POWER AND EFFORT

INTRODUCTION

We have seen how fundamental differences among the various schools turn on, or perhaps are reflected in different positions on, the analysis of certain key concepts. In *Ethics* (Penguin, 1954) P. H. Nowell Smith defended an analysis of “He could have done otherwise” which became for a while the standard reconciliationist view on the subject. He opposed his analysis to Campbell’s categorical analysis. The discussion reached a deeper and subtler level with the publication in 1956 of Austin’s famous paper, reprinted here. Although Austin sets out neither to defend nor to attack compatibilism, his paper, on the whole, turns out to be critical of it. Nowell Smith feels, in his rebuttal, that Austin’s criticisms can be accounted for without rejecting a hypothetical analysis—indeed, he still believes that a hypothetical analysis is essential.

It is interesting that both Nowell Smith and Chisholm attempt to follow through on Austin’s suggestion that “can” be analyzed as “will, if tries” although Austin does not believe that the suggestion is really tenable. Chisholm eventually agrees with Austin, for even if the analysis is made more sophisticated, it must run afoul of the incompatibilist objection that the hypothetical is true even when “he can” is false if he cannot try.

Nowell Smith’s suggestion that some of the difficulties in these discussions arise from a failure to consider analyses in the context of ascriptions of moral responsibility is interesting. Although Austin may not have been interested in the problem of moral responsibility in *Ifs and Cans*, it is surely relevant to notice that his golfer, who misses a short putt knowing full well that he could have holed it, would not be considered morally responsible if he had tried as hard as he could to hole it. Thus even if the golfer believes that he (categorically) could have holed it, we do not consider him morally responsible for failing to hole the putt. Thus his “freedom” here does not make him morally responsible. We cannot, therefore, ignore moral questions if we are really looking for the freedom which is requisite for moral responsibility.

The final two selections are concerned with the concept of trying or effort. Campbell’s paper points to difficulties which psychologists have faced and must face in an effort to present a deterministic account of what Campbell calls “effort of will.” We have omitted Campbell’s brief description at the end of his own positive theory of self-activity since it appears in the *Mind* selection. Nowell Smith, on the other hand, suggests serious difficulties for libertarian analyses of trying in general and Campbell’s in particular.

IFS AND CANS

J. L. Austin

Are *cans* constitutionally *iffy*? Whenever, that is, we say that we can do something, or could do something, or could have done something, is there an *if* in the *offing*—suppressed, it may be, but due nevertheless to appear when we set out our sentence in full or when we give an explanation of its meaning?

Again, if and when there is an *if*-clause appended to a main clause which contains a *can or could or could have*, what sort of an *if* is it? What is the meaning of the *if*, or what is the effect or the point of combining this *if*-clause with the main clause?


1 The same general point has been made by Arnold Kaufman.
These are large questions, to which philosophers, among them some whom I most respect, have given small answers: and it is two such answers, given recently by English philosophers, that I propose to consider. Both, I believe, are mistaken, yet something is to be learned from examining them. In philosophy, there are many mistakes that it is no disgrace to have made: to make a first-water, ground-floor mistake, so far from being easy, takes one (one) form of philosophical genius.¹

Many of you will have read a short but justly admired book written by Professor G. E. Moore of Cambridge, which is called simply Ethics. In it, there is a point where Moore, who is engaged in discussing Right and Wrong, says that if we are to discuss whether any act that has been done was right or wrong then we are bound to discuss what the person concerned could have done instead of what he did in fact do. And this, he thinks, may lead to an entanglement in the problem, so-called, of Free Will: because, though few would deny, at least expressly, that a man could have done something other than what he did actually do if he had chosen, many people would deny that he could (absolutely) have done any such other thing. Hence Moore is led to ask whether it is ever true, and if so in what sense, that a man could have done something other than what he did actually do. And it is with his answer to this question, not with its bearings upon the meanings of right and wrong or upon the problem of Free Will, that we are concerned.

With his usual shrewdness Moore begins by insisting that there is at least one proper sense in which we can say that a man can do something he does not do or could have done something he did not do—even though there may perhaps be other senses of can and could have in which we cannot say such things. This sense he illustrates by the sentence 'I could have walked a mile in 20 minutes this morning, but I certainly could not have run two miles in 5 minutes': we are to take it that in fact the speaker did not do either of the two things mentioned, but this in no way hinders us from drawing the very common and necessary distinction between undone acts that we could have done

¹ Plato, Descartes, and Leibniz all had this form of genius, besides of course others.

and undone acts that we could not have done. So it is certain that, at least in some sense, we often could have done things that we did not actually do.

Why then, Moore goes on to ask, should anyone try to deny this? And he replies that people do so (we may call them ‘determinists’) because they hold that everything that happens has a cause which precedes it, which is to say that once the cause has occurred the thing itself is bound to occur and nothing else could ever have happened instead.

However, on examining further the 20-minute-mile example, Moore argues that there is much reason to think that ‘could have’ in such cases simply means ‘could have if I had chosen,’ or, as perhaps we had better say in order to avoid a possible complication (these are Moore’s words), simply means ‘should have if I had chosen.’ And if this is all it means, then there is after all no conflict between our conviction that we often could have, in this sense, done things that we did not actually do and the determinist’s theory: for he certainly holds himself that I often, and perhaps even always, should have done something different from what I did do if I had chosen to do that different thing, since my choosing differently would constitute a change in the causal antecedents of my subsequent act, which would therefore, on his theory, naturally itself be different. If, therefore, the determinist nevertheless asserts that in some sense of ‘could have’ I could not ever have done anything different from what I did actually do, this must simply be a second sense² of ‘could have’ different from that which it has in the 20-minute-mile example.

