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## Why Not Lewis?

JOEL ISAAC



Throughout his account of C. I. Lewis's life and thought, Murray Murphey diligently tests his subject's philosophical claims against both their own standards and rival positions advanced during Lewis's lifetime. Murphey does not spare his criticisms where he deems Lewis to have been inconsistent or unconvincing. At the same time, he offers penetrating and sympathetic insights into Lewis's reformulation of pragmatist philosophy, along with a spirited defence of his subject's work against the attacks of contemporaries in the logical positivist and Quinean camps. Given this thorough handling of Lewis's intellectual biography, it is all the more curious that Murphey does not explicitly justify his claim that Lewis was "the last great pragmatist" until the very end of the book. And when he does, there are good reasons—many offered by the author himself in earlier chapters—for disputing Murphey's case and denying Lewis elevation to the canon of Great Pragmatists.

A principal reason why Lewis merits renewed consideration, according to Murphey, is that he was "one of the few" philosophers "trained for the issues of the nineteenth century" who "could deal effectively with the very different issues of the 1940s and 1950s" (405). Murphey illustrates very well how Lewis's post-doctoral affinities with Roycean idealism gave way to the "conceptual pragmatism" of *Mind and the World Order*—a shift mediated by Lewis's engagement with the mathematical logic of Russell and his followers. Lewis was also open to, if ultimately highly critical of, the logical positivists who came to play an increasing role in American philosophy during the 1930s. Yet this is the same Lewis who, Murphey avers, "found himself outflanked" by Quine's attack on the empiricist dogma of reductionism in the early 1950s precisely because he was unable to

adapt his “rigid” epistemological views after he had “recast” them “to meet the challenge of the positivists in the 1930s and 1940s.” With the epistemological premises of *Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* effectively “in ruins,” Lewis felt in 1952 that “he had done what he could in epistemology” and was now happy to “leave the field to younger men” (331). Already twenty years earlier, Lewis had given up on logic, having ultimately failed—as Murphey does not flinch from pointing out—to “sweep the field for strict implication” (203). Lewis recognized that “he lacked the training in mathematics necessary for the ever more technical development of the subject,” which may have contributed to his own uncharitable 1948 assessment that mathematical logic was “destined to develop into something for which the question of how many angels can dance on the point of a needle, will not even be a good parody” (202–3). Notwithstanding Lewis’s laudable attempts to respond to the challenges of logical empiricism from within the pragmatist tradition, he seems to have become increasingly embittered with the various forms of analytic philosophy which became prominent in the years following the Second World War—lashing out at representatives of “positivism” such as Carl Hempel (332–3), and describing postwar philosophy as a “miserable business” (325). By 1961, Lewis had taken to castigating analytic philosophers as “jibbering semantacists” and “jabbering nincompoops” (347). Insofar as he abandoned his endeavors in logic and epistemology well before the end of his active career, Lewis does not seem to have dealt very effectively with the dramatic changes in the discipline at mid-century.

For Murphey, Lewis offers a unique alternative in twentieth-century American philosophy. Lewis drew on or engaged with all of its major currents: idealism, New and Critical Realism, pragmatism, logical positivism, and Quinean naturalism. In doing so, Murphey argues, Lewis succeeded in forging an updated and robust version of pragmatism which could successfully contest the “scientistic imperialism” of positivism and naturalism (406). Noting the current ascendancy of neo-pragmatism, in which Peirce, James, and Dewey have moved to the centre of scholarly attention, Murphey wonders if “perhaps it is time to study again” (407) the thought of Lewis, who struggled to “preserve and develop the ideas and ideals” of the classical pragmatists (406). This is a stirring call, but it elicits two doubts. In the first instance, one wonders whether Lewis’s thought was robust enough to sustain extended critical engagement with the logical empiricists. Murphey asserts that Lewis “[took] up arms to defend values and morality” (406) from the depredations of the positivists, and that he further foresaw the slide toward “total relativism” inherent in Quine’s extensionalism (406). Yet Lewis seems ultimately to have been less sure of himself after the onslaught of the Quineans, by admitting *à propos* of the validity of the analytic/synthetic distinction that “the whole body of my philosophic conceptions . . . depends on the validity of this distinction; and if that plank is pulled out from under me, the whole structure will come tumbling down” (330). In an unpublished lecture of 1952 cited by Murphey, Lewis even conceded

that although neither he nor Quine could settle their dispute over analyticity at that point in time, “each of us secretly believes—I am foolish enough to let the secret out—that someday those who interest themselves will come to agree that he had the truth of the matter” (328).

