Lewis, Clarence Irving (1883-1964)

The American philosopher C.I. Lewis held that in all knowledge there are two elements: that which is presented to sense and the construction or interpretation which represents the creative activity of the mind. Contrary to Kant, Lewis claimed that what is fixed and unalterable is not the structure that we bring to the sensibly presented, but rather the sensibly presented itself. The categories that mind imposes do not limit experience; they determine the interpretation we place upon experience, and if too much of experience eludes our categorizations, new ones should be established. It is pragmatically necessary that we create interpretive structures which will work in getting us around in sensory experience. This important and novel doctrine, Lewis’ ‘pragmatic a priori’, emerged through the development of ideas which took root during his study of logic. The problems of choosing among alternative logics led him to assert the need for pragmatic criteria. The way we conceptually structure or categorize experience answers to pragmatic criteria of purposes, intents and interests. Only within a context defined by a priori categorizations can empirical judgments be made. These empirical judgments proceed from apprehensions of the sensibly presented to assertions of objectivities. Moral judgments require both judgments of good and decisions of right. Judgments of value are tied to qualitative satisfactions disclosed in experience and are empirical claims. Decisions about the morally right are based on imperatives of reason.

1 Life

Clarence Irving Lewis, an American philosopher who focused on epistemology, logic and ethics, was born in 1883 in Stoneham, Massachusetts, and died in Menlo Park, California, in 1964. He was educated at Harvard, receiving his BA in 1905 and his Ph.D. in 1910. After receiving his Doctorate, he taught at the University of California from 1911 to 1920, and then at Harvard, where from 1930 he was the Edward Peirce Professor of Philosophy until his retirement in 1953.

2 Logic and the a priori

Lewis’ important and novel doctrine of the pragmatic a priori emerged through the development of ideas which took root during his study of logic. This work in logic, combined with a healthy respect for Kantian epistemology, a long exposure to Roycean idealism and an appreciation of certain basic tenets of classical American pragmatism, produced the context from which the pragmatic a priori, the vital core of Lewis’ conceptual pragmatism, took shape (see Royce, J. §3; Pragmatism §2).

Lewis spent many years in the study of logic, disturbed mainly by the conception of implication developed in the extensional logic of Whitehead and Russell’s *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13) (see Russell, B.A.W. §3; Whitehead, A.N. §2). This ‘material implication’ deviated strikingly from the ordinary sense of implication. According to it, a false proposition implies any proposition, while a true proposition is implied by any proposition. The problem, Lewis held, lay in the fact that the logic of propositions formulated in *Principia* is an extensional one, while ordinary deductive inference depends upon the meanings of the propositions used, and hence is rooted in intensional relations. The solution to this problem led Lewis to the development of the system of strict implication in symbolic logic and carried him beyond logic into the field of epistemology and the development of a detailed theory of meaning and analyticity.

A second type of issue, arising out of the entertainment of the possibility of an alternative to the logic of material implication, led to his interest in the existence of various types of alternative logics such as many-valued logics (see Many-valued logic §1; Modal logic §1). It also carried him beyond logic to the development of a theory of knowledge asserting the free creation of and pragmatic selection among various possible a priori conceptual schemes as tools of interpretation of experience.

Lewis held that the behaviour of symbolic systems operates in the same way as the behaviour of the human mind, that there is nothing in them which we have not put in ourselves, but that they teach us the meaning of our commitments. Thus, a priori truth is independent of experience because it is purely analytic of our conceptual meanings. The line between the a priori and the a posteriori, then, coincides with the divisions between the conceptual and the empirical, between the contributions of mind and what is given in experience, between the analytic and the synthetic.
3 Meaning and analyticity

According to Lewis, the meaning or deductive significance of a proposition, which can be thought of as a kind of term, coincides with the intension of the proposition, in the sense that whatever is deducible from the proposition is contained in its intension. A proposition signifies a state of affairs. A state of affairs is not a chunk of reality to be denoted, but rather includes all that the assertion of the state of affairs as actual implies, and only what it thus implies.

All real definitions specify intensional modes of meaning. What Lewis here means by a real definition is neither symbolic convention nor dictionary definition, but rather an explicative statement which relates a meaning to a meaning. There are two types of meanings related in such real definitions: linguistic meaning and sense meaning. Linguistic meaning is the pattern formed by the relation of a term or proposition to other terms or propositions. Sense meaning is the criterion in mind which determines the application of the term or proposition; it is the criterion by which what is meant is to be recognized.