In the remainder of his chapter, Moore argues that quite possibly his first sense of ‘could have,’ in which it simply means ‘could or should have if I had chosen,’ is all we need to satisfy our hankering after Free Will, or at least is so if conjoined in some way with yet a third sense of ‘could have’ in which sense ‘I could have done something different’ means ‘I might, for all anyone could know for certain beforehand, have done something different.’ This third kind of ‘could have’ might, I think, be held to be a vulgarism, ‘could’ being used incorrectly for

² About which Moore has no more to tell us.
In the upshot, then, Moore leaves us with only one important sense in which it can be said that I could have done something that I did not do: he is not convinced that any other sense is necessary, nor has he any clear idea what such another sense would be: and he is convinced that, on his interpretation of 'could have,' even the determinist can, and indeed must, say that I could very often have done things I did not do. To summarize his suggestions (he does not put them forward with complete conviction) once again:

1. 'Could have' simply means 'could have if I had chosen.'
2. For 'could have if I had chosen' we may substitute 'should have if I had chosen.'
3. The if-clauses in these expressions state the causal conditions upon which it would have followed that I could or should have done the thing different from what I did actually do.

Moore does not state this third point expressly himself: but it seems clear, in view of the connexions he alleges between his interpretation of 'could have' and the determinist theory, that he did believe it, presumably taking it as obvious.

There are then three questions to be asked:
1. Does 'could have if I had chosen' mean the same, in general or ever, as 'should have if I had chosen'?
2. In either of these expressions, is the if the if of causal condition?
3. In sentences having can or could have as main verb, are we required or entitled always to supply an if-clause, and in particular the clause 'if I had chosen'?

It appears to me that the answer in each case is No.

1. Anyone surely would admit that in general could is very different indeed from should or would. What a man could

3 Since Moore has couched his example in the first person, he uses 'should' in the apodosis: but of course in the third person, everyone would use 'would.' For brevity, I shall in what follows generally use 'should' to do duty for both persons.

do is not at all the same as what he would do: perhaps he could shoot you if you were within range, but that is not in the least to say that he would. And it seems clear to me, in our present example, that 'I could have run a mile if I had chosen' and 'I should have run a mile if I had chosen' mean quite different things, though unfortunately it is not so clear exactly what either of them, especially the latter, does mean. 'I should have run a mile in 20 minutes this morning if I had chosen' seems to me an unusual, not to say queer, specimen of English: but if I had to interpret it, I should take it to mean the same as 'If I had chosen to run a mile in 20 minutes this morning, I should (jolly well) have done so,' that is, it would be an assertion of my strength of character, in that I put my decisions into execution (an assertion which is, however, more naturally made, as I have now made it, with the if-clause preceding the main clause). I should certainly not myself understand it to mean that if I had made a certain choice my making that choice would have caused me to do something. But in whichever of these ways we understand it, it is quite different from 'I could have walked a mile in 20 minutes this morning if I had chosen,' which surely says something rather about my opportunities or powers. Moore, unfortunately, does not explain why he thinks we are entitled to make this all-important transition from 'could' to 'should,' beyond saying that doing so we 'avoid a possible complication.' Later I shall make some suggestions which may in part explain why he was tempted to make the transition: but nothing can justify it.

2. Moore, as I pointed out above, did not discuss what sort of if it is that we have in 'I can if I choose' or in 'I could have if I had chosen' or in 'I should have if I had chosen.' Generally, philosophers, as also grammarians, have a favourite, if somewhat blurred and diffuse, idea of an if-clause as a 'conditional' clause: putting our example schematically as 'If p, then q,' then it will be said that q follows from p, typically either in the sense that p entails q or in the sense that p is a cause of q, though other important variations are possible. And it seems to be on these lines that Moore is thinking of the if in 'I can if I choose.'
But now, it is characteristic of this general sort of if, that from 'If p then q' we can draw the inference 'If not q, then not p,' whereas we can not infer either 'Whether or not p, then q' or 'q' simpliciter. For example, from 'If I run, I pant' we can infer 'If I do not pant, I do not run' (or, as we should rather say, 'If I am not panting, I am not running'), whereas we can not infer either 'I pant, whether I run or not' or 'I pant' (at least in the sense of 'I am panting'). If, to avoid these troubles with the English tenses, which are unfortunately prevalent but are not allowed to matter, we put the example in the past tense, then from 'If I ran, I pant'd' it does follow that 'If I did not pant, I did not run,' but it does not follow either that 'I pant'd whether or not I ran' or that 'I pant'd' period. These possibilities and impossibilities of inference are typical of the if of causal condition: but they are precisely reversed in the case of 'I can if I choose' or 'I could have if I had chosen.' For from these we should not draw the curious inferences that 'If I cannot, I do not choose to' or that 'If I could not have, I had not chosen to' (or 'did not choose to'), whatever these sentences may be supposed to mean. But on the contrary, from 'I can if I choose' we certainly should infer that 'I can. whether I choose to or not' and indeed that 'I can' period: and from 'I could have if I had chosen' we should similarly infer that 'I could have, whether I chose to or not' and that anyway 'I could have' period. So that, whatever this if means, it is evidently not the if of causal condition.

This becomes even clearer when we observe that it is quite common elsewhere to find an ordinary causal conditional if in connexion with a can, and that then there is no doubt about it, as for example in the sentence 'I can squeeze through if I am thin enough,' which does imply that 'If I cannot squeeze through I am not thin enough,' and of course does not imply that 'I can squeeze through.' ‘I can if I choose’ is precisely different from this.

Nor does can have to be a very special and peculiar verb for its which are not causal conditional to be found in connexion with it: all kinds of ifs are found with all kinds of verbs. Consider for example the if in 'There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them,' where the verb is the highly ordinary are, but the if is more like that in 'I can if I choose' than that in 'I pant'd if I ran': for we can certainly infer from it that 'There are biscuits on the sideboard whether you want them or not' and that anyway 'There are biscuits on the sideboard,' whereas it would be folly to infer that 'If there are no biscuits on the sideboard you do not want them,' or to understand the meaning to be that you have only to want biscuits to cause them to be on the sideboard.

