

EXPLODING A MYTH: C. I. LEWIS, PRAGMATISM, AND THE GIVEN

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Clarence Irving Lewis is one of the mostly unjustly neglected philosophers of the last century. This paper shows in what sense he is the inheritor of Peirce's view; and did not succumb to the myth of the given, but rather, put forward a view that was picked up, almost in whole, by his student Quine.

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1. Introduction. The central insight of pragmatism is that we must start from where we find ourselves – as human beings, laden with beliefs and practices, trying to make sense of ourselves and our world. There are better and worse ways of unpacking this insight. I have argued, in *The American Pragmatists*, that the path that leads from the much-mis-understood C. S. Peirce to the much-mis-understood C.I. Lewis, to well-enough-understood Sellars is not only the best kind of pragmatism, but is as right as we can get in philosophy. Today, I'm going to very briefly give you the gist of Peirce's view and then try to show you the promise of Lewis's position.

2. The pragmatism of Ch.S. Peirce. Peirce was one of the founders of pragmatism, with William James. He was what we would today call a holist about knowledge. His metaphor was not Neurath's and Quine's – that of the boat being rebuilt at sea. In Peirce's words, inquiry 'is not standing upon the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the present. Here I will stay till it begins to give way' (*CP* 5. 589). All kinds of inquiry – from science to mathematics to morals – are such that we revise our body of beliefs on the prompt of surprising or recalcitrant experience, coming to a more stable, better position. He argued that were we to have a belief that would be 'indefeasible'; or would not be improved upon; or would never lead to disappointment; or would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence, that would be the truth.

Peirce, with all the pragmatists, held that we must not adopt empty metaphysical theories of truth or rightness – we must stay away from what he called 'vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation' and 'begin with men and their conversation' (*CP* 8. 112). How could anyone aim for a truth that goes beyond experience or beyond the best that inquiry could do? How could an inquirer adopt a methodology that

might achieve that aim? The very idea of the believer-independent world, and the items within it to which beliefs might correspond, seems graspable only if we could somehow step outside of our practices. The correspondence theory, Peirce says, makes truth ‘a useless word’ and ‘having no use for this meaning of the word “truth”, we had better use the word in another sense’ (CP 5. 553).

Peirce is perfectly happy with the correspondence theory as a ‘nominal’ definition (CP 8. 100). It preserves the important idea that truth is something objective – not a matter of what we might happen, or choose, to believe. On Peirce’s view of meaning, there are three things we need to do if we are to come to an understanding of a concept – provide a definition, know how to pick out instances, and get a fix on the concept by seeing how it is related to our practices. The last of course is the pragmatic element in meaning and it is a kind of verificationism.

Peirce saw himself as improving on the empiricisms of Hume and Comte. For one thing, empirical meaning gets at only one aspect of a concept. For another, beliefs in mathematics and morals can be responsive to experience. That is, it is important to not take the verificationism in pragmatism to be identical to earlier or later brands of verificationism. This mistake was something that plagued Lewis’s reputation.

Lewis and Peirce were alike in many ways. Both were influenced by Kant and both try to take what Peirce saw as spurious metaphysics out of transcendental idealism. We find him saying in 1902 that when he “was a babe in philosophy my bottle was filled from the udders of Kant” but he now wants “something more substantial” (CP 2. 113). For instance, not only should the fact that an assumption is indispensable to our practice of inquiry not convince us of its necessary truth, it should not even convince us of its truth. He says: “I do not admit that indispensability is any ground of belief. It may be indispensable that I should have \$500 in the bank – because I have given checks to that amount. But I have never found that the indispensability directly affected my balance, in the least.”¹ We must make these regulative assumptions “for the same reason that a general who has to capture a position or see his country ruined, must go on the hypothesis that there is some way in which he can and shall capture it” (CP 7. 219; 1901). Peirce’s view is that “we are obliged to suppose, but we need not assert,” that, for instance, there are determinate answers to our questions. The principle of bivalence is a “saltus” or an unjustified leap made by logicians. It is merely a regulative assumption of inquiry – an assumption we must make if we are to continue with a practice that we cannot see ourselves abandoning.

