



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Lewis's Late Ethics

Eric Dayton

Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy, Volume 42, Number 1, Winter 2006, pp. 17-23 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csp.2006.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/200089>

Murray Murphey's intellectual biography of C. I. Lewis is doubly welcome. It is welcome first because, although Lewis is the most important American philosopher of the second quarter of the twentieth century, there are no book-length treatments of his thought as a whole. Indeed, the standard up until now has been the chapter on Lewis in *A History of Philosophy in America*, by Murphey and Elizabeth Flower. The last decade has seen a major flowering of American philosophy studies generally and pragmatism in particular, but Lewis has been curiously left out of its curriculum. It is something of a scandal that a philosopher of his standing and ability should have suffered such eclipse. The publication of Murphey's book will do much to rectify matters. It is an exhaustive and detailed treatment of the development of Lewis's thought and will be an essential resource for Lewis scholars, indeed *the* essential resource, for many years to come.

It is welcome secondly, because it definitively reinserts Lewis into the pragmatic tradition. Lewis's neglect has been at least partly due to a widespread misremembering of his work as an obsolete position in epistemology involving analyticity and foundationalism, and to the view that a philosopher so influential among logical empiricist and analytic philosophers couldn't really be a pragmatist. Murphey's discussion of Lewis's early years makes abundantly visible the emergence of Lewis's thought in the debates between James and Royce, his early idealism and struggles against the metaphysical commitments of Royce's logic, and his reassessment of James and Peirce in that period of intense creative development which was to culminate in the conceptual pragmatism of his brilliant *Mind and the World Order (MWO)*. Murphey amply discusses Lewis's contributions to logic, his conversation and gradual disillusionment with positivism,

## *Lewis's Late Ethics*

ERIC DAYTON



and his contributions to the theory of knowledge and to the philosophical debates forming post-war American philosophy.

I shall leave these issues to other contributors and limit myself to the problematic subject of Lewis's late ethics. Murphey provides a rich and detailed account of Lewis's ethics with which I am in broad agreement and my discussion will differ primarily in interpretation and emphasis. Lewis's ethics poses difficult problems in interpretation. There are several reasons for this. First, although Lewis gives notice in 1946, in the introduction to (the three books of) *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (AKV) that he was at work on a "fourth" book on ethics, and there indeed is ample evidence that he was at work on topics in ethics even in the 30's, the book never appeared. Although Lewis worked tirelessly on ethics after his retirement in 1953 and gave numerous public lectures from which we can trace his thinking, he worked in relative isolation from the discussions on ethics in the philosophical community. Secondly, there is the labyrinth of the unpublished book manuscripts. Lewis wrote essentially everyday of his retirement producing thousands of pages of chapter versions and chapter fragments and sketches of the book which was never to be published. The problem here is not too little information but altogether too much. There are numerous plans of the book similar but subtly different, and multiple drafts of chapters some of which are subsequently dropped. Why was it so difficult for Lewis to commit his thoughts to final form? Finally, Lewis's ethics, even though practically unknown to the philosophical community generally, is deeply continuous with his work as a whole. One sees reflections of it in even in the introduction to *MWO*, although the continuity is largely retrospective, a product of Lewis's self understanding at the end of his career. Each of these facts imposes an interpretive difficulty. Decisions must be made about what is most central and explanatory and is a mere artifact of Lewis's failure to complete his book. Murphey tells an admirable story threading Lewis's various works together in a plausible and intelligent whole. Whereas Murphey sees the ethics more than I through the lens of the logic, I am inclined to see both as reflecting a more basic pragmatism about meaning and normativity.

To begin with, how are we to understand Lewis's ethics as a whole? Murphey notes, Lewis's cold war republicanism makes his normative pronouncements occasionally difficult to take seriously, and I agree. Lewis's ethics is not important for its normative content, rather everything of real importance in it is meta-ethics, or what he occasionally called the philosophy of practice or practical reason. What is most distinctive there is his grounding of the normative by way of a pragmatic vindication. Indeed his account of the ground of rightness and its constitutive role in practical agency speaks directly to central discussions in meta-ethics today and, because it represents a path largely not taken, can illuminate a number of these current debates. As I see Lewis's argument, it divides into two complementary strategies, a *reductio ad absurdum* against the skeptic and a "Kantian

deduction” of the principles of practice, the deduction being the fundamental argument, within which the *reductio* is a tactical manoeuvre.