The if, then, in 'I can if I choose' is not the causal conditional if. What of the if in 'I shall if I choose'? At first glance, we see that this is quite different (one more reason for refusing to substitute shall for can or should have for could have). For from 'I shall if I choose' we clearly cannot infer that 'I shall whether I choose to or not' or simply that 'I shall.' But on the other hand, can we infer, either, that 'If I shan't I don't choose to'? (Or should it be rather 'If I don't I don't choose to'? I think not, as we shall see: but even if some such inference can be drawn, it would still be patently wrong to conclude that the meaning of 'I shall if I choose' is that my choosing to do the thing is sufficient to cause me inevitably to do it or has as a consequence that I shall do it, which, unless I am mistaken, is what Moore was supposing it to mean. This may be seen if we compare 'I shall ruin him if I choose' with 'I shall ruin him if I am extravagant.' The latter sentence does indeed obviously state what would be the consequence of the fulfilment of a condition specified in the if-clause—but then, the first sentence has clearly different characteristics from the second. In the first, it makes good sense in general to stress the 'shall,' but in the second it does not. This is a symptom of the fact that in the first sentence 'I shall' is the present of that mysterious old verb shall, whereas in the second 'shall' is simply being used as an auxiliary, without any meaning of its own, to form the future indicative of 'ruin.'

I expect you will be more than ready at this point to hear...

... in general, though of course in some contexts it does: e.g. 'I may very easily ruin him, and I shall if I am extravagant,' where 'shall' is stressed to point the contrast with 'may.'
something a little more positive about the meanings of these curious expressions 'I can if I choose' and 'I shall if I choose.' Let us take the former first, and concentrate upon the if. The dictionary tells us that the words from which our if is descended expressed, or even meant, 'doubt' or 'hesitation' or 'condition' or 'stipulation.' Of these, 'condition' has been given a prodigious inning by grammarians, lexicographers, and philosophers alike: it is time for 'doubt' and 'hesitation' to be remembered, and these do indeed seem to be the notions present in 'I can if I choose.' We could give, on different occasions and in different contexts, many different interpretations of this sentence, which is of a somewhat primitive and loose-jointed type. Here are some:

I can, quaere do I choose to?
I can, but do I choose to?
I can, but perhaps I don't choose to.
I can, but then I should have to choose to, and what about that?
I can, but would it really be reasonable to choose to?
I can, but whether I choose to is another question.
I can, I have only to choose to.
I can, in case I (should) choose to,
and so on.

These interpretations are not, of course, all the same: which it is that we mean will usually be clear from the context (otherwise we should prefer another expression), but sometimes it can be brought out by stress, on the 'if' or the 'choose' for example. What is common to them all is simply that the assertion, positive and complete, that 'I can,' is linked to the raising of the question whether I choose to, which may be relevant in a variety of ways.

Ifs of the kind I have been trying to describe are common enough, for example the if in our example 'There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want them.' I do not know whether you want biscuits or not, but in case you do, I point out that there are some on the sideboard. It is tempting, I know, to 'expand' our sentence here to this: 'There are biscuits on the sideboard which you can (or may) take if you want them': but this, legitimate or not, will not make much difference, for we are still left with 'can (or may) if you want,' which is (here) just like 'can if you choose' or 'can if you like,' so that the if is still the if of doubt or hesitation, not the if of condition.

I will mention two further points, very briefly, about 'can if I choose,' important but not so relevant to our discussion here. Sometimes the can will be the can, and the choice the choice, of legal or other right, at other times these words will refer to practicability or feasibility: consequently, we should sometimes interpret our sentence in some such way as 'I am entitled to do it (if I choose),' and at other times in some such way as 'I am capable of doing it (if I choose).' We, of course, are concerned with interpretations of this second kind. It would be nice if we always said 'may if I choose' when we wished to refer to our rights, as perhaps our nannies once told us: but the interlocking histories of can and may are far too chequered for there to be any such rule in practice. The second point is that choose is an important word in its own right, and needs careful interpretation: 'I can if I like' is not the same, although the 'can' and the 'if' may be the same in both, as 'I can if I choose.' Choice is always between alternatives, that is between several courses to be weighed in the same scale against each

An account on these lines should probably be given also of an excellent example given to me by Mr. P. T. Geach: 'I paid you back yesterday, if you remember.' This is much the same as 'I paid you back yesterday, don't you remember?' It does not mean that your now remembering that I did so is a condition, causal or other, of my having paid you back yesterday.

I formerly believed that the meaning of 'I can if I choose' was something like 'I can, I have the choice,' and that the point of the if-clause was to make clear that the 'can' in the main clause was the 'can' of right. This account, however, does not do justice to the role of the if, and also unduly restricts in general the meaning of 'choice.'
complete the sense of the sentence. The other view is that the meaning of 'can' or 'could have' can be more clearly reproduced by some other verb (notably 'shall' or 'should have') with an if-clause appended to it. The first view is that an if is required to complete a can-sentence: the second view is that an if is required in the analysis of a can-sentence. The suggestion of Moore that 'could have' means 'could have if I had chosen' is a suggestion of the first kind; but the suggestion also made by Moore that it means 'should have if I had chosen' is a suggestion of the second kind. It may be because it is so easy (apparently) to confuse these two kinds of theory that Moore was tempted to talk as though 'should have' could mean the same as 'could have."

Now we are concerned at this moment solely with the first sort of view, namely that can-sentences are not complete without an if-clause. And if we think, as Moore was for the most part thinking, about 'could have' (rather than 'can'), it is easy to see why it may be tempting to allege that it always requires an if-clause with it. For it is natural to construe 'could have' as a past subjunctive or 'conditional,' which is practically as much as to say that it needs a conditional clause with it. And of course it is quite true that 'could have' may be, and very often is, a past conditional: but it is also true that 'could have' may be and often is the past (definite) indicative of the verb can. Sometimes 'I could have' is equivalent to the Latin 'potui' and means 'I was in a position to': sometimes it is equivalent to the Latin 'potuisse' and means 'I should have been in a position to.' Exactly similar is the double role of 'could,' which is sometimes a conditional meaning 'should be able to,' but also sometimes a past indicative (indefinite) meaning 'was able to': no one can doubt this if he considers such contrasted examples as 'I could do it 20 years ago' and 'I could do it if I had a thingummy.' It is not so much that 'could' or 'could have' is ambiguous, as rather that two parts of the verb can take the same shape.