Peirce set himself against the pragmatism of his friend William James, who was less concerned with getting beliefs that were well-settled or responsive to the evidence. Much to pragmatism’s misfortune, it has been the view of James that has dominated the pragmatist scene. Peirce was by all accounts a difficult man and he found the gates of academia barred to him. After his day job as a scientist at the US Coast Survey, he spent cold and lonely hours in his attic turning out countless pages of manuscripts, with relatively little to

¹ (CP 2. 113; 1902, see also CP 3. 432; 1896).

show for it by way of publication or acknowledgement. James, on the other hand, was the most famous academic in America with a reputation that spanned the world. It is no surprise that in the early to mid 1900's, James' version of pragmatism was dominant. But it had also been savaged by Russell and Moore for taking truth to be what works for an individual and for suggesting that what is desirable to be believed ought to be believed. Peirce's view was not known, nor mentioned in the dispatches slaying pragmatism.

But as Frank Ramsey (the last neglected pragmatist, but another story) says: 'such absurdities ... form no part to the essential pragmatist idea even if they constitute its chief attraction to some minds'.

3. The pragmatism of C.I. Lewis. It is easy to forget how Lewis spans the generations. Here he is his Harvard undergraduate education in the early years of the 1900s:

In my third and final year, I took the famous course in metaphysics which James and Royce divided between them and in which each gave some attention to shortcomings of the other's views. It was immense... I should be glad to think that the "conceptual pragmatism" of *Mind and the World-Order* had its roots in that same ground; indeed the general tenor of my own philosophic thinking may have taken shape under the influence of that course. [1968a: 5]

After a stint teaching at Berkeley, Lewis wound his way back to Harvard as a faculty member in 1920, where he "practically lived with" the "manuscript remains" of Peirce for two years. This massive bulk of papers had been left to Harvard in a state of disarray by Peirce's widow and there was some hope that Lewis would start to put them into order (1968a: 16). He declined to do such menial editorial work, preferring rather to read the Peirce papers, and concluding that the "originality and wealth" of this "legendary figure" was not fully evident in Peirce's meager published writings and not well represented by those who were influenced by him (James and Royce).²

Lewis went on to teach a generation of superstars – Quine, Goodman, Sellars, for instance. He truly is the bridge between classical and contemporary pragmatism. More precisely, he is the bridge (along with Ramsey), between Peirce and what we might call analytic pragmatism. One of the gravest injustices in the history of modern philosophy is the relegation of Lewis to the dustbin of foundationalism and what Sellars later called the Myth of the Given.³ For he was a more sophisticated holist than his students Quine and Goodman and is closer to Sellars than any other philosopher, save Peirce.

² (1970 [1930c]: 78)

³ See Misak (2013), Dayton (1995), Hookway (2008) for corrective accounts of how Lewis did not adopt a foundationalist view of the given and how he did not adopt the traditional distinction between the analytic and the synthetic.

Here is how Lewis puts his position in the 1929 *Mind and the World Order*:

The whole body of our conceptual interpretations form a sort of hierarchy or pyramid with the most comprehensive, such as those of logic, at the top, and the least general such as ['all swans are birds'] etc, at the bottom ... with this complex system of interrelated concepts, we approach particular experiences and attempt to fit them, somewhere and somehow, into its preformed patterns. Persistent failure leads to readjustment ... The higher up a concept stands in our pyramid, the more reluctant we are to disturb it, because the more radical and far-reaching the results will be ... The decision that there are no such creatures as have been defined as 'swans' would be unimportant. The conclusion that there are no such things as Euclidean triangles, would be immensely disturbing. And if we should be forced to realize that nothing in experience possesses any stability – that our principle, 'Nothing can both be and not be,' was merely a verbalism, applying to nothing more than momentarily – that denouement would rock our word to its foundations. (1956 [1929]: 305-6)

This passage is a stunner, to anyone with a passing familiarity with Lewis's student, Quine. Donald Davidson, who in turn was Quine's student, offers the following explanation of why Quine failed to give credit where it was due:

