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Introduction

- 1 C. I. Lewis's conceptual pragmatism is widely acknowledged as indebted to Kant¹. In particular, it is recurrently argued that the distinction between the given and the concept in *Mind and the World Order* (1929; henceforth *MWO*) is evidence of Lewis's pragmatic implementation of the Kantian distinction between intuitions and concepts. In the same way as the Kantian motto "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (A51/B76) essentially contributes to answering the Kantian problem of intentionality or objectivity – that is the problem of how our thoughts and concepts can so much as hook onto the world in the first place, can have so much as an objective purport –, the relation of complementarity between the given and the concept would constitute the key element in Lewis's treatment of the problem of intentionality (Conant 2012 and 2016, McDowell 2015, Sachs 2014; see also Hamawaki 2021), as "they are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for objective purport" (Sachs 2014: 13).
- 2 I take this widespread interpretation of Lewis's treatment of the problem of intentionality to be correct in ascribing to him a distinction between given and concept that is in some broad sense Kantian in purpose, but incorrect or at least seriously misleading on a crucial score. According to this reading, nearly everything that Lewis has to say about the Kantian problem of intentionality lies in the distinction between the given and the concept, elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3 of *MWO*. Such an account nonetheless offers a truncated picture of Lewis's treatment of the problem of intentionality. The best way to appreciate this verdict is to state the predicament it is confronted with: If the distinction between the given and the concept apparently leads to a version of the very same problem it was designed to address, how could it be the key element contributing to answering the problem of intentionality? Indeed the given

and the concept are mutually independent (Lewis 1929: 37) so that *prima facie* nothing guarantees that concepts are applicable to the given. The difficulty is what Lewis calls “the problem of the *a priori*” (*ibid.*: 195): “Can conceptual order, which is of the mind, be imposed upon a content of experience which is independent and not yet given?” (*ibid.*), or “How shall we know that [the *a priori*] can be imposed upon a reality which is independent?” (*ibid.*: 213). This problem is a version of the problem that Kant’s transcendental deduction addresses: how can categories, as subjective conditions of experience, be objectively valid? (*ibid.*: 224). A natural question is then: How does Lewis address the problem of the *a priori*? Does he align himself with Kant in trying to provide a transcendental deduction? Nothing in the widespread account of Lewis’s treatment of the problem of intentionality will help us answer these crucial questions. What is left aside from this account is Lewis’s dismissal, in Chapter 7 of *MWO*, of the very idea and attempt to provide a transcendental deduction of our categories and concepts. This points toward one of the requirements bearing on any faithful account of Lewis’s treatment of the problem of intentionality: in the same way as the Kantian motto on the complementarity of intuition and concept is properly understood only once interpreted in the light of the transcendental deduction of the categories, Lewis’s distinction between the given and the concept in Chapters 2 and 3 is properly understood only once interpreted in the light of his attack on the idea of a transcendental deduction in Chapter 7.

- 3 The main purpose of this essay is then to investigate on how Lewis’s addresses the problem of the *a priori* and to contribute to restoring an appropriate understanding of Lewis’s conceptual pragmatism, particularly of his pragmatic reconception of the *a priori*.
- 4 This essay is structured as follows. I first review the basic features of Lewis’s pragmatist appropriation of the Kantian distinction between intuitions and concepts (section 1). In section 2, I show that far from contributing to solving the problem of intentionality, this distinction *prima facie* leads to “the problem of the *a priori*,” which is but a version of that problem. I then set the stage for the examination of Lewis’s treatment of the problem of the *a priori* by sketching the “Kantian solution” to the problem (section 3). In the two following sections (sections 4 and 5), I unfold the reasons why Lewis takes the Kantian solution to be impossible and unnecessary, trying to convey the force and originality of Lewis’s break with the traditional conceptions of the *a priori*. Then, in section 6, I examine the new problem of the *a priori* that Lewis substitutes for the old one. Finally, I conclude with a brief exploration of the legacy of C. I. Lewis’s argumentation in Goodman, Quine and Putnam.

1. The Given and the Concept

- 5 According to Lewis, “[p]hilosophy is concerned with what is already familiar” in that it “investigates what we already know” (Lewis 1929: 10). Its distinctive task is that of “bringing to clear consciousness and expressing coherently the principles which are implicitly intended in our dealing with the familiar” (*ibid.*: 3). That philosophy aims at making it explicit, articulating and clarifying these principles is not only true for ethics and logic but also for metaphysics (*ibid.*: 4). We are able to discriminate between valid and invalid inferences because we already understand the criteria of logical validity, even if we are not able to express them clearly and coherently, and sometimes fail to

apply them correctly. The formulation of the criteria of logical validity does not then add to our knowledge, but it makes explicit, articulates, and clarifies what we already implicitly know. The same is true for ethics – “everybody knows the difference between right and wrong; if we had no moral sense, philosophy would not give us one” (*ibid.*: 3) – as well for metaphysics. Metaphysics is a reflective practice that aims at making explicit, articulating, and clarifying principles at work in a whole range of practices. More specifically, it is to be understood as the study of the nature of reality in general, but not in the sense of a study of “Reality, with a Capital R, the concrete-universal Reality which transcends all particular phenomenon and underlies them” since, in this superlative sense, reality is “a kind of philosophical *ignis fatuus*” (*ibid.*: 9). What metaphysics is concerned with, is the “problem of determining the criteria by which the adjective ‘real’ is correctly applied – the problem of the *abstract universal*” (*ibid.*: 10). Like the two pairs of contrastive predicates “right”/“wrong” and “valid”/“invalid”, the contrastive predicates “real”/“unreal” are applied to our experience and amount to “fundamental criteria of classification and principles of interpretation” of our experience. Now the concept of the real is not univocal (*ibid.*: 9-11, 55, 225, 350): what is not classified as real under the heading of a category already implicit in our practices (for example, the category of the physical) may be classified under the heading of another one (for example, the category of the psychological). In a nutshell, “whatever is real in one sense will be unreal in others” (*ibid.*: 11). Accordingly, “the problem of metaphysics is ‘the problem of the categories’” so that *MWO* is primarily concerned with the problem of the categories.