Once it is realized that 'could have' can be a past indicative, the general temptation to supply if-clauses with it vanishes: at least there is no more temptation to supply them with 'could
have' than with 'can.' If we ask how a Roman would have said
'I could have ruined you this morning (although I didn't),' it
is clear that he would have used 'potui,' and that his sentence
is complete without any conditional clause. But more than this,
if he had wished to add 'if I had chosen,' and however he had
expressed that in Latin, he would still not have changed his
'potui' to 'potuissetm': but this is precisely what he would have
done if he had been tackling on some other, more 'normal' kind
of if-clause, such as 'if I had had one more vote.'

That is to say, the 'could have' in 'could have if I had
chosen' is a past indicative, not a past conditional, despite
the fact that there is what would, I suppose, be called a 'conditional'
clause, that is an if-clause, with it. And this is, of course, why
we can make the inferences that, as we saw, we can make from
'I could have if I had chosen,' notably the inference to 'I could
have' absolutely. Hence we see how mistaken Moore was in con-
trasting 'I could have if I had chosen' with the 'absolute' sense
of 'I could have': we might almost go so far as to say that the
addition of the 'conditional' clause 'if I had chosen' makes it
certain that (in Moore's language) the sense of 'could have' is
the absolute sense, or as I should prefer to put it, that the mood
of 'could have' is indicative.

It might at this point be worth considering in general whether
it makes sense to suppose that a language could contain any
verb such as can has been argued or implied to be, namely one
that can never occur without an if-clause appended to it. At least
if the if is the normal 'conditional' if this would seem very
difficult. For let the verb in question be to X: then we shall never
say simply 'I X,' but always 'I X if I Y': but then also, according
to the accepted rules, if it is true that 'I X if I Y,' and also true

8If the if-clause is 'if I had chosen,' then I was able, was actually
in a position, to ruin you: hence 'potui.' But if the if-clause expresses a
genuine unfulfilled condition, then plainly I was not actually in a posi-
tion to ruin you. Hence not 'potui' but 'potuissetm.' My colleague Mr. R. M.
Nisbet has pointed out. to me the interesting discussion of this point in
S. A. Handford, The Latin Subjunctive, pp. 130 ff. It is interesting that
although this author well appreciates the Latin usage, he still takes it
for granted that in English the 'could have' is universally subjunctive or
conditional.

(which it must surely sometimes be) that 'I do, in fact, Y,' it
must surely follow that 'I X,' simpliciter, without any if about
it any longer. Perhaps this was the 'possible complication' that
led Moore to switch from the suggestion that 'I could have' (in
one sense) has always to be expanded to 'I could have if' to
the suggestion that it has always to be analysed as 'I should have if':
for of course the argument I have just given does not suffice to
show that there could not be some verb which has always to be
analysed as something containing a conditional if-clause: sug-
gestions that this is in fact the case with some verbs are common
in philosophy, and I do not propose to argue this point, though
I think that doubt might well be felt about it. The only sort of
'verb' I can think of that might always demand a conditional
clause with it is an 'auxiliary' verb, if there is one, which is used
solely to form subjunctive or conditional moods (whatever
exactly they may be) of other verbs: but however this may be,
it is quite clear that can, and I should be prepared also to add
shall and will and may, are not in this position.

To summarize, then, what has been here said in reply to
Moore's suggestions in his book:

(a) 'I could have if I had chosen' does not mean the same as
'I should have if I had chosen.'

(b) In neither of these expressions is the if-clause a 'normal
conditional' clause, connecting antecedent to consequent
as cause to effect.

(c) To argue that can always requires an if-clause with it to
complete the sense is totally different from arguing that
can-sentences are always to be analysed into sentences
containing if-clauses.

(d) Neither can nor any other verb always requires a con-
tditional if-clause after it: even 'could have,' when a past
indicative, does not require such a clause: and in 'I could
have if I had chosen' the verb is in fact a past indicative,
not a past subjunctive or conditional.

Even, however, if all these contentions are true so far, we must
recognize that it may nevertheless still be the case that can,
could, and could have, even when used as indicatives, are to be analysed as meaning shall, should, and should have, used as auxiliaries of tense or mood with another verb (i.e. so as to make that other verb into a future or subjunctive), followed by a conditional if-clause. There is some plausibility,⁹ for example, in the suggestion that I can do X' means 'I shall succeed in doing X, if I try' and 'I could have done X' means 'I should have succeeded in doing X, if I had tried.'

It is indeed odd that Moore should have plumped so simply, in giving his account whether of the necessary supplementation or of the analysis of 'could have,' for the one particular if-clause 'if I had chosen,' which happens to be particularly exposed to the above objections, without even mentioning the possibility of invoking other if-clauses, at least in some cases. Perhaps the reason was that choose (a word itself much in need of discussion) presented itself as well fitted to bridge the gulf between determinists and free-willers, which try might not so readily do...But as a matter of fact Moore does himself at one point give an analysis of 'I could have done X' which is different in an interesting way from his usual version, although confusable with it. At a crucial point in his argument, he chooses for his example 'The ship could have gone faster,' and the suggestion is made that this is equivalent to 'The ship would have gone faster if her

⁹ Plausibility, but no more. Consider the case where I miss a very short putt and kick myself because I could have holed it. It is not that I should have holed it if I had tried; I did try, and missed. It is not that I should have holed it if conditions had been different; that might of course be so, but I am talking about conditions as they precisely were, and asserting that I could have holed it. There is the rub. Nor does 'I can hole it this time' mean that I shall hole it this time if I try or if anything else: for I may try and miss, and yet not be convinced that I could not have done it; indeed, further experiments may confirm my belief that I could have done it that time although I did not.

But if I tried my hardest, say, and missed, surely there must have been something that caused me to fail, that made me unable to succeed? So that I could not have holed it. Well, a modern belief in science, in there being an explanation of everything, may make us assent to this argument. But such a belief is not in line with the traditional beliefs enshrined in the word can: according to them, a human ability or power or capacity is inherently liable not to produce success, on occasion, and that for no reason (or are bad luck and bad form sometimes reasons?).