Lewis's identification of pragmatism as offering the ground of rational choice is clearly evident in both *MWO* and *AKV*. Any psychological attitude which carries cognitive significance as a response will exhibit some value character of utility or disutility which can ground the correctness or incorrectness of that response as knowledge. As his views developed, Lewis's thought on the ground of right conduct was increasingly influenced by his complex and ambiguous relationship to Kant. I would emphasize that dependence more than Murphey has. Lewis was very critical of Kant's metaphysics, but Kant was an important source of his pragmatic grounding strategy. Kant's belief that scientific explanation required universal determinism gave rise to all the aspects of Kant's philosophy which Lewis found objectionable: his mystique of freedom and his commitment to the unknowable character of the self, and the emptiness and thus the inadequacy of Kant's ethics. In a bluntly worded draft discussion of the problem of determinism and Kant's ethics, Lewis says:

Determinism is an exaggeration made on the ground of a failure to understand that theoretical certainty is not required for genuine knowledge. It is not: if it should be there would be no justified claim that there is such a thing as empirical knowledge. And as we come to realize this fact, the deterministic thesis loses both its plausibility and its significance. One might say that it is replaced by the question of the validity of induction. But if so, let us again observe, that the question is not *whether* it is valid but how it can be. And since we are dogmatising here, we may answer that. The validity of inductive predictions at large cannot be gainsaid, because if it [induction] have no validity, there is no question of empirical fact having any answer; and the question itself is a meaningless noise. That in brief is the deduction of the categories: it is pragmatic rather than metaphysical. Incidentally, Kant was the first pragmatist.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis saw the need to provide a pragmatic deduction of the categories of intelligent practice as a whole, of the imperatives of logic, induction, valuation and action. On Kant's view the concepts requiring a transcendental deduction are *a priori* and so cannot be secured by an empirical deduction, or demonstration of the causal history of their employment in synthetic judgements. Kant's deduction—depending on an account of the *a priori* which Lewis rejects—was, of course, unavailable, but to the extent that Kant's strategy was to argue for the warranted employment of a system of principles and empirical cognitions by way of their necessity, Lewis could see a parallel to his own “pragmatic” deduction of principles of practice.

Clearly Lewis saw the need to vindicate practical judgements as essential to pragmatism, long before he turned to ethics. In a talk given at Yale and Princeton in 1937 he said:

Indeed, pragmatism might almost be defined as the contention that all judgments of truth are judgments of value: that verification is a value-determination, and the criterion of truth is realization of some kind of value. Pragmatism could not consistently admit that value-judgments are incapable of an objective test unless it should be prepared to admit that truth in general is subjective.<sup>2</sup>

And in *AKV* the strategy of vindication is already visible, indeed the first attempt at “deduction” (although he does not call it that there) appears in section 2 of chapter 13 of *AKV* (pp. 480–86) and although Kant is not mentioned by name the allusion is clear. The essential elements are two. The first is human freedom (a human being is subject to imperatives because he has a will, and “the sense of the future moves him, but not sufficiently to make him automatically responsive. He has to ‘move himself’ in order to come into accord with the dictates of the reasonable” (p. 484)). The second is human nature, which allows for an inductively derived value content of good, thus giving Lewis consistency and cogency, a formal constraint and a content constraint.

Where I would emphasize the development of a single grounding strategy, Murphey sees important changes, arguing, “Lewis changed his position on the justification of these imperatives during the course of the 1950s” (p. 647). He also argues that in 1952 Lewis focussed on the Law of Objectivity which he later dropped and took the fundamental imperatives to be analytic *a priori*. It is not obvious to me that much hangs on either claim. Lewis gives many names and varied content to his imperatives. In *AKV* Lewis identifies the “final and universal imperative” as “Be consistent in thought and action” and then immediately as “Be concerned with yourself in the future and on the whole”, and of course, these formulations are not equivalent. The imperative of rationality in practice, he says, is not derivative from the logical “rather it is the other way about”. I take the point to be that consistency itself, the imperative to consistency, has a categorical practical ground. To attempt to repudiate it is to contradict oneself “not formally but pragmatically”.

