Philosophy 4310 –- Assignment #5

This assignment is to be turned in at the beginning of class on Thursday, April 20th.

Part I:
Assume the basic Lewisian semantics for counterfactuals: A>C is true iff there is no possible world where A is true or there is a possible world where A&C is true which is closer to the actual world than any A&~C world. This leaves 'closer' undefined. Each of 1-5 is a proposed analysis of 'closer' which Lewis would reject. Give an example counterfactual which you think is clearly true (or clearly false), but which the proposed analysis would count as false (or true) and explain why the analysis does so. Or alternatively, give some other argument for why this is an unacceptable analysis.

1) If two worlds both have human beings in them then they are automatically closer to each other than a world that does and a world that doesn't.
2) Assuming that the relevant worlds all have exactly the same people in them, any two worlds where everybody lives to be exactly the same age in the two worlds (so Joel dies at the same age in both, Bob dies at the same age in both, etc.) are automatically closer to each other than worlds that aren't like this.
3) A world w is closer to y than to z iff they share more facts in common
4) Any two worlds which share the exact same past (before the time when A occurred) are closer to each other than either is to a world which doesn't share the exact same past.
5) Any worlds which share exactly the same causal laws (laws of nature) are closer to each other than any two that don't.

6) In class, John was willing to accept the counterfactual "If Trayvon Martin had been white, he would not have been shot." Give an attempt at analyzing this counterfactual strictly applying Lewis's account of similarity across possible worlds (from "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow") [I mean check whether it is true or false].

If someone asserts this counterfactual, what is it exactly that you think they mean? Do you think this is a problem for Lewis's account of the semantics of counterfactuals?

Part II:
7) Alan Hájek argues that most counterfactuals are false. Here is an especially crude version of the argument: A > C is false if it is true that 'If A were true then it might not be C'. But since we live in an indeterministic world, then for any C you pick, it might happen or it might not. It is just a matter of chance – even if in some cases those chances are really high. Therefore if A were true C might not be true therefore it is false that if A were true, C would be.

Given this argument, why doesn't Hájek say that ALL counterfactuals are false? Which counterfactuals could still be true given the argument just mentioned?

8) Here is a possible response to Hájek: A > C is true when at the nearest A world(s) the probability of C is very high. Take 'very high' to mean $\geq 2/3$ here. Hájek takes the main argument against this kind of analysis to be that it would violate the principle that A > B together with A > C entails A > (B&C). Explain why this analysis would violate this principle. Also explain why the number 2/3 here is arbitrary in the sense that any probability < 1 would have exactly the same problem.