Now, of course, these remarks do not undo other occasions on which Lewis took serious and implacable issue with the positivists, particularly on the topic of the conventionalist theory of meaning and the nature of the given, but they do add to the impression, highlighted above, that Lewis conceded his failures in logic and epistemology, and abandoned the field to younger—and perhaps more able—men and women. This is hardly a figure around whom neo-pragmatists can now rally. Dewey’s remarkable renaissance in recent decades is surely attributable in part to his democratically-oriented vision of philosophy, which stands in such stark opposition to the technical narrow-mindedness of the dominant analytic tradition. Lewis’s thought does not stand out so defiantly.

The conditions for Dewey’s enthusiastic reception in the late twentieth century academy point up a second, more crucial problem with Murphey’s case for a neo-pragmatist resuscitation of Lewis. The revival of interest in the work of Peirce, James, and Dewey in the early 1980s marked a breakdown in “the new rigorism” which Carl Schorske has argued is characteristic of the postwar humanistic disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Having spent much of the “high” Cold War years bridled by formalist, naturalistic assumptions regarding the aims and methods of their discipline, American philosophers moved to embrace an indigenous tradition of pragmatism which was attuned to precisely those challenges of liberal democratic culture which analytic philosophy had largely ignored. The new rigorism was, as Neil Gross has pointed out, “an ideology of professionalization” which “promised standardization at a time of rapid institutional growth and restructuring” after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> With its emphasis on the philosophical utility of mathematical logic and its attachment to “scientific empiricism,” analytic philosophy became the ideology of philosophy’s professionalization. By the mid-to-late 1970s, however, analytic philosophy became a victim of its own success: not only had philosophy succeeded in entrenching itself as a professional discipline, thus obviating the need for strict doctrinal coherence, its dominance within the profession had alienated a growing band of non-analytic philosophers, who identified themselves as “pluralists.”<sup>3</sup> The protracted and bitter dispute between “analysts” and “pluralists” signaled the “fragmentation” of analytic philosophy and the search for new bearings in the discipline.<sup>4</sup> Sensitive to the charge of “irrelevance” levelled by the student radicals of the 1960s, many philosophers were especially keen to recover a social mission for philosophy. It was in this context that figures such as Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Hilary Putnam, and many others turned to the writings of James and Dewey for inspiration.

The renaissance of pragmatism in the late 1970s and early 1980s was not limited to philosophy. Indeed, a notable feature of neo-pragmatism has

been its interdisciplinary scope. Emerging from their own forms of new rigorism, literary critics, legal theorists, intellectual historians, and sociologists have joined the philosophers in turning to the rich tradition of American pragmatism.<sup>5</sup> Although the principles of the classical pragmatists have been, as Murphey indicates, “appropriated by a bewildering variety of philosophers [and, I would add, scholars from other disciplines] who had little in common with the pioneers who created the movement,” (406) there seems to be at the heart of the pragmatist revival a commitment to contesting the claim of elites, professional or otherwise, to privileged knowledge, and to placing the challenge of interpreting texts and lives within a wider public of knowers, if not within the heart of the deliberative democratic process itself.

If this assessment is correct, then Murphey may be mistaken in believing that the “renewed interest” (407) in the classical pragmatists can be extended to Lewis. The latter may very well have been “the most systematic, the most thorough, and the most precise” of the “pioneers,” but Lewis’s “professional” concern with thoroughness and precision may be the very thing which disqualifies him from rehabilitation. If the recent attraction toward James and Dewey stems from a desire on the part of humanistic scholars to re-engage with American democratic culture, there are few resources for this endeavor in Lewis’s *oeuvre*. It is not that Lewis can be dismissed because he spent most of his career working on specialist fields such as logic, epistemology and ethics: as James Kloppenberg has shown, apparently recondite developments in the theory of knowledge and ethics fuelled the social democratic imagination in the Atlantic World during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that, by the time Lewis came to write on such topics, they had become “professional” matters, of concern to ambitious graduate students and their professors, but increasingly unconnected with the tribulations of the public sphere.