The imperative mood, the basic sense of which is, Lewis argues in the book material called “Semantics of the Imperative”<sup>3</sup>, “the entertainment of the thought-of content of representation as future determinable and as a *commitment to be taken*”, is just one of the human moods of entertaining no less primitive than the indicative. When the Cyrenaic repudiates in words the imperative of rationality he counsels us in the imperative mood (and thus as a *commitment to be taken*) not to take commitments; the content is incompatible with the mood of entertaining.

Put in the indicative the imperative of consistency, “It ought to be that you be consistent” expresses the intended mood of entertainment, the imperative, as the main clause, and the representational content thought-of in indirect discourse. The imperative so stated is true in the same sense that

the principles of logic are true, that is, it is pragmatically enjoined. But when we say that the principles of logic are analytic, the term has a precise meaning and a clear use; to say the same of the imperative invites us to treat it a term in a developed logic. This brings me to related point. Murphey identifies the thesis “that there is a logic applicable to imperatives” (376) as a problematic assumption of Lewis’s theory of pragmatic contradiction. In part Murphey is concerned that Lewis illegitimately confused the contraries of imperatives with their contradictories. (The contradictory of *Always be consistent* being not *Never be consistent* but *Sometimes do not be consistent*.) But I do not think that the observation makes a problem for Lewis. It is not the imperative treated as a sentence which is subject to pragmatic contradiction but a particular thought content entertained by a particular person in the imperative mood. To entertain a content in the imperative for Lewis is, arguably, to take it as a *rule* for future conduct, and both the contrary and the contradictory of a rule are incompatible with that taking. Lewis saw all the moods of entertaining to involve a descriptive core, but he also held that without the various moods in which we wonder, question, presume, exhort, suppose, expect, doubt and so on, human experience could not exist; even simple perception of an object is, he argues, a complex of modally distinct entertainings. For there to be a logic applicable to imperatives there should be some systematically developed way of expressing the consequences of the commitments we make using the imperative mood. It is not at all clear that he thought that imperative sentences have a logic of their own independently of contexts of use. As Lewis says “There would be no logical inconsistency in his hortation, “Have no concern for the future,” if it should be found engraved by lightning on a rock. But for us to take seriously one who puts it forward, or for anyone to take himself seriously in accepting it, would imply exactly such concern as this injunction advises that we repudiate” (AKV, 481).

I have two more small concerns. Murphey considers the question of whether Lewis’s ethics is circular while noting Saydah’s view that it is not. According to Saydah, Lewis’s deduction does not assume the existence of human beings but merely the possibility of a human type of experience, and so circularity is avoided. Murphey doubts Saydah’s position and also conjectures that Lewis abandoned the deduction by time of his later “Foundations of ethics” lectures (398). There are two connected questions here. One is whether Lewis continued to be committed to a deduction as the basic form of pragmatic vindication. The other is whether Lewis’s pragmatic vindication makes his ethics viciously circular. Let me first address the question of circularity. Lewis admits that his view is circular and holds the circularity to be benign and unavoidable. It is circular because here, as in the case of logic, there is no more fundamental ground of appeal than conduct itself. It is benign because “The validity of imperatives consists precisely in this fact of life in any world which could be that in which we live.”<sup>4</sup> It would be viciously circular, if it were optional, if it were possible to stand outside the circle. A

Kantian transcendental deduction isn't viciously circular, since it delineates conditions of possible experience, but, as Murphey notes, Lewis's deduction is grounded in actual experience. But does Lewis's pragmatic vindication leave open real possibilities which are outside the circle. I think not. Lewis's deduction asserts that real possibilities rest on an agent's tacit or implicit practical skills and know-how. To be an active self-governing social being is not just to have certain mental contents but is also to possess active powers of purposing and valuing and recognizing norms. Rationality, being a set of agent powers, does not need to be metaphysically grounded in possible experience; it is enough that it applies in any world which could be ours.

