

## THE PRAGMATIC A PRIORI OF C.I. LEWIS

### O A PRIORI PRAGMÁTICO DE C.I. LEWIS

Lauri Järvillehto

University of Jyväskylä

lauri.jarvillehto@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *A priori knowledge is a topic of much controversy in epistemology. Understanding how we can know the truth of certain statements without turning to empirical evidence is, however, a quintessential philosophical endeavor. An innovative account of the a priori was presented by the American pragmatist Clarence Irving Lewis. Lewis introduced the conception in his 1923 paper “A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori”, and refined it into the cornerstone of his epistemological theory in “Mind and the World Order” (1929). Lewis turns the notion of a priori knowledge on this year. The pragmatic a priori is not universally privileged as was held by the traditional Cartesian and Leibnizian positions. Lewis maintains rather that a priori knowledge is always reflexive to a convention. Lewis’ elegant account does not, however, collapse into conventionalism or relativism. While a priori truths may vary across conventions, they are still privileged within a convention. Once a given convention is chosen, its a priori knowable truths hold fast, come what may. A demonstration of such variance can, for example, be given in comparing various consistent logics and competing hyperbolic geometries. Lewis maintains that in conjunction with the given element in experience, many conventions yield equally accurate knowledge. The fundamental a priori commitments adopted within a convention act as the grounds for veridicality. Thus judging veridicality across conventions is not possible. Choice of conceptual commitment is discernible only in terms of pragmatic criteria. This notion yields a kind of an ontological perspectivism not untypical to American pragmatism in general. In the present paper the central arguments for the pragmatic a priori are explored, contrasting them with classical notions where necessary. Lewis’ main arguments will be drawn especially from the 1923 introduction, and supported further by a wide corpus of his later writings. It is the purpose of the present paper to deliver a concise account of the pragmatic a priori, as well as to defend it as the most plausible account of a priori knowledge currently available.*

**Key-words:** *Philosophy. Pragmatism. Epistemology. A Priori.*

**Resumo:** O conhecimento *a priori* é um tópico bastante controverso na epistemologia. Ainda, compreender como podemos conhecer a verdade de certas afirmações sem nos voltarmos a indícios empíricos é um empreendimento filosófico quintessencial. Uma interpretação inovadora do *a priori* foi apresentada pelo pragmatista Americano Clarence Irving Lewis. Lewis introduziu a concepção no seu escrito de 1923 chamado “A pragmatic conception of the a priori”, refinando-a para se tornar a pedra fundamental de sua teoria epistemológica em “Mind and the World Order” (1929). Lewis transforma a noção de conhecimento *a priori* nesse ano. O *a priori* pragmático, diferentemente do que sustentavam as tradicionais posições cartesiana e leibniziana, não é universalmente privilegiado. Lewis sustenta, antes, que o conhecimento *a priori* é sempre reflexivo para uma convenção. A elegante interpretação de Lewis, porém, não sucumbe a um convencionalismo ou a um relativismo. Embora as verdades *a priori* possam variar de convenção para convenção, elas ainda são privilegiadas dentro de uma convenção. Uma vez que uma dada convenção é escolhida, suas verdades cognoscíveis *a priori* – não importa o que aconteça – permanecem. Uma demonstração dessa variação poderia, por exemplo, ser dada ao se comparar várias lógicas consistentes e geometrias hiperbólicas rivais. Lewis sustenta que junto com o elemento dado na experiência, muitas convenções igualmente resultam em conhecimento preciso. Os comprometimentos *a priori* fundamentais adotados dentro de uma convenção agem como os fundamentos para a veridicalidade. Dessa forma, julgar a veridicalidade cruzando entre as convenções não é possível. A escolha de comprometimento conceitual só é

discernível em termos de critérios pragmáticos. Essa noção resulta em um tipo de perspectivismo ontológico que não é atípico de um pragmatism Americano em geral. No presente artigo, os argumentos centrais em favor do *a priori* pragmático são explorados, em contraposição às noções clássicas, quando necessário. Os principais argumentos de Lewis serão tirados principalmente da introdução de 1923 e sustentados ulteriormente por um amplo *corpus* de seus escritos posteriores. O propósito deste artigo é dar uma interpretação concisa do *a priori* pragmático, assim como defendê-lo como a interpretação mais plausível do conhecimento *a priori* disponível atualmente.

**Palavras-chave:** Filosofia. Pragmatism. Epistemologia. A priori.

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Understanding how we can know the truth of some statements a priori, that is to say without turning to empirical evidence, is a quintessential philosophical endeavor. The precise nature of a priori knowledge is, however, under much debate. Various competing theories vie for foothold, yet no consensus seems forthcoming. Even a simple definition of a priori knowledge is yet to be seen.