- 6 Lewis’s view of philosophy as a reflective and critical investigation sets the standard for any successful treatment of this problem: “any metaphysics which portrays reality as something strangely unfamiliar or beyond the ordinary grasp, stamps itself as thaumaturgy, and is false upon the face it.” This is why Lewis’s starting point in Chapter 2 is “the thick experience of every-day life” (*ibid.*: 30):

It is indeed the thick experience of the world of things, not the thin given of immediacy, which constitutes the *datum* for philosophic reflection. Such initial data of object and fact set the problem in philosophy and are, in a measure, the criteria of its solution, since any philosophic theory will rightfully be rejected as inaccurate or inadequate if it does not measure up to, or account for, experience in this broad sense. (*ibid.*: 54)

- 7 The distinction between “the concept, which is the product of the activity of thought, and the sensuously given, which is independent of such activity” (*ibid.*: 37) is thus between two logically, but not really independent moments in experience_{Thick}.² Lewis’s distinction between given and concept can be interpreted as a pragmatist reading of the Kantian idea that all experience_{Thick} requires the contribution from both sensations and concepts. In experience_{Thick}, sensations and concepts have distinct functions and are correlated, but we cannot experience either one apart from the other although in philosophical reflection we are able to distinguish them and recognize the necessity of both (*ibid.*: 54-5). Whereas *qualia* are the sensuous qualities of the given element in experience_{Thick}, that is, reidentifiable qualitative and non-conceptual aspects of our experience with respect to which we are relatively passive (*ibid.*: 60-2, 121-8) and which we “can neither create nor alter,” (*ibid.*: 47) categories and concepts are identified with our active contribution to our experience_{Thick} according to our interests, ends, and abilities (*ibid.*: 37, 48).

- 8 Following Kant, Lewis endorses the rationalist idea that concepts and categories essentially contribute to knowledge as well as the empiricist idea that the senses essentially contribute to knowledge while avoiding the two symmetrical pitfalls, that is, the idealist one consisting in reducing to nothing the contribution of the given and the empiricist one consisting in claiming that the senses deliver us something of which we are aware independently of any concept. In line with Kant's motto "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind," the distinction between the given and the concept contributes to accounting for the objective purport of our thoughts:

If there be no *datum* given to the mind, then knowledge must be contentless and arbitrary; there would be nothing which it must be true to. And if there be no interpretation or construction which the mind itself imposes, then thought is rendered superfluous, the possibility of error becomes inexplicable, and the distinction of true and false is in danger of becoming meaningless. (*Ibid.*: 39)

- 9 Conceptualization is a necessary condition for empirical knowledge for without concepts, the distinction between veridical perception and perceptual illusion as well as "the distinction of true and false [are] in danger of becoming meaningless" (*ibid.*). Yet, conceptualization is not a sufficient condition for empirical knowledge since, on its own, the activity of the mind is empty and arbitrary so long as it remains wholly unconstrained by what is not its own making. The given is that which is delivered up to the mind and is unalterable by the mind: it thus furnishes content to operate with so that it makes it possible to distinguish between "objectively valid" conceptual constructions and merely capricious ones.
- 10 The Kantian idea that all experience_{Thick} as such involves a twofold contribution of intuition and concept is nevertheless modified in a radical way by Lewis. First, Lewis takes all concepts, not simply those we usually call "categories," to be criteria of reality or objecthood (*ibid.*: 230-1), attempting at making sense of that which is given to us in experience_{Thin}. In this respect, while there is a dichotomy, thus a difference in nature, between *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge, no difference in nature between concepts and categories holds but only a difference in degree of generality (Lewis 1970 [1930]: 17), in contrast to Kant's view in which there is a sharp contrast between categories and empirical concepts formed by abstraction. Second, the conceptual element in experience is not only theoretically but also practically and pragmatically oriented. Concepts and categories are "categorical ways of acting" (Lewis 1970 [1923]: 231) with respect to what is given in experience and whose meaning and significance lie in their pragmatic and practical consequences. Third, "the pragmatic element in knowledge concerns the choice in application of conceptual modes of interpretation" (Lewis 1929: 272) of the given in the sense that such a choice is determined by criteria relative to the fulfillment of specifically human needs, interests, and ends. What both rationalism and empiricism as well as Kant have missed is ultimately the pragmatic element in knowledge, thus the pragmatic dimension of the *a priori* (Lewis Lewis 1970 [1923]: 239).
- 11 Lewis's distinction between the given and the concept contributes thus to addressing the problem of intentionality: if nothing were given, no concepts and categories could have an objective purport; if there were no concepts and no categories, there could not be any thought and knowledge at all. Furthermore, if there were no concepts and no categories, there could not even be any actions: "If I should be completely absorbed in the first given, as an infant might, then I should frame no concept, it would have no

meaning, and no action, unless a merely instinctive one, would be evoked” (Lewis 1929: 119) – “[c]onversely, only an active being could have knowledge” (Lewis 1946: 3).