Analytic truths state relations between sense meanings and not merely between linguistic meanings. Lewis sets out to undercut the conventionalist position that analytic truth expresses nothing beyond what is or can be determined by the language system which embodies it. Although he holds that there are conventional elements in the choice of symbols, in the assignment of the symbols to the meanings and in the choice of the meanings to be considered, he insists that the interrelation of the meanings is neither linguistic nor arbitrary. The analyticity of the linguistic meaning is determined by the fixed intensional relationships of sense meanings.

Lewis’ position reveals both a sympathy towards, and yet sharp criticism of, Kant’s epistemology. This critical appreciation of the insights of Kant is nowhere more in evidence than in his rejection of Kant’s synthetic a priori, a rejection based directly on Lewis’ own use of the Kantian concept of schematism (see Kant, I. §7). A sense meaning as a schema is a rule or prescribed routine and an imagined result of it which will determine the applicability of the word. By this means Lewis proposes to solve the epistemological problem of the nature of the necessity of analytic truth and how we know such necessity. We perform an experiment in imagination. We know that ‘All squares are rectangles’ because in envisaging the test which a thing must satisfy if ‘square’ is to apply to it, we observe that the test it must satisfy if ‘rectangle’ is to apply is already included. Both Lewis’ theory of meaning and his notion of the test schema reveal that his theory of analyticity is basically one of inclusion or containment.

Empirical meaning, then - meaning as a criterion in mind by reference to which the applicability of a term or the believability of an empirical statement is to be attested in experience - is a mode of intensional meaning. Lewis emphatically rejects as epistemologically untenable the nominalist conception that individuals are the first knowables and are primitively determinable by ostensive reference. It is only by reference to intensional meaning as criterion in mind by which one applies or refuses to apply a term that denotation is possible.

4 The a priori and pragmatic considerations

The truth of any empirical generalization is determined by the relationship of a conceptual scheme to given experience, and remains true, relative to that scheme. Empirical truth does not literally change, nor are contexts of interpretation proven false. Rather, conceptual schemes which do not work adequately as interpretive contexts are replaced by others. The sense in which truth is ‘made by the mind’ and is ‘relative to human interest and purpose’ is the sense in which we choose the interpretive structures by which we prescribe the outlines of realities of particular types and in so doing set the context for the discovery of empirical truth. However, the analytic or a priori truth contained in the interrelationships of the interpretive structures is subject neither to the contingencies of experience nor to the whims of convention; rather, it is eternally true. Such truth is not material truth but formal truth or validity.

Lewis holds not only that our choice of an analytic, a priori conceptual scheme is conditioned by experience in that it is based on pragmatic considerations operative in the light of past experience, but also that the logic which the conceptual schemes apply and by which they are interrelated is itself based on pragmatic considerations and hence is, in the last analysis, conditioned by experience. Lewis’ pragmatism runs quite deep. Humans, for Lewis, are essentially acting beings. Meanings which mind entertains, the logic which explicates such meanings, and mind itself emerge from behavioural responses to the environment in which humans find themselves. Our ways of
behaving towards the world around us which are made explicit in our accepted logic are those which have lasted because they work. The final ground, even of the validity of the principle of consistency as well as the validity of ordinary inference, is firmly rooted in a pragmatic, evolutionary-based direction of successful activity. The principle of consistency, and that ordinary inference which explicates our meanings in accordance with the principle of consistency, is rooted in a ‘pragmatic imperative’: if it is rejected, then thought and action themselves become stultified.

Lewis’ concept of the a priori occupies a unique position in the debate concerning the nature of a priori knowledge and the very possibility of an analytic-synthetic distinction. Drawing on a fundamentally Kantian scheme made responsive to the insights of American pragmatism and adapted to fit the needs of contemporary logic, Lewis has established an a priori which is coextensive with the analytic, yet which cannot be said to be empirically vacuous. It both arises from experience and has possible reference to experience.

5 Empirical knowledge
Lewis distinguishes three levels of empirical statement which enter into the formulation of empirical knowledge: expressive utterances, terminating judgments and objective beliefs.

Expressive statements, or the expressive use of language, signify appearances or indubitable content. They neither assert nor deny any objective reality of what appears; neither do they predict anything. Because they are confined to description of the immediate content of presentation, they cannot be in error. The immediate content is not judged, it is ‘had’.