An innovative account of the a priori was developed by the American pragmatist Clarence Irving Lewis. Lewis introduced the conception in his 1923 paper “A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori” and refined it into the cornerstone of his epistemological theory in the monograph *Mind and the World Order* (1929). Lewis stands the notion of a priori knowledge on its ear. According to Lewis a priori knowledge is not absolute, universal and indisputable as was traditionally maintained. Lewis claims rather that a priori knowledge is always reflexive to a convention. It concerns the conceptual commitments we have made. Lewis’ elegant account does not, however, collapse into conventionalism or relativism. While a priori knowable truths may vary across conventions, they are still privileged within a convention, and subsequently metaphysically, albeit aspectually, necessary. Once a given convention is adopted, its a priori knowable truths hold fast, come what may. That is knowable a priori that is true no matter what.

In the present paper Lewis’ theory of the a priori is examined. First, a few observations concerning the classical notions of a priori and the problems involved therein are made. Subsequently, Lewis’ position is explored in detail. Finally, it will be argued that Lewis’ position steers clear of the problems evoked by the classical positions and offers thus a very powerful theory to account for our intuitions of a priori knowledge.

## 1. Concerning the classical positions on the a priori

Some philosophers have discarded entirely the notion of a priori knowledge as invalid.<sup>1</sup> Despite the relatively strong credibility of the anti-apriorist accounts, it is obvious that there is a peculiar difference between certain kinds of statements, such as “all bachelors are unmarried,” that have been classically construed as a priori, and explicitly a posteriori knowable statements, such as “Fred is unmarried.” It would also appear to be the case that once we grasp how such disciplines as logic and mathematics function, their truths seem to be resolvable without further experiential corroboration.

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<sup>1</sup> Most notable anti-apriorist positions have been presented by John Stuart Mill (1843) and W.V.O. Quine (1951).

Presently much of the discussion in favor of a priori knowledge consist in rephrasing and refining the classical positions.<sup>2</sup> These positions are, roughly, three. A priori knowledge is distinguished by some psychological criterion such as the “natural light of reason”; by some peculiar mode of proof, or logical relation to experience in general, often characterized as “presupposition”; or by experience’s being limited or determined in some sense consonant to the a priori knowable categories of the mind. Let us call these the psychologist, the onto-logicist and the transcendentalist views, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

All three approaches suffer from the same problem: they all approach a priori truths as absolute, unrevisable and independent of real-life practices. In the light of developments in philosophy and science during the last two centuries such unrevisability of knowledge cannot, however, be upheld. The Cartesian psychologistic position falls with the realization that mankind is notorious for having upheld utterly false notions as absolute truths throughout history. The Leibnizian onto-logicist position falls with the surfacing of various competing, consistent logics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If a priori knowledge coincided with logical truth, one should be able to point out whose logic is the one that corresponds with the facts. And finally, the Kantian transcendentalist position falls with the fact that there is an abundance of various equally consistent and intuitively appealing categorial systems one can approach experience with.<sup>4</sup> Just as there are a number of mutually exclusive logics, there are a number of categorial systems over whom nobody can assume an absolute ruling.

The classical positions on a priori knowledge seem thus at least suspect, if not altogether invalid. Since we are not about to take up Mill’s and Quine’s path of giving up on the a priori, let us next turn to a conception of the a priori that repositions the discussion by reconstructing the notion of apriority.

## 2. C.I. Lewis’ Conception of the A Priori

Before proceeding with the particulars, it has to be admitted that Lewis’ position is in many respects very close to the Kantian framework. Traces of the old sage of Königsberg are indeed detectable throughout Lewis’ writing, and Lewis did earnestly admit his debt to Kant.<sup>5</sup> One might even advance the claim that Lewis’ position, while novel in many respects, is a relativization of Kant’s categorial approach; a kind of a pragmatic Kantianism, as Rosenthal (2007, p. 36) maintains.

The assumption that there are, indeed, categorial attitudes of the mind that affect the ways in which we experience the world, is certainly quite Kantian. But the abandonment of the absoluteness of these categories is not. For Lewis, no *particular* categories give form to our experience. Some categories necessarily do – but what these categories happen to be in particular is entirely conventional.

Lewis (Lewis 1929, p. x) gives the following summary of his conception of the a priori:

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<sup>2</sup> Some exceptions do, of course, exist, most notably Hilary Putnam’s idea of the contextual a priori; see e.g. Putnam 1962 & 1978.