- 12 This distinctive brand of Kantianism is what motivates McDowell’s interpretation of Lewis’s concept of the given as a transcendental one:
- Lewis’s concept of sensibility is – at least in the first instance – not sensualistic but transcendental [for t]he supposed need to recognize the givenness of sense-qualities is generated by the project of accommodating the contentfulness of conceptual activity. (McDowell 2015: 648)
- 13 In consonance with this interpretation, Lewis’s argument for the given has been interpreted as a transcendental argument for the given, that is, in the original Austinian sense, an argument for the indispensability or the necessity of the given (Sachs 2014: 25) – as it is a condition of possibility for our concepts to have an objective purport – that posits the existence of an “abstraction” (the given) which is “emphatically *not* anything we stumble across” (Austin 1979: 34).
- 14 McDowell ultimately argues that Lewis’s concept of the given is intrinsically inappropriate for its role. Indeed it would prove to be the desperate attempt to satisfy two incompatible requirements, namely the requirement to be located within or close enough to the edge of the sphere of the conceptual – so as to enable it to accomplish its function of warranting the application of some of our concepts, while excluding that of others – and the requirement to exert its constraint on conceptual activity from outside the sphere of the conceptual – so as to retain its function of an “external” constraint. As a result, Lewis would be caught in a “transcendental bind” (McDowell 2015: 647) and the argument of *MWO* would threaten to “leave us unable to make sense of ourselves as so much as in possession of a ‘world-view’” (Conant 2012: 51; see also 2016: 91-3).
- 15 My purpose is not to *directly* challenge this interpretation. To do so would mean to show that the distinction between the given and the concept is not only the key element of response to the problem of intentionality – at least as formulated in Lewis’s terms – but also a quite fully satisfactory treatment of the problem. I want instead to bring into evidence that this picture of Lewis’s treatment of the problem of intentionality is truncated and misleading for the reason that, first, it neglects the fact the distinction between the concept and the given leads to an apparently insuperable difficulty, namely “the problem of the *a priori*,” that is a version of the problem of the intentionality; second, it obliterates that Lewis finally dismisses this problem together with its Kantian solution.

2. The Problem of the *A Priori*

- 16 Lewis’s conceptual pragmatism relies on the verdict that “traditional conceptions of the *a priori* have proved untenable” (Lewis 1970 [1923]: 231) and have henceforth become obsolete. Whether they be empiricist, rationalist, Kantian, or post-Kantian, these conceptions have proved indeed unable to fit and to account for the new developments and innovations, not only in logic – the invention of the new logic by Peirce, Frege, and Russell, and the emergence of alternative systems of logic, in particular the many-valued systems of logic rejecting the law of excluded-middle and Lewis’s own systems of strict implication S1–S5 – but also in mathematics – especially the emergence of non-Euclidean geometries – and physics – especially the birth of

quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity. All these new developments call for a reconsideration of the nature of the *a priori* and the categories as they apparently challenge what was until then thought of as *a priori* and categorial truths and principles presupposed by our epistemic achievements. More specifically, they were thought to lead to the “independence of the conceptual and the empirical” (Lewis 1929: ix), that is, the idea that “the pure concept and the content of the given are mutually independent [in that] neither limits the other” (*ibid.*: 37): the given is “what remains unaltered, no matter what our interests, no matter how we think or conceive” (*ibid.*: 52), while categories, and more generally concepts, in no way “confine the content of experience” (*ibid.*: x). In other words, “the question whether there are any synthetic *a priori* truths [has become] a dead, or nearly dead, issue” (Lewis 1946: 158). This “disintegration of the *a priori*” (Reichenbach 1951: 125) underlies the first of the three main theses of *MWO*:

A *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 as “real” must be something discriminated in experience by criteria which are antecedently determined. (Lewis 1929: x)

- 17 The demise of the notion of *a priori* synthesis does not, however, seem to make it possible to avoid “the problem of the *a priori*”: once it is granted to Kant, as Lewis does, that the possibility for our thoughts to have an objective purport depends on an *a priori* and conceptual element (Lewis 1929: 196, 310-1), “how, then, shall we know that [the *a priori*] can be imposed upon a reality which is independent?” (*ibid.*: 213; see also 196). In other words, if what is given to us is independent from the mind – that is, such that it is not created by us and cannot be anticipated by us –, how could the application of categories and concepts to experience_{Thin} even be guaranteed? Conversely, how could it be guaranteed in advance that what is not yet given will be intelligible? Indeed, “How can we know in advance that experience which should not conform to our categorial principle is impossible?” (*ibid.*: 224). The problem of the *a priori* is thus apparently calling into question the very possibility of applying our concepts and categories to experience_{Thin} and, by the same token, the intelligibility of experience_{Thin}. It constitutes Lewis’s version of the Kantian problem of the objective validity of categories.
- 18 The question is then: If the distinction between the given and the concept apparently leads to the “problem of the *a priori*,” that is to a version of the very same problem it was aimed to address, how could it be the key element contributing to answering the problem of intentionality? The difficulty is that the role attributed to this distinction in Lewis’s treatment of the problem of intentionality is considered in isolation from the whole argumentative strategy developed in *MWO*. Yet, no account of Lewis’s treatment of this problem can hope to be faithful to what he actually does and claims if it does not take as seriously as possible the following points: First, the distinction between the given and the concept is only one element and a first step in Lewis’s treatment of the problem of intentionality, and this distinction, elaborated in the chapters 2 and 3 of *MWO*, should not be considered in isolation from Lewis’s treatment of the problem of the *a priori* in chapter 7. Second, Lewis forcefully opposes the Kantian way of addressing this problem, that is the transcendental deduction of the categories. In the same way as the Kantian motto on the relations between intuitions and concepts is properly understood only once interpreted in the light of the transcendental deduction, Lewis’s distinction between the given and the concept is properly understood only once

interpreted in the light of his criticisms of the very project of providing a transcendental deduction of the categories. Third, Lewis does not consider the problem of the *a priori* as raising a genuinely intelligible worry, and eventually substitutes a new problem of the *a priori* for the “old” one. The second and third point are two faces of the same coin. They summarize Lewis’s treatment of the problem of the *a priori*, which is encapsulated in the following excerpt in which Lewis states one of the three fundamental theses defended in *MWO*:

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. (Lewis 1929: x; see also 37-8)

- 19 The best way to appreciate Lewis’s argumentation for this claim is, first, to recall the spirit of the Kantian solution to the problem of the *a priori*.