I do think that C.I. Lewis had a tremendous influence on Quine, but Quine doesn't realize it. The explanation for that is that Quine had no training in philosophy and so when he took Lewis's course in epistemology, he took for granted that this is what everybody knows about epistemology. Quine didn't realize that Lewis was any different from everyone else ... I don't think he realized any of this, but you can find most of Quine's epistemology in C. I. Lewis minus the analytic-synthetic distinction. Epistemology naturalized is very close to the heart of C. I. Lewis. (Davidson 2004: 237)

Whether Davidson is right about the causes of Quine's behavior, he is wrong in his suggestion that Lewis, unlike Quine, retained the analytic-synthetic distinction. Davidson is of course aided and abetted in this misunderstanding by Quine, who distinguished his view from that of other empiricists by denying what he took to be a dogma embedded in the older views: the analytic-synthetic distinction. He says:

Carnap, Lewis, and others take a pragmatic stand on the question of choosing between language forms, scientific frameworks; but their pragmatism leaves off at the imagined boundary between the analytic and the synthetic. In repudiating such a boundary I espouse a more thorough pragmatism. (1951: 46)

Had he read any Peirce, Quine would have seen that Peirce too was resolutely against the analytic-synthetic distinction. His holism was complete. Matters of mathematics and logic are part of our body of belief, subject to change in light of the surprise of experience, which he showed can be had in diagrammatic proof contexts. He was also willing to entertain ethics as a legitimate arena for belief and inquiry, although he worried that often the aim in ethics was not to get to the truth on a matter, but was more political.

Lewis was in full agreement with Peirce, despite Quine and others railing against the analytic and synthetic distinction they said was embedded in his view. Lewis' called his

account of the analytic (or the *a priori*) a ‘pragmatic conception’. There is nothing necessary or unrevisable about our definitions and framework. In fact, for Lewis, as for Peirce, the framework is what we have choice over, where what is compelling is the brute force of experience.

5. C.I. Lewis: Knowledge and valuation. Lewis, unlike Peirce, concentrates on the ethical and carves out an extraordinarily promising position that bears hardly a trace on contemporary philosophical consciousness. It is bound up with his epistemology and hence gives us a nice rounded view of his position.

Lewis argues that we experience value in more or less the same way we experience a thing’s being green or hard. “Value judgments are a form of empirical cognition, directed upon facts as obdurate and compelling as those which must determine the correctness of any other kind of knowledge.⁴” Something compels, or impinges upon, us. When we make a judgment or form a belief about that which impinges upon us, what was given to us flies away.⁵ The mystic and the intuitionist might be “outraged” at this view, as it stands against anyone who would see us “sinking ourselves in the presentation itself and putting thought to sleep.⁶” But if we are to have any knowledge at all of value, then just as with any kind of knowledge, we must bring to immediate presentations of value our network of thought structures.

Lewis recoils from the emotivist branch of empiricist ethics. He thinks that “one of the strangest aberrations ever to visit the mind of man” is the idea that value-predictions are not true or false matters of fact, but are merely expressions of emotion.⁷ Non-cognitivism in ethics, he thinks, implies that “one belief would be as good as another.” It results in “both moral and practical cynicism” and makes action “pointless”.⁸ If it were not better to be right than wrong in what one believes, why bother about your belief or your grounds for it? If our observations of value did not have any connection whatsoever to “the objective value-properties of things, then it would be totally impossible for us to learn from experience how to improve our lot in life”.

Lewis and Peirce are the two pragmatists who are determined to address what we might call the problem of validity – of how we can make sense of being right or wrong, if truth is something that is linked to human beings. That problem is at its starkest with respect to value, so let’s look at what Lewis says about that.

He wants to set out a “naturalistic” conception of values.⁹ Human beings are the judges of what is right and wrong. But that does not mean “the evaluations which the fool makes in his folly are on a par with those of the sage in his wisdom”. Human beings

⁴ (1971 [1946]: 407).

⁵ (1970 [1923]: 231)

⁶ (1970 [1923]: 406).

⁷ (1971 [1946]: 365-6, 399; 1970 [1934]: 259).

⁸ (1971 [1946]: 366).

⁹ (1971 [1946]: 398).