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officers had chosen.' This may well seem plausible, but so far from being in line, as Moore apparently thinks, with his general analysis, it differs from it in two important respects:

(a) the subject of the if-clause ('her officers') is different from the subject of the main clause ('the ship'), the subject of the original sentence:

(b) the verb in the if-clause following 'chosen' is different from the verb in the main clause, the verb in the original sentence. We do not readily observe this because of the ellipsis after 'chosen': but plainly the verb must be, not 'to go faster,' but 'to make her go faster' or, for example, 'to open the throttle.'

These two features are dictated by the fact that a ship is inanimate. We do not wish seriously to ascribe free will to inanimate objects, and the 'could' of the original sentence is perhaps only justifiable (as opposed to 'might') because it is readily realized that some person's free will is in question.

If we follow up the lines of this new type of analysis, we should have to examine the relations between 'I could have won' and 'I could, or should, have won if I had chosen to lop' and 'I could, or should, have won if he had chosen to lop.' I will do no more here than point out that the difference between 'could' and 'should' remains as before, and that the sense of 'I could have won,' if it really is one, in which it means something of the sort 'I should have won if he had chosen to lop' or 'to let me win' (the parallel to the ship example), is of little importance—the 'if' here is of course the conditional if.

It is time now to turn to a second discussion of ifs and cans. Quite recently my colleague Mr. Nowell Smith, in another little book called *Ethics*, also reaches a point in his argument at which he has to examine the sentence 'He could have acted otherwise,' that is, could have done something that he did not in fact do. His reason for doing so is that, unless we can truly say this of people, we might find ourselves unable to blame people for things, and this would be generally regretted. This reason is not unrelated to Moore's reason for embarking on
his earlier discussion, and Nowell Smith’s views show some resemblances to Moore’s: perhaps this is because Nowell Smith, like Moore at the time he wrote his book, is willing, if not anxious, to come to terms with determinism.

Nowell Smith begins his discussion by saying (p. 274) that “could have” is a modal phrase, and modal phrases are not normally used to make categorical statements. I am not myself at all sure what exactly a ‘modal phrase’ is, so I cannot discuss this assertion: but I do not think this matters, because he proceeds to give us two other examples of modal phrases, viz. ‘might have’ and ‘would have,’ and to tell us first what they are not (which I omit) and then what they are:

‘Would have’ and ‘might have’ are clearly suppressed hypotheticals, incomplete without an ‘if . . . ’ or an ‘if . . . not . . . ’ Nobody would say ‘Jones would have won the championship’ unless (a) he believed that Jones did not win and (b) he was prepared to add ‘if he had entered’ or ‘if he had not sprained his ankle’ or some such clause.

Here (a) is actually incorrect—we can say ‘Jones would (still) have won the championship, (even) if Hagen had entered—but this does not concern us. (b), however, seems to be fairly correct, at least as far as concerns ‘would have’ (in the case of ‘might have’ it might well be doubted). So we have it that, when Nowell Smith says that ‘would have’ is a ‘suppressed hypothetical’ he means that it requires the addition of an if-

10 Also perhaps 'may have,' for he discusses 'It might have rained last Thursday' in terms that seem really to apply to 'It may have rained last Thursday.'

11 I refrain here from questioning it in the case of 'would have.' Yet 'would' is agreed to be often a past indicative of the old verb will, requiring no if-clause: and I think myself that in, say, 'X would have hanged him, but Y was against it' 'would have' is likewise a past indicative—indeed it is from this sort of example that we can see how the past tenses of will have come to be used as auxiliaries of mood for forming the conditionals of other verbs.

To state what seem to be some grammatical facts (omitting all reference to the use of the words concerned in expressing wishes): Could have is sometimes a past indicative, sometimes a past subjunctive of the verb can. When it is the main verb and is a subjunc-

clause to complete the sense. And he goes on to say that 'could have' sentences also (though not so obviously) 'express hypotheticals,' if not always at least in important cases, such as notably those where we say someone could have done something he did not actually do: in these cases 'could have . . . ' is equivalent to 'would have . . . if . . . '

It will be clear at once that Nowell Smith, like Moore, is not distinguishing between the contention that 'could have' requires supplementation by an if-clause and the quite different contention that its analysis contains an if-clause. On the whole it seems plain that it is the second (analysis) view that he wishes to argue for: but the argument he produces is that 'could have' is (in important cases) like 'would have,' the point about which is that it needs an if-clause to complete it—as though this, which is an argument in favour of the first view, told in favour of the second view. But it cannot possibly do so: and in any event could have is liable, as we have already seen, to be in important cases a past indicative, so that the contention that it is like would have in requiring a conditional if-clause is unfounded.

Nevertheless, it must be allowed that Nowell Smith may still be right in urging that 'could have' means 'would have if' and that, as he eventually adds, 'can' means 'will if.' What has he to say in support of this?

tive, it does require a conditional clause with it. Can and its past are not used as auxiliaries of tense or mood to form tenses or moods of other verbs.

Would have, whether or not it is used as a past indicative or subjunctive of the verb will, is now commonly used (should have in the first person) as an auxiliary for forming the past subjunctive of other verbs: hence if it is the main verb it does in general require a conditional clause with it.

12 It is true that he uses two different expressions: 'would have' is a (suppressed) hypothetical, while 'could have' sentences express hypotheticals. But it does not look as if any distinction is intended, and if it is, the protracted initial analogy between 'could have' and 'would have' seems irrelevant and misleading. Moreover, discussing the (unimportant) case of 'it could have been a Morris,' he writes that 'it would be absurd to ask under what conditions it could or would have been a Morris' (my italics): this seems to show an indifference to the distinction that I am insisting on.
He propounds two examples for discussion, which I think do not differ greatly, so I shall quote only the first. Here it is:

He could have read *Emma* in bed last night, though he actually read *Persuasion*; but he could not have read *Werther*, because he does not know German.