3. The Kantian Solution to the Problem of the *A Priori*

- 20 In his homage to Lewis, “Snowflakes and Wastebaskets”, Goodman argues that “Lewis goes as far beyond Kant as Kant goes beyond his predecessors” (Goodman 1972: 416). This remark somehow sums up Lewis’s approach to the problem of the *a priori* as well as his criticism of the Kantian solution. Lewis’s conceptual pragmatism is situated by Goodman within the context of modern philosophy’s evolution toward Kant’s Copernican revolution. As an attempt to address the problem of the *a priori*, the transcendental deduction is best understood as implementing this revolutionary turn in the history of modern philosophy. Kant’s transcendental approach is directed against the idea, defended by dogmatic rationalism, that the world is intelligible to us in virtue of a harmony between the order of ideas and the order of things, with God as source and guarantee of the teleological principle underpinning this harmony (Deleuze 1963: 22). The heart and the fundamental insight of Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy consists in supplanting the rationalist idea of a harmony between subject and object with the “principle of the necessary submission of the object to the subject” (*ibid.*: 23), that is, the idea that “what we are given to in experience is necessarily submitted to the same principles that *a priori* rule our representations (thus submitted to our *a priori* representations themselves)” (*ibid.*: 22).

- 21 The transcendental deduction addresses a new sort of skeptical problematic:

Kant’s question is this: given that our intellectual engagement with reality requires the availability of objects to the senses, how can we know *a priori*, concerning forms required by the pure understanding, that they provide for objective purport in instantiations of them? (McDowell 2007: 399)

- 22 This new – “Kantian” – skeptical problematic is to be distinguished from the “Cartesian” one, which asks whether, and how, we can ever be justified in making the claims we do about the world, or how we can make true claims about the way the world is (Brandom 2002: 22-3; Conant 2012). Kant’s concern in the Transcendental Deduction is not that

in framing our world view in the forms required by our understanding, we may *get reality wrong* in categorial respects [since] such a worry would *presuppose* that our understanding enables us to direct thought at reality. [...] Kant’s concern is with that presupposition (McDowell 2007: 399).

- 23 The Kantian skeptical problematic runs deeper than the Cartesian one: it does not invoke the possibility of systematic error but, more radically, the possibility of systematic disharmony, that is the possibility of a disharmony at the level of the relation between categories and experience in general that would deprive thought of its grip on the world (its “objective validity”), that would make thought and language fail in their purport to give any picture of the world at all, true or false. This amounts to what I called the Kantian problem of intentionality. Applied to the notion of experience, the Kantian skeptical problematic does not ask whether and how to be sure that our experiences are veridical but, much more radically, whether experience is so much as intelligible.
- 24 Kant’s transcendental deduction is apparently premised on the supposition that objects may “appear to us without their being under the necessity of being related to the functions of understanding” (A89/B122), that is appearances “might very well be so constituted that the understanding should not find them to be in accordance with” the categories (A90-91/B122-123). Kant seems to be explicitly contemplating the possibility that “the formal conditions of sensibility and the formal conditions of understanding might well be entirely orthogonal to each other” (Conant 2016: 100) so that our sensibility may present us with objects that do not fall under the categories. Since the metaphysical deduction only has shown that the categories have subjective validity, the problem to be addressed is therefore to show “how subjective conditions of thought can [also] have objective validity” (A89/B122; Lewis 1929: 214).
- 25 “The Kantian way with skepticism” (Conant 2012, section IX; Conant 2016, sections 8-12 and McDowell 2007, section 7) then consists in attempting to show that where we seem to be confronted with the specter of a systematic disharmony between thought and the world, we are confronted with only the illusion of such a disharmony. According to this reading, the Kantian strategy in the transcendental deduction is to find a way to make the apparent disharmony disappear or, which comes to the same, to make it patent that the notion of such mismatch between what is given to us in sensibility and the categories of understanding is not intelligible in the least so that it is not only superfluous but above all nonsensical to attempt to overcome the apparent possibility of a systematic disharmony.
- 26 As indicated above, the problem of the *a priori* directly echoes Kant’s formulation of the problem of the objective validity of the categories. The transition from Kant to Lewis on this score is mediated by Royce’s interpretation of Kant’s transcendental deduction.³ According to Royce, Kant’s deduction of the categories deserves a prominent place in the whole development of modern philosophy:
- The Kantian deduction of the categories is the portal to the dwelling of modern philosophy. Some of you, having made previous efforts to grasp Kant’s meaning, may regard that portal as a pretty closely shut door – not only closed, but perhaps locked. And, in fact, the section of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* which I have named is notoriously the most difficult passage in a very difficult book. But I do not believe the difficulties in question to be insurmountable. In any case, if we are to consider post-Kantian idealism at all, in any of its more technical aspects, we must make our beginning here at the doorway. Otherwise, if we endeavored to avoid such an entrance to the subject, we should be obliged to view modern idealism as a passing tourist might view a king’s palace. (Royce 1919: 5)
- 27 Here Royce takes that mastering the lessons of the Transcendental Deduction is a prolegomenon for orienting oneself into the post-Kantian philosophical world in that

he appreciates that the skeptical problematic to which Kant is responding is not a Cartesian one but a Kantian one:

Whatever our categories may be, experience comes to us in its own way, and independently of our will. [...]. What a *priori* guarantee is there then that our ways of conceiving things are well warranted? Why might not the genuine natural world simply ignore our categories? If it did so, and experience failed to confirm our ways of conceiving things, what could we do to enforce our conceptual constructions? Present experience, in any case, is not mere conceptual construction. Why might not the unintelligible happen? Why might not experience break away from the forms of my intellect? Why might not chaos come at any moment? That such chaos does not now occur, what is that but itself a merely empirical fact, neither a *priori* nor necessary? [...] To answer just such questions, so far as the categories were concerned, was the purpose of Kant's so-called deduction of the categories. This deduction is an effort to prove, not only that we are subjectively forced to conceive all facts as being in accordance with the forms of our intellect, but also that we can be sure that the objective facts of what we call nature actually never will transgress the limits which our intellect sets when it defines the foregoing outline plan of our world. (*Ibid.*: 23-4)