“stand in need of all that can be learned from the experience of life in this natural world”¹⁰

Underlying Lewis’ account of ethics is the pragmatist idea that we need to be able to verify a meaningful expression in action – either physical or imaginative.¹¹ But we do not aim at the false grail of certainty when we do so. The requirement is that we need to say what would be further evidence for or against the hypothesis in question.¹²

He distinguishes three kinds of value predication. First we have expressive statements of the sort “This is good”, said at the table, where the speaker intends merely to express her immediate impression about the food, not to make a statement that is verifiable by others. This is “apparent value” or “felt goodness” or a sense that something is “prized.”¹³ This kind of value judgment is the data for the other two kinds of value statements. “Without the experience of felt value and disvalue, evaluations in general would have no meaning”.¹⁴ Here we see the makings of a distinction in Lewis’ thought between what seems to me to be good and what is good. Expressive statements about what seems to me to be good are not subject to error. They are only true or false in the sense that we can tell lies about what we experience. They do not fall into the category of knowledge. There is a distinction to be made between what is prized, on the one hand, and what is judged or “appraised” on the other.

The second kind of value predication consists of evaluations that are verifiable by the course of experience. Although we can never verify these (or any other kind of empirical judgment) with certainty, some of them are “terminating judgments” (1971 [1946]: 375). We predict a course of experience and that prediction is decisively, but fallibly, verified or falsified. We set a test and it is passed or not passed. These statements are predictions that a course of action will be good or bad, or will cause enjoyment or pain. We have here “a form of empirical knowledge, not fundamentally different in what determines their truth or falsity, and what determines their validity and justification, from other kinds of empirical knowledge”. The validity of these judgments “will be disclosed in experience”. If we judge falsely, that can have “devastating consequences.”¹⁵ Sometimes these terminating judgments are easily and decisively verified – if my aim is to get pleasure and I predict that doing *A* will bring me pleasure, verifying my prediction might be a relatively straightforward matter. But if my purpose “is to make the world safe for democracy”, that will not be easily verifiable.¹⁶ No limited set of experiences is going to be sufficient to exhaust the empirical significance of predictions about that.

The third kind of evaluative judgment also falls under our cognitive scope. We often evaluate things, actions, and states of affairs as good or bad – we attribute a value to them, just as we attribute the property of red, say, to an object. These evaluations are di-

¹⁰ (1971 [1946]: 398-9).

¹¹ (1971 [1946]: 134-5).

¹² (1971 [1946]: 136-7)

¹³ (1971 [1946]: 374, 398).

¹⁴ (1971 [1946]: 375).

¹⁵ (1971 [1946]: xi).

¹⁶ (1971 [1946]: 368-9).

verse and complex, but they are also subject to verification – this time in “non-terminating” experiences. They cannot be decisively verified: further experience might always turn out to be relevant.¹⁷ They are never more than probable. But we might have so much to go on that they are “practically certain¹⁸,” a term right out of Peirce. Examples include statements in normative ethics, such as “Torture is odious” or “It is right to help others.”¹⁹ These are not unverifiable expressions of desires, but verifiable judgments that continue to be responsive to experience, even if we are pretty sure we have them right.

It is clear that Lewis is gripped by the question of validity or of making sense of how we can get right and wrong answers. What is valuable is not equivalent to what is immediately perceived as valuable by this or that person. Lewis notes that he might get enormous satisfaction from a cartoon on his desk, but he can nonetheless see that it is a trivial, not very valuable, matter.²⁰ And the goodness of a good object is not dependent upon it being experienced by someone.²¹ Following Peirce, Lewis moves to subjunctive conditionals to articulate his position. Something may be beautiful even if no human were ever to behold it. What is important is how “it *would be* beheld if it ever *should be* beheld under conditions favorable to realization in full of the potentialities for such delight which are resident in the thing.”²² Nonetheless, it is a “peculiarity” of value judgments that “expressive meaning” (what is felt to be valuable) drives “objective meaning” (what is in fact valuable).

Moreover, someone can discover that something is of value without actually experiencing it for himself. Lewis gives the following example: he might come to believe that his neighbor is a good musician through his rendition of difficult passages, even though the music leaves him cold. One might add that one can learn something about the moral rightness or wrongness of a practice by reading first-person reports of those who have been subject to the practice, by listening to the argument on either side, and so on.²³ For Lewis, value ascriptions are subjective in the sense that they are driven by how human beings would experience a thing or an act. But they are not subjective in the sense that if I or we value *A*, then *A* is valuable.