This is evidently of the same kind as Moore's 20-minute-mile example. The first thing that Nowell Smith urges is that such a 'could have' statement is not a categorical, or a 'straightforward' categorical, statement. And his argument in favour of this view is derived from the way in which we should establish its truth or falsity. No inspection of what the man actually did will, he says, verify directly that he could have done something else (here, read *Emma*) which he did not do: rather, we should, to establish this, have to show

(a) that he has performed tasks of similar difficulty sufficiently often to preclude the possibility of a fluke, and (b) that nothing prevented him on this occasion. For example, we should have to establish that there was a copy of *Emma* in the house.

To refute it, on the other hand, we should have to show either 'that some necessary condition was absent' (there was no copy of *Emma*) or 'that the capacity was absent.' That is, let us say, we have to show on the one hand that he had both the ability and the opportunity to read *Emma*, or on the other hand that he lacked either the ability or the opportunity.

Nowell Smith seems, at least at first, to be less interested in the matter of opportunity: for he says that we can establish 'directly,' i.e., by considering what the facts at the time actually were, at least that he did not have the opportunity, that is, that something did prevent him, and he does not seem daunted by the obviously 'greater difficulty of establishing, in order to establish that he could have done it, the general negative that there was nothing to prevent him. At any rate, it is at first upon our manner of establishing that he had (or had not) the ability to do this thing that he did not do that Nowell Smith fastens

in order to support his assertion that the 'could have' statement is not categorical. That the man had the *ability* to read *Emma* can not, he says, be established 'directly,' i.e., by observing what happened on that past occasion, but only by considering what prowess he has displayed in the face of similar tasks in the past or on other occasions, or displays now when put to the test: the argument that we have performe to use is an 'inductive' one (and, he adds, none the worse for that).

Now let us pass all this, at least for the sake of argument. What interests us is to discover why Nowell Smith thinks that these considerations show that 'He had the ability to read *Emma*' is not a categorical statement. I confess I fail to follow the argument:

The very fact that evidence for or against 'could have' statements must be drawn from occasions other than that to which they refer is enough to show that 'He could have acted otherwise' is not a straightforward categorical statement.

But do we really know what is meant by a 'straightforward categorical statement'? Certainly it is not the case that statements made on the strength of inductive evidence are in general not categorical—for example, the statement that the next mule born will prove sterile: this seems categorical enough. Perhaps this example should be ruled out as not in point, on the ground that here there will some day be 'direct' evidence relevant to the assertion, even if it is not available at the moment. Could the same, I wonder, be said of the inductive conclusion 'All mules are sterile'? Or is that not categorical? I know that this has been interpreted by some philosophers to mean 'If anything is a mule then it is sterile,' but I see no reason to support that curious interpretation.

The situation becomes still more puzzling when we remem-

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33 Yet I think it is not hard to see that we cannot establish 'directly,' at least in many cases, that something 'prevented' him: he was drugged or dazzled, which prevented him from reading, which establishes that he could not have read—but how do we know that being drugged or dazzled 'prevents' people from reading? Surely on 'inductive' evidence? And, in short, to be prevented is to be rendered unable.
ber that Nowell Smith is about to generalize his theory, and to assert, not merely that ‘could have’ means ‘would have . . . if,’ but also that ‘can’ means ‘shall or will . . . if.’ Suppose then that I assert ‘I can here and now lift my finger,’ and translate this as ‘I shall lift my finger if . . . ’: then surely this will be ‘directly’ verified if the conditions are satisfied and I do proceed to lift the finger? If this is correct, and if the theory is indeed a general one, then there seems to be no point in insisting on the non-availability of ‘direct’ evidence, which is only a feature of certain cases. Incidentally, it is not in fact the case that to say ‘He could have done it’ is always used in a way to imply that he did not in fact do it: we make a list of the suspects in a murder case, all of whom we think could have done it and one of whom we think did do it. True, this is not Nowell Smith’s case: but unless we are prepared to assert that the ‘could have’ in his case differs in meaning from that in the murder case, and so to rule out the latter as irrelevant, we are in danger of having to admit that even ‘could have’ sentences can be ‘directly’ verified in favourable cases. For study of the facts of that past occasion can prove to us that he did it, and hence that our original ‘He could have’ was correct.\footnote{There are, I should myself think, good reasons for not speaking of ‘I can lift my finger’ as being directly verified when I proceed to lift it, and likewise for not speaking of ‘He could have done it’ as being directly verified by the discovery that he did do it. But on Nowell Smith’s account I think that these would count as direct verifications.}

However, to proceed. Whether or not we should describe our conclusion here as ‘categorical’ it seems that it should still be a conclusion of the form ‘he could have done so and so,’ and not in the least a conclusion concerning what he \textit{would} have done. We are interested, remember, in his abilities: we want to know whether he could have read \textit{Emma} yesterday: we ascertain that he did read it the day before yesterday, and that he does read it today: we conclude that he could have read it yesterday. But it does not appear that this says anything about what he \textit{would} have done yesterday or in what circumstances: certainly, we are now convinced, he \textit{could} have read it yesterday, but

\textit{would} he have, considering that he had read it only the day before? Moreover, supposing the view is that our conclusion is not of the ‘could have’ but of the ‘would have if’ form, nothing has yet been said to establish this, nor to tell us what follows the ‘if.’ To establish that he would have read it yesterday if . . . , we shall need evidence not merely as to his abilities and opportunities, but also as to his character, motives, and so on.

It may indeed be thought, and it seems that Nowell Smith does at least partly think this, that what follows the ‘if’ should be suppleable from the consideration that to say he could have, in the full sense, is to say not merely that he had the ability, which is what we have hitherto concentrated on, but also that he had the \textit{opportunity}. For to establish \textit{this}, do we not have to establish that certain \textit{conditions} were satisfied, for instance that there was a copy of \textit{Emma} available? Very well. But here there is surely a confusion: we allow that, in saying that he could have, I do assert or imply that certain \textit{conditions}, those of opportunity, \textit{were satisfied}: but this is totally different from allowing that, in saying that he could have, I \textit{assert something conditional}. It is, certainly, entirely possible to assert something conditional such as ‘he could have read \textit{Emma} yesterday if there had been a copy available,’ \textit{could} being then of course a subjunctive: but to say this sort of thing is precisely not to say the sort of thing that we say when we say ‘He could have acted otherwise,’ \textit{where} ‘could have’ is an indicative—implying, as we now do, that there was no copy available, we imply that \textit{pro tanto} he could not have acted otherwise. And the same will be true if we try saying ‘He would have read \textit{Emma} yesterday if there had been a copy available’: this too certainly implies that he could not in fact have read it, and so cannot by any means be what we mean by saying that he could have read it.