- 28 In Chapter 7 of *MWO*, the various formulations of the problem of the *a priori* are reminiscent of Royce's own phrasing of the problem of the objective purport of categories. It is not clear whether Royce considers that Kant himself is adopting "the Kantian way with skepticism" or whether he considers that Kant assumes the intelligibility of a categorial disorder, and thereafter intends to show that this genuinely intelligible possibility does not in fact obtain. Yet, from Lewis's perspective, the difference between the two interpretations of the transcendental deduction is of minor importance to the extent that, differently from Royce, one of whose philosophical purposes is to provide an updated version of Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories, Lewis dismisses the project of a transcendental deduction of the categories. One fruitful way to approach this departure from Royce on this score is to emphasize the internal relation between the idea of a transcendental deduction and the Kantian idea of world order that would be at once *a priori* and synthetic.
- 29 A transcendental deduction of the categories is aimed at establishing that the categories are entitled to settle an order which, as it imposes itself to us, is imposed upon the world or upon all possible experience. This order should be such that "that which can not validly be thought under the categories can not be given in intuition. Thus the objects of knowledge are the objects of experience. The limitations of thinking are also the limitations of sensing" (Lewis 1929: 214). As *a priori* in the traditional sense, a synthetic *a priori* order admits of no alternative while, as synthetic, it does. A synthetic *a priori* order is an order whose negation, if not coherent from the standpoint of transcendental logic – thus giving rise to thoughts which have content –, is at least coherent from the standpoint of general logic, that is non-contradictory – and giving rise to thoughts which lack content (Putnam 1994: 255; Moore 2013: 249-50). As Adrian Moore puts it, in order to account for the notion of an *a priori* and synthetic order, "Kant needs the contrast" between two senses of the notion of limit: "To acknowledge the synthetic *a priori* is, in effect, to acknowledge limits that are limits in both senses of the term – essential features and limitations" (Moore 2012: 234). A synthetic *a priori* order indeed purports to set limits on possible experience both in the excluding, contrastive sense of the notion – that is, limits as external limitations or restrictions that exclude genuine possibilities –, and in the non-excluding, non-contrastive sense – that is, limits as internal limits or constitutive, intrinsic features of what they limit (Moore 2012: 234;

Moore 2013: 240-1 & 249-50; Sullivan 2013, 257-8). If the limits of thought really were not limitations, then there would be no need to explain that the limits of reality or experience would always conform to them, no need of a transcendental deduction. The need of an order which would guarantee such a conformity can only arise from the assumed intelligibility of the negation of this order.

- 30 Lewis breaks with Kant on this crucial score: he rejects Kant's construal of the *a priori* order imposed upon what is given to us as a synthetic order. As Lewis points out, it was Kant's insight that "the only alternative to a categorized and orderly experience is a meaningless flux of mere *schwärmerei*" (Lewis 1929: 321). Yet, while he admits the intelligibility of the negation of the synthetic *a priori* order provided by the pure principles of understanding, Kant cannot admit the conceivability of alternative categorial frameworks. In the end, he thus assumes, in one way or in another, the intelligibility of the negation of the transcendental order provided by these principles, which is by no means a categorial order alternative to the one provided for by these principles but a mere lack of any categorial order. On the contrary, Lewis's "solution" to the problem of the *a priori* lies, at least in part, in Kant's insight that there is no specter of a categorially disordered experience to be defused to begin with, and that this is all that needs showing: "the deduction of the categories consist at bottom in this: that without the validity of categorial principle no experience is possible" (Lewis 1929: 320, x & 1970 [1930]: 18). Lewis's "solution" is faithful to the spirit of the Kantian way with skepticism if not to its letter.
- 31 Lewis's treatment of the problem of the *a priori* as well as the main elements of his pragmatic reconception of the *a priori* are contained in his demonstration that the Kantian "manner of meeting the skeptical difficulty is both unnecessary and impossible" (Lewis 1929: 214). While Kant's insight underlies the claim that the Kantian solution – that is, providing a transcendental deduction of categories – is superfluous, Lewis's pragmatic reconception of the necessity specific of the *a priori* underlies the claim that it is impossible.

4. The Impossibility of the Kantian Solution

- 32 In his memorial paper, Goodman reports the following words by Lewis:
- I remember that Lewis used to say to his class: "Anyone who really succeeds in deducing the categories will make a lasting name for himself". Then, after pausing long enough for each student to resolve to make that life work for at least the next two weeks, Lewis would destroy all dreams by saying: "... but it can't be done." (Goodman 1972: 416)
- 33 And he immediately explains that, for Lewis, it can't be done for categories are not articulations of the fixed and rigid ways according to which our mind must operate (*ibid.*).
- 34 The Kantian solution to the problem of the *a priori* is impossible primarily because if there were conditions imposed upon all possible experience, the mind could not recognize them as its own (Lewis 1929: 215). For the mind to recognize such limits as its own is to recognize them as resulting from its own activity or as exemplifying its own activity. However,
- if there are limitations of experience which are imposed not by the activity of thinking addressed to the given but before that given is given, or in its being given,

how shall we distinguish what mind is responsible for from what independent reality is responsible for? (*Ibid*)

- 35 Without any criterion for determining if those limitations are to be ascribed to the mind or to the given, if they are constitutive of experience or constituted by experience, they cannot but be thought of as limitations of the given itself, “whose continuance in all future experience would be as problematic as any empirical generalization” (*ibid.*). For the mind, to recognize these limits as its own making is only conceivable if it is possible to contemplate alternatives:

[The *a priori*] can be recognized as our own act because the *a priori* principle which is definitive, and not a material truth of the content of experience, has alternatives. It can be recognized as due to the mind itself by the ordinary criteria of responsibility in general – that a different mode of acting is possible and makes a discoverable difference. Where there is no possibility of refraining from our act or acting otherwise, there can be no discoverable activity – indeed, there is no act. (*Ibid.*: 232)

- 36 Lewis’s argument of impossibility against the Kantian solution hinges upon his reconception of the necessity specific to the *a priori* and to the categories. One of the major mistakes of traditional conceptions of the *a priori*, including the Kantian one, is to misunderstand the relation of the *a priori* to the mind by misconstruing the necessity specific to the *a priori*. These conceptions confuse the logical with the psychological by mistaking the logical necessity for a kind of psychological inescapability or unavoidability (Lewis 1970 [1923]: 231; 1929: 196, 211). The necessity specific to the *a priori* is then understood as that which does not admit any alternative. Yet, to claim that the *a priori* is necessary in the sense of not admitting alternatives renders it impossible to argue that it is constitutive of experience_{Thick} rather than constituted by experience_{Thin} and strictly universal rather than inductively general. What would be thus threatened is nothing less than the constitutive function of the *a priori*, that is its contribution to the objective purport of our thoughts. By contraposition, it means then that any *a priori* or categorial truth partly owes its objectivity to the conceivability of alternatives.
- 37 Lewis attempts to show that the logical necessity specific to the *a priori* combines in a coherent way two aspects: the irreducibility to any kind of “psychological undeniability” and the conceivability of alternatives. To this end, he distinguishes between two acceptations of the word “necessary,” whether the necessary is opposed to the contingent and identified with the non-contingent or opposed to the voluntary and identified with the non-voluntary (Lewis 1970 [1923]: 231; 1929: 196-7). Lewis’s diagnosis that “traditional conceptions of the *a priori* have proved untenable” (Lewis 1970 [1923]: 231) and his noticing of the historical and anthropological variability of categorial frameworks lead him to think that the necessity specific to the *a priori* is to be opposed not to the voluntary but to the contingent. By contrast, traditional conceptions of the *a priori* mistake the necessity specific to the *a priori* for the non-voluntary or for that which imposes itself upon us, so that they mistake the necessity of the *a priori* for the notion of a necessity which imposes itself upon us.
- 38 Lewis’s argument is partly directed against the rationalist prejudice that the *a priori* is an “absolute datum” (Lewis 1929: 211) imposed upon us and forming an integral part of the standard, invariant constitution of the mind, categories being “fixed and unalterable modes of mind” (*ibid.*: 233).⁴ Traditional conceptions of the *a priori* have unduly ascribed to the *a priori* features specific to the given – the given being indeed

that “which the mind must accept willy-nilly” (*ibid.*: 196) and that which we do not have laid down – for they were not clear about the distinction between the given and the concept.⁵ Lewis’s reconception of the *a priori* amounts thus to a radical criticism of any reification of the *a priori* and, since the *a priori* “bears the stamp of mind’s creation” (*ibid.*: 213), of any reification of the mind.

- 39 The active and creative nature of the mind bears on the nature of the *a priori* and its necessity: the *a priori* does not have its origin in the mind as an element of its standard constitution but as a result of its active, creative nature and as an attitude of the mind itself (*ibid.*). Categorical frameworks are systems of attitudes of the mind and of “categorical ways of acting” with respect to what is given in experience, whose meaning and significance lie in their practical and empirical consequences. If there is no such thing as taking an attitude or acting in a certain way where there is no room for alternative attitudes or alternative ways of acting, then there is no such thing as an *a priori* or a categorical framework without conceivable alternatives. This “practical” aspect of the *a priori* is integral to Lewis’s pluralism. Inheriting Royce’s characterization of the categories as “our categorical ways of acting,” he nonetheless departs from “absolute pragmatism” by drawing the pluralistic implications of this characterization (*ibid.*: 101-2).
- 40 Contrary to the founder of pragmatism, Lewis was not aiming to set up “a new list of categories.” Thus, conceptual pragmatism cannot be adequately characterized as a “correction of Kant by means of Peirce” (Baylis 1930: 320).⁶ The idea of an *a priori* inventory of categories is nothing but a corollary of the idea, rejected by Lewis, that there is a fixed, unique and invariant set of categories or, which comes to the same, a standard categorical constitution of the mind. Lewis’s attack on this “rationalist prejudice” paves the way for a pragmatic variety of pluralism. As Lewis W. Beck says, “what was most distinctive in [MWO] was the pragmatic origin of the variability of the categories” (Beck 1968: 274).
- 41 Even though the traditional conceptions of the *a priori*, including the Kantian one, have proven untenable, the two features they identified – necessity and independence from experience – were correctly pinpointed as intrinsic features of the *a priori*. Lewis’s strategy is to reconceive not only the notion of necessity but also the notion of independence from experience, while trying to retain the kernel of truth in these conceptions (Lewis 1970 [1923]: 231; 1929: 196, 232). He thus considers that the *a priori* is independent from experience and defined in terms of anticipation but rejects the idea that the *a priori* is constitutive of the form of possible experience⁷ and, with this idea, the idea of a transcendental logic. The challenge is then to explain why to identify the notion of independence from experience and the notion of limits of possible experience is a mistake – which will lead us to the heart of Lewis’s argument against the necessity of the Kantian solution.