Terminating judgments state the prediction of a particular passage of experience. They find their cue in what is given, but state something taken to be verifiable by some test which involves a way of acting. Since terminating judgments are expressed in expressive language, if the judgment is true, its truth is known with certitude, since there is no further means to bring it into question.

Finally, there are non-terminating judgments or judgments of objective fact. Such judgments express objective beliefs which can never be completely verified but are always further verifiable. Because such beliefs can never be completely verified they are probable, not certain. Non-terminating judgments are expressed in the form, ‘If this is a physical object O, then if S appearance and action A occur, then in all probability E appearance will occur’. The major, or first, implication relation of the non-terminating judgment expresses the logical entailment of strict implication. The second implication relation of the non-terminating judgment, or in other terms the implication relation holding within the terminating judgment, expresses what Lewis calls ‘real relations’. These real relations are causal relations involving contrary-to-fact conditionals and probability relations.

Our physical-object concepts embody habits of belief, and a habit is not just a collection of possible appearances and responses to these appearances; it is a rule of organization of possible appearances and possible responses which, in its very being as a rule, contains the possibility of generating more explicit relationships than can ever be enumerated. The meaning of objectivity is something over and above a collection of related appearances, and this meaning is supplied by the fixed rule of organization. Thus, though a physical-object statement is confirmable by verifying experiences, it is not reducible to or totally translatable into the verifying experiences.

Perhaps no single aspect of Lewis’ philosophy has been subject to more frequent and diverse attacks than his concept of the given element in experience. He expressed an ongoing frustration that his understanding of the given had been so misinterpreted over the years, stressing that the point he is trying to make is so obvious that he wonders how anyone could contest it. If there is nothing given, there would be no content for thought, nor could there be success or failure in action, and prediction would be incomprehensible. His emphasis on the given, as he himself stresses, is not a foundationalist or phenomenalist concern about data from which we build up a world of objects, but a pragmatic concern with the way in which we proceed to verify our beliefs. If nothing is to be counted as certain, then probable knowledge is not possible, for knowledge would be merely ‘probably probable’. The probability involved in our predictive claims must be founded in something that is not subject to probability claims. The sensibly presented, as apprehended, is a ‘taken’, but is pragmatically certain in that it serves as the test for our various claims, but cannot itself be tested since it makes no reference to future experience.

6 Ethical writings

Lewis’ moral theory is an extension of the view developed in his philosophy of knowledge. There are two dimensions involved, a given element and a priori categorization. Lewis rejects the sceptical view that evaluations are emotive and unverifiable, and asserts instead that they are a species of empirical knowledge.

What is intrinsically valuable or valuable for its own sake is the quality of an experience. An experience further has contributory value through the contribution it makes to the full quality of the life of the person having it. These are reported in expressive terms, leading to decisively verifiable terminating judgments, and moving on to objective probability statements which are judgments of extrinsic value and attribute a property of value to an objectivity of some kind. Extrinsic values may be inherent or instrumental. The former lead directly to experiences which are intrinsically valuable, while the latter arise as means to an end that is inherently valuable. Judgments about right and wrong are not empirical, but rather are determined by principles which in their prescriptive character refer to values. The fundamental rational imperative is to think and act in a way that one will not later regret. Rationality requires that actions must be in accordance with objective knowledge of relationships productive of value experience in the future for all, rather than in accordance merely with the felt quality of one’s immediate experience.

See also: Intentionality

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List of works


Lewis, C.I. (1918) A Survey of Symbolic Logic, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.(As far as possible, deals with diverse systems and important developments of logic within a common notation.)

Lewis, C.I. (1929) Mind and the World Order, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons; repr. New York: Dover, 1956. (Conceptions presented here grew out of his interest in exact logic; includes detailed presentation of his pragmatic a priori.)

Lewis, C.I. (1946) An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, La Salle, IL: Open Court.(A study of meaning and analytic truth, empirical knowledge and an application of these to issues of valuation.)


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Lewis, C.I. (1969) Values and Imperatives (Studies in Ethics by C.I. Lewis), ed. and with intro. by J. Lange. (Consists of four interrelated lectures delivered in 1959, plus six others, four of which were never before published.)

References and further reading


Rosenthal, S.B. (1976) The Pragmatic A Priori: A Study in the Epistemology of C.I. Lewis, St Louis, MO: Warren H. Green.(Main focus on Lewis’ epistemology, but broadens to include metaphysical implications; pragmatic dimension stressed throughout.)