In the concluding paragraph of his discussion, Nowell Smith does finally undertake to give us his analysis not merely of ‘could have,’ but also of ‘can’ (which he says means ‘will if’). And this last feature is very much to be welcomed, because if an analysis is being consciously given of ‘can’ at least we shall
at length be clear of confusions connected with the idea that 'could have' is necessarily a subjunctive.\footnote{It must, however, be pointed out once again that if we are to discuss the assertion that somebody can (now) do something, the previous arguments that our assertions are not categorical because they are based on induction and cannot be verified directly, whether they were good or not, must now be abandoned; because of course it is possible to verify this 'directly' by the method Nowell Smith has specified in another connexion earlier, viz. by getting the man to try and seeing him succeed.}

The argument of the last paragraph runs as follows. It is 'logically odd' to say something of this kind (I am slightly emending Nowell Smith's formula, but only in ways that are favourable to it and demanded by his own argument):

Smith has the ability to run a mile, has the opportunity to run a mile, has a preponderant motive for running a mile, but does not in fact do so.

From this it follows directly, says Nowell Smith, that 'can,' means 'will if,' that is, I suppose, that 'Smith can run a mile' means 'If Smith has the opportunity to run a mile and a preponderant motive for running it, he will run it.'

It seems, however, plain that nothing of the kind follows.

This may be seen first by setting the argument out formally.

Nowell Smith's premise is of the form

\[ \neg(p \land q \land r \land \neg s) \]

that is

Logically odd (ability + opportunity + motive + non-action).

Now from this we can indeed infer

\[ p \supset ((q \land r) \supset s) \]

that is that

If he has the ability, then, if he has the opportunity and the motive, he will do it.

But we cannot infer the converse

\[ ((q \land r) \supset s) \supset p. \]

J. L. Austin

or in other words that

If, when he has the opportunity and the motive, he does it, he has the ability to do it.

(I do not say this last is not something to which we should, when so put into English, assent, only that it does not follow from Nowell Smith's premises: of course it follows merely from the premises that he does it, that he has the ability to do it, according to ordinary English.) But: unless this second, converse implication does follow, we cannot, according to the usual formal principles, infer that \( p \) is equivalent to, nor therefore that it means the same as, \((q \land r) \supset s\), or in words that ability means that opportunity plus motive leads to action.

To put the same point non-formally. From the fact that, if three things are true together a fourth must also be true, we cannot argue that one of the three things simply means that if the other two are true the fourth will be true. If we could argue indeed in this way, then we should establish, from Nowell Smith's premises, not merely that

'He has the ability to do \( X \) simply means that 'if he has the opportunity and the motive to do \( X \), he will do \( X \)'

but also equally that

'He has the opportunity to do \( X \) simply means that 'If he has the ability and the motive to do \( X \), he will do \( X \)'

and likewise that

'He has a preponderant motive to do \( X \) simply means that 'if he has the ability and the opportunity to do \( X \), he will do \( X \)'.

For clearly we can perform the same operations on \( q \) and \( r \) as on \( p \), since the three all occupy parallel positions in the premiss. But these are fantastic suggestions. Put shortly, Nowell Smith is pointing out in his premiss that if a man both can and wants to (more than he wants to do anything else), he will: but from this it does not follow that 'he can' simply means that 'if he wants to he will.' Nowell Smith is struggling to effect a transition from can to will which presents difficulties as great as those
of the transition from *could* to *would*: he puts up his show of effecting it by importing the additional, and here irrelevant, concept of motive, which needless to say is in general very intimately connected with the question of what 'he will' do.

When, in conclusion, Nowell Smith finally sets out his analysis of 'Smith could have read *Emma* last night,' it is this:

He would have read it, if there had been a copy, if he had not been struck blind, &c., &c., and if he had wanted to read it more than he had wanted to read (this should be 'do') anything else.

But so far from this being what we mean by saying he could have read it, it actually implies that he could not have read it, for more than adequate reasons: it implies that he was blind at the time, and so on. Here we see that Nowell Smith actually does make the confusion I referred to above between a statement which implies or asserts that certain conditions *were* fulfilled and a conditional statement, i.e. a statement about what would have happened if those conditions had been fulfilled. This is unfortunately a confusion of a general kind that is not uncommon: I need only mention the classic instance of Keynes, who confused asserting on evidence *h* that *p* is probable with asserting that on evidence *h* *p* is probable, both of which can be ambiguously expressed by 'asserting that *p* is probable on evidence *h,*' but only the former of which asserts that *p* is (really) probable. Here similarly there is a confusion between asserting on the supposition (or premise) that he had a copy that he could/would have read it, and asserting that on the supposition that he had a copy he could/would have read it, both of which can be ambiguously expressed by 'asserting that he could/would have read it on the supposition that he had a copy,' but only the former of which asserts that he (actually) could have read it.

To some extent, then, we learn from studying Nowell Smith's arguments lessons similar to those that we learned in the case of Moore. But some are new, as for instance that many assertions about what a man *would* have done or *will do* depend, in critical cases, upon premisses about his *motives* as well as, or rather than, about his abilities or opportunities: hence these assertions cannot be what assertions about his abilities *mean.*

On one point I may perhaps elaborate a little further. It has been maintained that *sometimes* when we say 'He could have done X' this is a conditional: it requires completion by an *if*-clause, typically 'if he had had the opportunity,' and so does *not* require us, if we are to establish its truth, to establish that he did in fact have the opportunity. Sometimes on the other hand it is a past indicative, implying that he did have the opportunity: in which case we do, to establish its truth, have to establish that certain conditions were satisfied, but the assertion is *not* to be described as a conditional assertion.