<sup>3</sup> The psychologist position originates in Descartes (1951), the onto-logicist in Leibniz (1961) and the transcendentalist in Kant (1993). Prominent contemporary philosophers that have further developed these positions include, respectively, George Bealer (1999) and Laurence Bonjour (1998); Bertrand Russell (Whitehead & Russell 1910) and A.J. Ayer (1964); and Philip Kitcher (1980) and Jaakko Hintikka (1974).

<sup>4</sup> Other categorial systems have been developed by e.g. Charles Sanders Peirce (1868), Edmund Husserl (1900), Wilfrid Sellars (1970), Ingvar Johansson (1989) and Roderick Chisholm (1996).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Lewis 1970 pp. 3–4.

- (1) A priori truth is definitive in nature and rises exclusively from the analysis of concepts. That reality may be delimited a priori, is due, not to forms of intuition or categories which confine the content of experience, but simply to the fact that whatever is denominated “real” must be something discriminated in experience by criteria which are antecedently determined.
- (2) While the delineation of concepts is a priori, the application of any particular concept to particular given experience is hypothetical; the choice of conceptual systems for such application is instrumental or pragmatic, and empirical truth is never more than probable.
- (3) That experience in general is such as to be capable of conceptual interpretation, requires no peculiar and metaphysical assumption about the conformity of experience to the mind or its categories; it could not conceivably be otherwise.

In what follows, we shall observe these claims in detail. Lewis’ conception of the a priori is based on the idea that what is knowable a priori concerns in fact categorial criteria that we accept uncritically. These a priori knowable criteria are not descriptive, but rather prescriptive, or legislative. We can be certain of their validity simply because they are something that we accept in the face of all experience. This explains the apriority of both the categories of experience and logical truth: they are the suppositions that we assume before experience, and which are therefore indisputable by experience.

We may classify and categorize our experience one way or another. There is nothing in experience that would necessarily delimit this classification. We have always the option of evoking the notion of illusion, hallucination, or simply mistaken interpretation in the face of aberrant experience. And which experience we consider aberrant and which not is ultimately a matter of what our criteria of the real are, which in turn arise from committing to a convention of categorization. We can, for example, freely classify a duck-billed platypus as a mammal or as a non-mammal by drawing the criteria of mammality appropriately. The platypus won’t care.

### 3. A priori knowledge and concepts

A priori knowledge rises exclusively from the analysis of concepts. This means that we can determine the veridicality of an a priori knowable statement by rendering explicit what the concepts involved mean. A priori knowledge concerns the relationships between the meanings of concepts – relationships which may not at all be easily made explicit but nonetheless which exist as criteria in the mind. Thus, in rendering an a priori knowable truth explicit, we explicate something that we have already been engaged in.

When one understands, for example, that “all bachelors are unmarried” is knowable a priori, what is understood are the operational conditions regarding the use of the words ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried’ in our practices: in effect, that no matter what happens, in order for *anything* to be considered bachelor by us, it has to be unmarried as well. This commitment has been in place in the way we use the words even before we have rendered such relationships explicit.

The a priori knowable conceptual commitments we have in place to make sense of experience must precede experience. Were there no such concepts, our experience would be an unintelligible jumble. Lewis maintains that a priori is “prior to experience in almost the same sense that purpose is” (Lewis 1929, p. 24). Just like purpose precedes action in guiding our activities to a predetermined direction, the a priori knowable conceptual commitments precede experience in guiding us to pay attention to some aspects of what is experienced, while at the same time ignoring some others. As Rosenthal (1976, p. 21) points out, “[o]ur

conceptual schemes do not limit or determine the given, but they determine our attention to the given, as well as the attitude we take toward that to which we do attend.” We heed to some of what is experienced, at the expense of other things’ being ignored.

Lewis also notes that the “principles of categorial interpretation are a priori valid of all possible experience because such principles express the criteria of the veridical and the real. No experience could possibly invalidate them, because any experience not in conformity, which might be evidence against them, is automatically thrown out of court as not veridical in that category, and hence not pertinent to them.” (Lewis 1929, p. 227.)

We could not conceive of the world in any fashion whatsoever were there not some kinds of concepts we could classify our experience with: “We can not interrogate experience in general. Until our meaning is definite and our classification correspondingly exact, experience can not conceivably answer our questions” (Lewis 1923, pp. 172–173). The world, of course, in the brute-fact being-there sort of way, exists, and in this sense affects our capability of experiencing it. But what we make of it depends also on the conceptual scheme that we use to make sense of it: “‘Thing as known’ is a function of two variables; it depends on the mind, but also it depends on the thing” (Lewis 1929, p. 187). The a priori knowable criteria direct our attention to what exists – but as concerns what exists, it is what it is.