5. The Superfluity of the Kantian Solution

- 42 “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 and its categories” (Lewis 1929: x) for the reason that “mind may limit reality (in the only sense which the validity of the categories requires) without thereby limiting experience” (*ibid.*: 215, 222). The application of categories to experience and,

conversely, the intelligibility of experience do not require categories to limit the possible experience but only that they be constitutive of what counts, in a context, as real or unreal with respect to a category. Categories are categories of reality, not of experience. A decisive element of the answer to the question “how do we know that we may not be presented in experience with what will not fit into any category and thus be wholly unintelligible?” (*ibid.*: 225) lies in the “systematic ambiguity” of “real” and “unreal.” No assumption about the conformity of experience to categories and concepts is necessary for experience to be intelligible for “we can understand anything in one way or another” (*ibid.*: 219) in the sense that “[w]hat is not reality of one sort is reality of another; what we do not understand in one way, we shall understand in another” (*ibid.*: 263). In brief, “[n]othing is real in all categories; everything is real in some categories” (*ibid.*: 322). This “regulative” principle is such that the universal applicability of the *a priori* to experience is in any case satisfied: not only is each category valid for all relevant experience but a categorial system as a whole is valid for all experience.

- 43 Goodman’s comment illuminatingly underscores the importance of Lewis’s notion of a scrap-basket category for this argument:

How can we be sure that what comes to us will be amenable to the ordering we have invented? In much the same way, Lewis answers, that I can be sure my filing system – miserable as it is – will accommodate all my correspondence. A poet once had a filing system consisting of four folders severally marked: “Unpaid Bills,” “Rejection Slips,” “Love Letters,” and “Miscellaneous.” It had a place for everything he could possibly receive. Some years later, when one of his poems was accepted, he made a minor improvement by re-marking the miscellaneous folder “Acceptances,” and dumping the rest of its contents into the wastebasket. But this was only for convenience. The wastebasket now became an integral part of his filing system. And the point is that so long as a filing system contains a “miscellaneous” folder or a wastebasket, we shall never be at a loss. No demon can frustrate us by producing something that won’t fit anywhere. That whatever we encounter will fit our scheme depends upon no assumption about what we shall encounter but only upon reasonable care in devising our scheme – especially by providing a wastebasket. (Goodman 1972: 417)

- 44 Nothing absolutely unintelligible could run counter to our categorial system since “even the ‘unintelligible’ is a sort of category [*the scrap-basket category*], a temporary pigeon-hole in which items are filed subject to later classification” (Lewis 1929: 225). Hence, nothing that we can encounter in experience is unintelligible except with respect to a system of categories so there is no sense to a notion of an experience being absolutely and completely unintelligible. The general form of Lewis’s argument is the following: either a certain experience is put into the wastebasket class since it does not fit into any other class of a categorial framework, in which case this experience is considered as disordered only relative to a categorial framework and is classified in that respect; or the experience contemplated does not fit into any category of our categorial framework, not even the scrap-basket category, but in that case, there is no such experience to be contemplated but just some piece of nonsense. This argument is directed against whoever ask us “to tremble before the specter of the ‘alogical’ so that we may thereafter rejoice that we are saved from this by the dependence of reality upon mind” (*ibid.*: 246), and consists in objecting that the “unintelligible” or the “alogical” is a “pure bogey, a word without meaning” (*ibid.*). The following excerpt

encapsulates Lewis's verdict on the letter of the Kantian solution to the problem of the *a priori*:

What is beyond our powers of conception has no meaning; the word which is supposed to denote it is a nonsense syllable [...]. [T]he alternative to what can be understood cannot even be phrased. And what is limited only by nonsense syllables is not limited at all. (*Ibid.*: 219-21).

6. The New Problem of the *A Priori*

45 Lewis's argumentation against the Kantian solution proceeds in two steps: first, by showing that the old problem of the *a priori* is a pseudo-problem; second, by substituting for the old problem of the *a priori* a new problem of the *a priori*: How do we know in advance that if experience does not conform to our categories, it will not be real under the heading of one of our categories (Lewis 1929: 224)? Here is the answer to the new problem:

It is not *a priori* certain that any given experience is validly interpretable in a particular category – for example, the physical. But we do know with certainty and *a priori* that if X is a physical thing, then it will conform to certain general principles which can be laid down in advance because they constitute criteria of the physical. (*Ibid.*: 322)

46 There is no guarantee that such future particular experience will satisfy our criteria of the physical but we are in a position to anticipate that if it were the case, then our experience would be the experience of something physical and if it were not the case, then our experience would not be the experience of something physical. What is guaranteed in advance of any particular experience is the *a priori* and categorial truths encapsulated in our concepts and categories, expressed by “strict hypothetical propositions” the logical form of which is “For any x, if x is F, then necessarily x is G” (*ibid.*: 434). *A priori* knowledge is knowledge about our own concepts and categories, that is to say, knowledge about our own attitudes toward the given. This “reflexive self-consciousness” (*ibid.*: 227-8) anticipates our attitude toward experience: “That only can be *a priori* which is true *no matter what*. What is anticipated is not the given but our attitude toward it” (*ibid.*: 197; 1923: 238-9). While the traditional conceptions of the *a priori*, especially the Kantian one, correctly define the *a priori* in terms of anticipation, they wrongly interpret this feature in terms of limits of possible experience.

47 Finally, either the “problem of the *a priori*” is tantamount to the traditional problem of the delimitation of possible experience and therefore is a pseudo-problem that does not admit any answer, or the “problem of the *a priori*” is identified with the possibility of knowing in advance what will count as a “veridical experience” and it will receive an “obvious answer” (Lewis 1929: 225): “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” (*ibid.*: 227). The only genuine problem concerning the applicability of the *a priori* to experience is not that of its possibility but of determining which categorial framework is to be applied to experience in general. Indeed, alternative categorial frameworks give “rise to alternative descriptions of experience, which are equally objective and equally valid” (*ibid.*: 271). But while the choice of a categorial framework to be applied to experience is “dictated neither by what is presented in experience nor by any transcendent and eternal factor of human nature, it still answers to criteria of the general type which may be termed pragmatic” (*ibid.*:

239). Only when such a choice is made do we have a set of criteria for determining what counts as a veridical experience or as real under the heading of one or other of our categories. These pragmatic criteria consist of socially and phylogenetically determined criteria (*ibid.*: 111-6, 239), not necessarily clearly grasped by each individual (*ibid.*: 300), that are compatible – and sometimes combined – with socially determined criteria of simplicity, consistency or completeness while being irreducible to narrowly biological or utilitarian standards.