Now while I have no wish to retract this account in general or in all cases, I doubt whether it is the whole story. Consider the case where what we wish to assert is that somebody had the opportunity to do something but lacked the ability—'He could have smashed that lob, if he had been any good at the smash': here the *if*-clause, which may of course be suppressed and understood, relates not to opportunity but to ability. Now although we might describe the whole sentence as 'conditional,' it nevertheless manages to assert, by means of its main clause, something 'categorical' enough, viz. that he did have a certain opportunity. And in the same way Nowell Smith's 'He could have read *Emma*, if he had had a copy,' does seem to assert 'categorically' that he had a certain ability, although he lacked the opportunity to exercise it. Looking at it in this way, there is a temptation to say that 'could have' has, besides its 'all-in' sense several more *restricted senses:* this would be brought out if we said 'He could have smashed it, only he is no good at the smash' or 'He could have read *Emma* but

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16 Yet here it must be pointed out once more that it has not been shown that *all* assertions about what he would have done are so dependent, so that this particular argument against the analysis of 'could have' as 'would have if' is not conclusive: in particular, it does not dispose of the possible suggestion that 'could have' means 'would have if he had tried,' for here considerations of motive may be irrelevant.
he had no copy,' where, we should say, 'could have' is being used in the restricted senses of opportunity or of ability\(^{17}\) only, and is a past indicative, not a past conditional.

This view might be reinforced by considering examples with the simple 'can' itself. We are tempted to say that 'He can' sometimes means just that he has the ability, with nothing said about opportunity, sometimes just that he has the chance, with nothing said about ability, sometimes, however, that he really actually fully can here and now, having both ability and opportunity. Now nobody, I think, would be tempted to say that 'can,' where it means one of the two lesser things, for example, 'has the opportunity,' i.e., 'can in the full sense if he has the ability,' is grammatically a subjunctive or conditional. Perhaps, then, it was not correct to describe 'He could have,' either, as always a conditional where it asserts ability or opportunity only, with nothing said about the other, or even where the other is denied to have existed.

The verb can is a peculiar one. Let us compare it for a moment with another peculiar verb, know, with which it shares some grammatical peculiarities, such as lack of a continuous present tense. When I say that somebody knows what the thing in my hand is, I may mean merely that he has the ability to identify it given the opportunity, or that he has the opportunity to identify it if he has the ability, or that he has both. What do we say about know here? Certainly we are not prone to invoke the idea of a conditional, but rather that of different senses, or perhaps the still obscure idea of the dispositional. I must be content here merely to say that I do not think that the old armoury of terms, such as 'mood' and 'sense,' is altogether adequate for handling such awkward cases. The only point of which I feel certain is that such verbs as can and know have each an all-in, paradigm use, around which cluster and from which divagate, little by little and along different paths,
do seem, whatever exactly they may be, different from traditional grammar. But grammar today is itself in a state of flux; for fifty years or more it has been questioned on all hands and counts whether what Dionysius Thrax once thought was the truth about Greek is the truth and the whole truth about all language and all languages. Do we know, then, that there will prove to be any ultimate boundary between 'logical grammar' and a revised and enlarged Grammar? In the history of human inquiry, philosophy has the place of the initial central sun, seminal and tumultuous: from time to time it throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science, a planet, cool and well regulated, progressing steadily towards a distant final state. This happened long ago at the birth of mathematics, and again at the birth of physics: only in the last century we have witnessed the same process once again, slow and at the time almost imperceptible, in the birth of the science of mathematical logic, through the joint labours of philosophers and mathematicians. Is it not possible that the next century may see the birth, through the joint labours of philosophers, grammarians, and numerous other students of language, of a true and comprehensive science of language? Then we shall have rid ourselves of one more part of philosophy (there will still be plenty left) in the only way we ever can get rid of philosophy, by kicking it upstairs.

IFS AND CANS

P. H. NOWELL SMITH

If someone were to ask what idea is expressed by the verb 'can' in all its moods and tenses, he might be told that it expressed power, potency or potentiality, capacity, capability or ability, contingency or possibility—all or some of these. But

\footnote{From P. H. Nowell Smith, "Ifs and Cans," Theoria, XXVI, Part 2 (1960), pp. 85-101.}

\footnote{A reply to J. L. Austin: Ifs and Cans. British Academy Lecture. Oxford University Press, 1956.}

this answer, though true enough, is unenlightening, and unenlightening just because it is so obviously true. If there are puzzles about 'can' there will be puzzles about these. Human actions, the things people actually do, are, we feel, ground-floor members of the world; their abilities are not. Philosophers have often felt that particular statements, expressed by sentences in the indicative mood with names of entities as subjects, are somehow paramount. We use the indicative mood to say flatly that something is or was or will be the case. Hypothetical and universal statements, by contrast, are suspect. This feeling has led some philosophers (for example some logicians who have been incautious about the relation between the logical constants of a language and those of a calculus) to stray astray. It is certainly wrong to say flatly that 'all mules are sterile' means the same as 'if anything is a mule, it is sterile' or 'nothing is both a mule and non-sterile'; but the idea that it is not sufficiently categorical to get in on the ground floor but requires to show its connections with true-blue categoricals about this and that mule before it can be admitted is not wholly erroneous. Likewise statements about the next mule are not wholly irreproachable, and the drive to analyze universal statements into hypotheticals and then treat these hypotheticals as truth-functional sets of particular categoricals is not wholly to be resisted.

There is a notorious connection between universal statements and statements made with 'can' which leads us to suspect that the latter, though in one sense categorical enough, are not wholly, flatly irreducibly categorical. One of the many features which these two types of statement have in common is that, while they must always be backed in the end by statements as to what is or was the case, they always assert more than this. We can see Tom and Dick playing bridge, but we cannot see the class of all bridge-players, and in much the same way, though we can see someone playing bridge and perhaps see him manifesting his ability to play bridge, we cannot see his ability. Abilities are somehow parasitic on performances, if only because an ability to do something is an ability to do that thing.