A priori knowledge concerns then conceptual commitments that are legislative in the sense that they guide our attention to some regularities and law-likenesses in experience at the expense of others. Such conceptual commitments are needed, for otherwise we could not make sense of our experience.

#### 4. The plasticity of the a priori

A priori concerns *expectations*, not *observations*. A priori concerns the fundamentals of the categoriality we ourselves bring to our experience of the world – but which categories we choose to include and which not is entirely up to us. Thus Lewis: “the most fundamental laws in any category – or those which we regard as most fundamental – are *a priori*, even though continued failure to render experience intelligible in such terms might result eventually in the abandonment of that category altogether” (Lewis 1923, p. 175). The inapplicability of the Euclidean parallel postulate for spherical surfaces, or the distributive law for measurements of electrons are apt examples of such failures to render experience intelligible.

A priori knowable concepts can be construed as a hierarchy, where the most fundamental level is formed by laws of logic, followed by laws of mathematics, physics and finally class concepts such as natural and general kinds. No level is immune to change, and a change in a more fundamental level will reorganize less fundamental levels accordingly. If we were to categorize cats and dogs as a single class, laws of logic would not be affected, but if we were to relinquish the law of the excluded middle, our entire ways of categorization would change dramatically. The more fundamental an a priori commitment is, the harder it is, in most cases, to give up.

A recent example of the plasticity of categorization is the case of Pluto. Up till 2006 Pluto was categorized as a planet, owing to its conforming to the denotative criteria of the term ‘planet’. This resulted in such true statements as “the number of the planets is nine” and so forth. After the International Astronomical Union redefined ‘planet’ in 2006 to include as a criterion “has cleared the neighborhood around its orbit,” Pluto no longer qualified as a

planet.<sup>6</sup> The decision made by IAU reconfigured the class concept ‘planet’: the a priori criterion “has cleared the neighborhood around its orbit” was added to it. Subsequently, it now holds that statements such as “Pluto is a planet” and “the number of planets is nine” are flatly false.

However, neither the pre-2006 nor the post-2006 definition itself is *false*. They both simply depend on what the appropriate authority, in this case the IAU, happens to decree. With the 2006 decision we have simply shifted our attention with respect to the heavenly bodies in the Solar System; what we expect to find when we expect to find a planet. The criteria of veridicality arise from the system of categorization itself. Various systems can thus only be examined against one another on grounds of pragmatic criteria. It is pragmatic criteria that guide our choice of relevant categorial commitments – no individual system of categorization is any more *true* than another one. We embrace a given method of categorization insofar as it allows us to meet our goals expediently. If some method of categorization repeatedly fails us, we may eventually give it up. Embracing and resigning from an a priori knowable categorial commitment depends thus entirely on pragmatic criteria.

The pragmatic a priori concerns not some structurality or innate character of the world or even of experience, but only our own commitments in approaching the world – what we *expect to experience*. We expect that if something is a planet, it will have an orbit clear of other celestial bodies, that when two pairs are brought together, four items will be found, that if Jack is here, it is not the case that Jack is not here and so on and so forth. If celestial bodies would be encountered around the orbit of a tentative planet, it would not be considered a planet anymore. Likewise, if two and two yielded three, we would immediately conclude that something had gone awry in our experimental setting – that a chemical reaction, for example, had annihilated one of our test items. And if Jack both were and were not there, we would no doubt precipitate to register ourselves at the nearest mental institution.

## Concluding Remarks

To sum up, a priori knowledge concerns categorial principles that direct our attention in experience, which can either be included in a conceptual scheme or discarded thereof, depending on pragmatic criteria. Our categorial commitments direct our attention to various facets of experience at the expense of others’ being neglected. This produces a position that is perspectival or aspectual: the world can be viewed in various different ways. It does not, however, collapse into relativism or conventionalism: categories alone do not determine what is experienced.

Lewis’ account of the a priori steers clear of the problems evoked by the classical positions, which arise from the assumption of the rigidity of a priori knowledge. Furthermore, it offers us a powerful analytic tool to render explicit those conceptual structuralities we are committed to. In so doing Lewis’ framework offers an explanation for the intuitions pertaining to the special epistemic status of what appear to be a priori knowable statements.

Lewis’ framework develops a graceful position on a priori knowledge by relativizing the Kantian intuition of categories’ affecting experience. Lewis’ position retains a great degree of common sense realism, and in so doing steers clear of phenomenism, anti-realism and even transcendentalism. In Lewis’ framework what we know a priori is our own categorial attitudes that direct our attention to the real world. What the mind introduces to

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<sup>6</sup> See IAU 2006.

experience holds under all circumstances, for it is what we are committed to maintain no matter what.

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