An even greater barrier in the way of a Lewis revival is his disdain for social issues and the concerns of the public. Murphey must again be commended for facing this issue head-on. Lewis’s social thought, he observes, was that of a “disgruntled conservative for whom the New Deal economy looked all too much like socialism.” Lewis was “clearly a believer in some type of free-market capitalism,” and in the early 1950s complained about the drift of Western civilization away from the principles of competition and towards socialism. Yet in his lectures and publications there was “little . . . dealing with the major economic or social issues of his time. . . . no discussion of the relation of labor and capital, of unemployment, or of the role of the state in the management of the economy. . . . [and] no discussion of race relations, crime, bureaucracy, gangs, or other social issues prominent at that time” (373). Lewis had grown up poor yet gone on to achieve great success as a Harvard professor. This experience appears to have instilled in him an elitism which contained, as Murphey notes, both “racist and eugenicist strains” (249). The “hope” for modern civilization, Lewis wrote in 1948, was that “those too stupid to acquire the technological skills essential

for the most economical production of material goods, and of otherwise too low-grade mentality to find satisfaction in non-material goods will drink themselves to death or fail, through sex-perversions, to reproduce their kind." These "types," Lewis continued, showed "too high a correlation with race to hope that what is desirable can be achieved without elimination of the biologically predominant strains of some races" (248).

Such attitudes, as Murphey rightly points out, were not foreign to either progressive or conservative thinkers whose political views were forged in the early years of the twentieth century. But it is hard to imagine how neo-pragmatism, which has its origins in an impulse of social re-engagement, could accept as one of its canonical figures a philosopher with such a jaundiced worldview. When scholars turn to the work of James and Dewey, or even Mead and Peirce, they can tell stories about the reconstruction of American intellectual culture after the Civil War, and about the emergence of a philosophy sensitive to the demands of industrial democracy. They can talk about the epistemological, the ethical, and the sociological underpinnings of turn-of-the-century American liberalism. It seems unlikely that Lewis will offer the same scope for such narratives.

But what stories might one tell about Lewis? Hilary Putnam once made an astute distinction between "philosophers in the history of philosophy whose importance does not very much depend on their being *right*" and those whose significance does depend on their having been right.<sup>7</sup> Into the first category fall figures such as Dewey and Heidegger, whose philosophical claims were often obscure, but who succeed in furnishing their readers with a fruitful vocabulary or a particularly rich set of metaphors within which to work. Lewis, on the other hand, belongs with most postwar analytic philosophers among those whose importance rests on their being right. This sets strict limits on what narratives Lewis can illuminate. Murphey does a good job of making Lewis's characteristic positions appear more plausible than they have seemed since Quine, White and Goodman tore into intensionalism after the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> Defending Lewis's reliance upon introspection in his account of meaning in *Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, Murphey shows how Lewis's theory of sense-meaning can be reconciled with prototype theory. He further draws on current cognitive science to validate Lewis's emphasis upon the priority of concepts as vehicles of meanings. But showing how, in the light of later developments, some of Lewis's claims may be viewed as valid or significant hardly makes Lewis's thought available for the revival Murphey hopes will soon follow. For we are still contesting the professional ground of who can claim to have had the best of an argument. This is appropriate for an academician like Lewis, but it is scarcely relevant to the conditions which have guided the pragmatist revival. What is more, the fact remains that Lewis is still widely regarded to have been *wrong* about meaning, as witnessed by the lack of reference to Lewis in any of the major post-Quinean theories of meaning offered by the likes of Davidson, Putnam, and Brandom. Even in new areas of philosophical

inquiry where one might expect Lewis's work to be relevant, it remains a dead letter. Thus, even though Putnam has come in recent years to emphasize the empirical nature of evaluation, he makes no substantive references to Lewis's research in that area.<sup>9</sup> And, although philosophers of science are increasingly recognizing the aridity and inconsistencies of Quine's naturalism, their discontent is leading them, not to Lewis, but to an historical recovery of the political dimensions of logical empiricism which were lost in its migration from central Europe to America.<sup>10</sup>