Regarding the question of Lewis's ongoing commitment to the deduction, my view is that Lewis used the term deduction very loosely and to characterize his whole strategy of pragmatic vindication. In the beginning of "Logic and the ethical" (the fragment just quoted), for example, he begins with a sketch of the claim that integrity in both deliberation and the action it guides, is a non-repudiable imperative of any creature "privileged to make his own decisions, and obliged to live with the consequences of them", saying "This, in sum, is the whole 'deduction' of the normative and self-critical." As I see it, the pragmatic deduction and the *reductio ad absurdum*, or pragmatic contradiction argument, both appeal, and in the same way, to the implicit support of the actual practices and social norms which we embody by acting and living human lives. The *reductio* argues that the attempt to repudiate these norms produces a contradiction between content entertained and mood of entertainment. The deduction notes that our agency provides guidance and warrants our employment of practical norms, but that the appeal to norms to ground their own validity is a *petitio principii*. Still there is no external ground to which to appeal. The attempt to repudiate the imperativeness of norms on some ground external to the rational imperatives cannot succeed; as a piece of conduct it relies on what it attempts to refute. While a defence of the ground of imperatives is a *petitio principii*, its repudiation is a *reduction ad absurdum* of the attempt. As a constitutive argument, the circularity is unavoidable but, as practically successful in any world which could be our own, it is virtuous.

This leaves the last and largest issues. "How does one get from the vindication of categorical norms of practice to ethical norms proper?" and "Why didn't Lewis finish his book?" Murphey argues that Lewis does not succeed in showing that the imperatives of practice give us moral imperatives, and that with his emphasis on the centrality of the prudential Lewis leaves himself ill equipped to bridge the gap. He argues that underlying Lewis's arguments is a tacit appeal to empathetic knowledge connecting his ethics to the problem of other minds (367). I want to say three things about this. First, it is certainly true that Lewis wanted the moral law to flow from the imperatives of practice and could not find a formulation which satisfied his own critical instincts; on his account the Categorical Imperative is empty enough that even the egoist and the emotivist could "crawl under the Kant-



ian tent”—though he is sure that they will not like the consequences of abiding by their own counsel. Lewis suggests that their error lies on the side of the good rather than on the side of the right, although he also thinks that these positions are typically in bad faith, and allow themselves selfish conclusions under the name of subjectivism. It is also clear that the account he gives of the imperatives of practice will not by itself give us the moral law—his account is incomplete without an empirical moral psychology. Murphey charitably attributes Lewis's failure to complete his book to failing health. It is true that Lewis's health deteriorated at the end, but this does not explain why he did not finish the book five years earlier. It is my view that Lewis's failure to complete the book is at bottom due to his inability to find a formulation which would magically do what in his heart he must have known could not be done.

Secondly, I think his views were a great advance on the views on offer in 1960, because he clearly connected the rational imperatives to the good and not to the desired. The reasons which valuations provide us with are not ego-centric but are, agent neutral. So he did not need to rely implicitly on empathetic knowledge. The practical problem of morality is that it is hard to move oneself to be guided by the good when it is the good of the other, not that one needs special glasses to see that it is a good. In this regard, I think Lewis's view is correct: the validity of the imperatives of practice is not a function of how naturally selfish or altruistic we are, although what the moral law requires of us may be.

Finally, I think that Lewis himself saw this only incompletely—one wishes that he had not tried to invent the wheel by himself and had submitted his substantial, if partial, contributions on ethics to the philosophical community. It is to be hoped that Murphey's excellent book will do what Lewis himself did not.

The University of Saskatchewan  
dayton@duke.usask.ca

#### NOTES

1. From the book manuscripts “Chapter IV: On Kant”, [3/3/62—pp. 86–87—FNO 7,8, in Box 3 folder 4].

2. From “Verification and the Types of Truth”, *Collected Papers of Clarence Irving Lewis*, ed. John D. Goheen and John L. Mothershead, Jr., Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1970, 277–93.

3. There are various versions of the “chapter” with this title, which was on some plans designated as chapter 3, this version from DN 3 in Box 4, folder 6, (Nov 1961).

4. From “Ethics and the logical” (SN 9–162 [6/6/62]), and part of the materials directed toward chapter 2 of the book.