Conclusion

48 There is little doubt that C. I. Lewis's treatment of the problem of the *a priori* deeply impressed Goodman and Quine, both of them students of Lewis. In spite of their shared dismissal of a significant part of the conceptual apparatus of *MWO*, especially the distinction between the given and the concept and the dichotomy between analytic statements and synthetic statements, both of them can be as fruitfully understood as praising Lewis for having dismantled the traditional conceptions of the *a priori*, including Kant's own. They were especially receptive to Lewis's compelling objection addressed to the very idea of a transcendental deduction as a solution to the basic problem of the applicability of our concepts and categories to experience.

49 Goodman explicitly locates himself in a philosophical lineage whose first two milestones are Kant's first *Critique* and Lewis's *MWO*:

I think of this book [*Ways of Worldmaking*] as belonging in that mainstream of modern philosophy that began when Kant exchanged the structure of the world for the structure of the mind, continued when C. I. Lewis exchanged the structure of the mind for the structure of concepts, and that now proceeds to exchange the structure of concepts for the structure of the several symbol systems of the sciences, philosophy, the arts, perception, and everyday discourse. The movement is from unique truth and a world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making. (Goodman 1978, Foreword)

50 In "Snowflakes and Wastebaskets," Goodman revisits the still underappreciated philosophical significance of his teacher's treatment of the problem of the world order and elucidates his own philosophical project in the light of this treatment. *Ways of Worldmaking* – as well as the "general theory of symbols" in *Languages of Art* – pursues the task announced in the closing paragraph of this tribute:

Lewis's treatment of [*the problem of the world order*] will perhaps suggest the importance of his general position. If we use categorical schemes to make the world, the study of these schemes becomes a primary concern in philosophy. Wistful speculation concerning forever inaccessible realms of being or consciousness gives way to investigations in logic, to an analysis of concepts, to the examination of the nature, varieties, and functions of symbolic systems and media. Only upon some such view can I see how such diverse activities as, for example, systematic construction, ordinary language study, and structural linguistics can all contribute directly to the philosophic endeavor. Not the least of the heritage Lewis leaves to philosophers is the invitation to a variety of fascinating and rewarding work that will occupy many of them for a long time to come. (Goodman 1972: 419)

51 That there are many ways of worldmaking and no unique and fixed set of ways of worldmaking – no *a priori* inventory of them – should be regarded as one of the corollaries of Lewis's objection to the Kantian solution.

52 One may also consider that this objection was meant to spread its influence through Quine to Putnam:

I believed and still believe that Quine is right in [holding, in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, that “No statement is immune to revision”]. [...] I agree with Quine that the idea of a metaphysical guarantee that any part of our supposed knowledge will never turn out to be wrong, perhaps wrong in a way we cannot now even conceive, is a fallacious idea, even if philosophers have sought for such a guarantee, for a fool-proof line between the truly certain and that which might turn out to need revision, for thousands of years. The “proof of the objective validity of our categories” that Kant thought he had succeeded in finding ways was supposed to be such a guarantee, but there is no proof of that sort to be had – no proof of the security of any part of our knowledge whose premises might not themselves turn out to need revision. (Putnam 2012: 174-5)

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NOTES

1. For Lewis's own appreciation of this aspect, see, in particular, Lewis (1968, 1970 [1930]: 3-4).
2. Henceforth, when necessary, I suffix "experience" with the two subscripts "Thin" and "Thick" to indicate the distinction between the two senses of the notion of experience.
3. On Royce's influence on Lewis, see (Lewis 1970 [1930]: 4; 1968: 5, 11-3).
4. The argumentative sequence in Lewis (1929: 206-13) is clearly directed against Royce's absolute pragmatism and his notion of absolute modes of rational activity.
5. See, for example, (Royce 2013: §21, 122).
6. According to L. W. Beck, Lewis once claimed that he was a Kantian "who disagrees with every sentence of the *Critique of Pure Reason*" (1968: 273), belonging to a trend of Kantianism characterized by its rejection of the universal and necessary character of the *a priori* (*ibid.*: 272).
7. For a recent version of the conflation of the idea of independence from experience with the idea of limits of possible experience in general, see Kitcher (2000: 77).

ABSTRACTS

C. I. Lewis's distinction between the given and the concept is often exposed as the key element of his treatment of the problem of intentionality in that the given and the concept would be necessary and sufficient conditions for objective purport. Such an account nonetheless offers a truncated picture of Lewis's treatment of the problem of intentionality. The best way to appreciate this verdict is to state the predicament this account is confronted with: If the distinction between the given and the concept apparently leads to a version of the same problem it was designed to address, how could it be the key element contributing to answering the problem of intentionality? Indeed, according to Lewis, the given and the concept are mutually independent so that *prima facie* nothing guarantees that concepts are applicable to the given. The difficulty is what Lewis calls "the problem of the a priori": how to guarantee that our concepts can be imposed upon a content of experience which is independent and not yet given? This is a version of the problem that Kant's Transcendental Deduction addresses: How can categories, as subjective conditions of experience, be objectively valid? A natural question is then: How does Lewis address the problem of the a priori? The main purpose of this essay is then to investigate how C. I. Lewis's addresses the problem of the a priori and to contribute to restoring an appropriate understanding of Lewis's conceptual pragmatism.

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