The kind of stories one can tell about philosophers like Lewis and Quine, as I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> must be rooted in a study of the culture of higher education and the practice of humanistic inquiry during the interwar and postwar years. Such stories must acknowledge the growing divergence between thought and the concrete lives and historical contexts in which it took place—a divergence symptomatically illustrated in Murphey's biography by the segregation of Lewis's "life and times" into a series of biographical notes which stand apart from the major narrative of ideas.<sup>12</sup> These are important stories, which lie at the heart of American intellectual history in the twentieth century. Yet they do nothing to advance Lewis's claim to pioneer status among the pragmatists.

We are in Murray Murphey's debt for providing such a rich and exhaustive biography of Clarence Lewis. It will be an ungenerous reader who comes away from Murphey's book without agreeing that Lewis's ideas form a significant part of the pragmatist inheritance. Overall, though, one cannot avoid the impression that Murphey does not make the case for elevating Lewis to the pragmatist pantheon. Both the fragility of Lewis's thought and the conditions of the pragmatist revival militate against his rehabilitation, which in any case shows few signs of getting underway. Despite Murphey's best efforts, Lewis seems likely to remain a minor figure in the pragmatist tradition.

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## NOTES

1. Carl E. Schorske, "The New Rigorism in the Human Sciences," *American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines*, ed. Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 309–29.

2. Neil Gross, "Richard Rorty's Pragmatism: A Case Study in the Sociology of Ideas," *Theory and Society* 32 (February 2003): 126, 127.

3. *Ibid.*, 116–8, 127–8.

4. Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 261–6.

5. See Morris Dickstein (ed.), *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); John Pettegrew (ed.), *A*

*Pragmatist's Progress: Richard Rorty and American Intellectual History* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). An especially helpful survey of the pragmatist revival is offered in James T. Kloppenberg, "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?" *Journal of American History* 83 (June 1996): 100–38.

6. James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

7. Hilary Putnam, "'Two Dogmas' Revisited," *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, Volume 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 88.

8. Murphey deals with the contributions of Quine and White to the famous analyticity debates of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but does not mention Goodman's attack on meaning. Goodman's criticisms of analyticity were a product of the famed "triangular correspondence" between Goodman, Quine and White. They were first aired at the Fullerton Club at Bryn Mawr College on the same day that White presented his "The Analytic and the Synthetic: an Untenable Dualism." See Nelson Goodman, "On Likeness of Meaning," *Analysis* 10 (October 1949): 1–7. In this light, Lewis's ultimate failure of nerve on analyticity appears to have been the result of a pre-meditated hijacking of the philosophical agenda by Quine, White, and Goodman.

9. Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

10. On the historical turn in the philosophy of science and the depoliticization of logical empiricism in the United States, see Peter Galison, "Constructing Modernism: The Cultural Location of the *Aufbau*" in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume XVI: Origins of Logical Empiricism*, ed. Ronald N. Giere and Alan W. Richardson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 17–44; Alan W. Richardson and Gary L. Hardcastle, "Introduction: Logical Empiricism in North America," Alan W. Richardson, "Logical Empiricism, American Pragmatism, and the Fate of Scientific Philosophy in North America," and Don Howard "Two Left Turns Make a Right: On the Curious Political Career of North American Philosophy of Science at Midcentury," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Volume XVIII: Logical Empiricism in North America*, ed. Gary L. Hardcastle and Alan W. Richardson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), vii—xxix, 1–24, 25–93.

11. Joel Isaac, "W. V. Quine and the Origins of Analytic Philosophy in the United States," *Modern Intellectual History* 2 (August 2005): 205–34.

12. A similar discontinuity between thought and life in the biographies of major analytic philosophers can be seen in W. V. Quine, *The Time of My Life: An Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), and, most recently, Anita Burdman Feferman and Solomon Feferman, *Alfred Tarski: Life and Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In the latter work, the authors invert the relationship between "ideas" and "life" established in Murphey's biography by segregating descriptions of Tarski's work in logic and mathematics—called "Interludes"—from the major chapters in his life and times.