Naturalist or pragmatist conceptions of value must also cope with the fact that value judgments are likely to encounter “more variation from person to person” and more variation for an individual from one time to another. Our very likes and dislikes also seem particularly sensitive to our own attitudes – to “how one goes out to meet” objects and situations.²⁴ Lewis is of the view that these facts merely distinguish value judgments from sensory judgments by degree, rather than by kind. All data are influenced by “internal”

¹⁷ (1971 [1946]: 365, 375f).

¹⁸ (1971 [1946]: 376).

¹⁹ (1970 [1940]: 111; 1970 [1941]: 166).

²⁰ (1971 [1946]: 381).

²¹ (1971 [1946]: 388).

²² (1971 [1946]: 389).

²³ See Misak (2008).

²⁴ (1971 [1946]: 418).

and interpretative factors. In other kinds of empirical matters, we simply do not look as often to these factors as explanations for why our judgments diverge. We tend to look rather to differences in the external set-up.²⁵ Indeed, we tend to emphasize divergence of belief in ethics because it is important for us to do so. It is vital to note the disagreements of others when we diverge about whether, for instance, assisted dying is permissible, whereas it is less important with garden variety judgments of greenness or hardness.²⁶

Lewis, it should by now be clear, builds validity into his account of value by showing us how the notions of disagreement, error, and getting things right play a vital role in our ethical deliberation. He identifies ways we can be mistaken about our value judgments and speaks to how we can learn from experience so that we improve our value judgments. I can be mistaken about my felt judgments – I might mistakenly think that my experiencing *A* as valuable on one occasion means that I will experience it as valuable on every occasion. Or I might be wrong in inferring that because I take *A* to be good, others will also take it to be good. That is, my experiencing *A* as valuable need not be connected to *A*'s really being valuable. It may be connected, rather, to my “personal make-up or personal history or personal attitude on this occasion.”²⁷

What about those whose idea of the good life is inconsistent with the ideas of others? What of those whose aim is to ensure substantive homogeneity in a population, by genocidal means? Lewis' attempt at answering such questions is to say that we have to hope, if there is to be any chance of improvement in our lives, that there is enough commonality in the experience of value so that inquiry will converge upon the right answer:

If there were a complete absence of community in our value-findings on given occasions, or if communities of value-apprehension in the presence of the same object should be mere matters of chance, then no one could, with the best will in the world, learn how to do anybody else any good – or for that matter, how to do him harm. (1971 [1946]: 423-4)

This is a critically important theme in Lewis' work. It is the Kantian strain in the brand of pragmatism he shares with Peirce. The very practices of assertion and of acting with intent require that we hold ourselves up to standards and norms:

To act, to live, in human terms, is necessarily to be subject to imperatives; to recognize norms. ... To repudiate normative significances and imperatives in general, would be to dissolve away all seriousness of action and intent, leaving only an undirected floating down the stream of time; and as a consequence to dissolve all significance of thought and discourse into universal blah. Those who would be serious and circumspect and cogent in what they think, and yet tell us that there are no valid norms or binding imperatives, are hopelessly confused, and inconsistent with their own attitude of assertion. (1971 [1946]: 481)

²⁵ (1971 [1946]: 422-3).

²⁶ (1971 [1946]: 419).

²⁷ (1971 [1946]: 416).

Lewis thinks that we can add the following to the Peircean imperative that we have to hope for some commonality and convergence: “Be consistent, in valuation and in thought and action; Be concerned about yourself in future and on the whole”. We need to abide by these requirements if we are to make sense of the life we live. The abandonment of standards is barely conceivable, and even if we could do it, we would be crippled in our attempt at making sense of a human life. We can only repudiate these norms if we are willing to repudiate all norms and the distinction between validity and invalidity itself. And we can’t do that while remaining the kinds of beings we are and think important to be²⁸. This is the Kantian pragmatist position of Lewis and Peirce. It has been rather lost in the literature and we would do well to re-discover it.

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²⁸ (1971 [1946]: 483-4).

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