

AN EXAMINATION
OF THE THEORY OF PERCEPTION
OF C. I. LEWIS

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Carole Joyce Borowski
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ABSTRACT

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by Carole Joyce Borowski

This thesis is a critical analysis of C.I. Lewis' account of the verification and justification of empirical statements and the justification of empirical knowledge claims in general, as presented in Book II of An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation. The thesis also includes an analysis of several criticisms of phenomenalism in general and of Lewis' account in particular.

Lewis' theory is that we verify and justify physical object statements by appealing to the data supplied by immediate sense experience. We are justified in doing so because physical object statements entail sense experience statements. These sense experience statements express the meaning of the physical object statements which entail them.

The process by which Lewis claims we ought to verify our physical object statements is examined in detail. Several ambiguities, inconsistencies and errors in Lewis' account are pointed out. The conclusion reached is that the process of verification which he advocates is not adequate, although the basic idea of his theory - that we appeal to sense experience to

verify physical object statements - is plausible. As far as the process of justification of physical object statements is concerned, only one part of his account is found to be unsatisfactory.

Unfortunately for Lewis his claim that physical object statements entail sense experience statements is subject to serious criticisms. Two criticisms presented by Berlin and Chisholm are probably valid, and if they are, Lewis' claim is untenable. The principle expressed by this claim, according to Lewis, justifies the processes of verification and justification of physical object statements. If it is rejected the theory as a whole must be rejected as well. Therefore Lewis' attempt to justify our empirical knowledge claims is unsuccessful.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines one attempt to solve a major problem in epistemology: How can we justify our claims to empirical knowledge? Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which is concerned with knowledge. One type of knowledge which most people claim to have is knowledge of the physical world. Epistemological theories do not attempt to describe this physical world; such a description belongs either to the sciences or to metaphysics, another branch of philosophy. Epistemological theories about empirical knowledge are concerned with, among other things, our claims to have such knowledge of the physical world and with how these claims can be justified. Epistemological theories of this type are often said to be attempting to provide some sort of foundation for empirical knowledge.

One sort of theory which attempts to justify empirical knowledge claims is phenomenalism. The basic idea of the epistemological versions of phenomenalism is that empirical knowledge claims are justified by immediate sense experience. A phenomenalist usually claims that the total verification and justification of statements about physical objects rest on the data supplied by the senses, that the meaning of statements about physical objects can be totally expressed by statements about sense experience, and that statements about physical objects entail sets of statements about sense experiences.

The epistemological versions of phenomenalism do not entail

any assertions about the ontological status of physical objects. It may be that there are physical objects which exist independently of being perceived and which we do occasionally perceive. On the other hand, there may be no such independently existing objects. This question of existence is simply left open. Also left open are questions about the ontological status of the data of sense themselves. These data are simply accepted as "given" and no attempt is made to ascertain whether they are mental, physical, metaphysically neutral, or identical with or a part of physical objects. Finally, the holder of a phenomenalist theory of perception is not committed to the view that "the data of sense" is either a connate or an alien accusative of "sensing".¹

One important contemporary philosopher who held a phenomenalist theory of perception was C.I. Lewis. My thesis is an analysis of his theory of perception, as it is presented in An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, Book II.

I shall begin by presenting an account of Lewis' analysis of the elements involved in perceptual knowledge. These are expressive statements, terminating judgements, and non-terminating or objective judgements. The expressive statements are the

1 This distinction is made by C.J. Ducasse in Nature, Mind, and Death (LaSalle, Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1951) p. 254. The distinction can best be explained by examples. In "I am jumping a jump.", "jump" is a connate accusative of "Jumping". In "I am jumping a fence.", "fence" is an alien ac-

statements which describe immediate experience. Terminating judgements express, in language referring to sense experience, predictions about future possible sense experience. The non-terminating judgements are what are often called physical object statements. I shall attempt to show in my analysis that Lewis' account of the first two elements, expressive statements and terminating judgements, is not adequate. I shall explain why the expressive statements are not epistemically indubitable or certain, although Lewis seems to think that they are. I shall make a distinction between two types of terminating judgements, although Lewis recognizes only one and I shall also demonstrate that the form he ascribes to his one type of terminating judgement is mistaken. If the theory which Lewis presents is to be at all plausible, I shall claim that his descriptions of expressive statements and terminating judgements must be qualified. I shall also attempt to demonstrate that the relationships between the various elements in the analysis of perceptual or empirical knowledge are not as straight-forward as Lewis suggests. In doing so I shall examine in detail his analysis of probability. In particular, I shall in the same section attempt to demonstrate that terminating judgements do not express the total meaning of the non-terminating judgements which are supposed to entail them.

cusative of "jumping". In "I am dancing a waltz.", "waltz" is a connate accusative of "dancing". In "I am sewing a dress." "dress" is an alien accusative of "sewing". A connate accusative is the name of something which cannot exist independently of the process described in the verb of the statement. An

During this discussion of the elements which must be recognized in the analysis of empirical knowledge, I shall also point out the various ambiguities, inconsistencies and errors in Lewis' account itself. I shall attempt to give a plausible account of his theory in those sections in which Lewis' own account is unclear and where I detect inconsistencies and contradictions I shall try to determine which statements, if any, are most likely to represent Lewis' actual opinion. Where I think Lewis' account is actually mistaken I shall, if possible, give what I consider to be a more satisfactory account of the topic under discussion.

After considering the various elements in Lewis' proposed analysis of empirical knowledge I shall consider the analysis as a whole. I shall conclude that once the necessary corrections are made Lewis' account of how we verify and justify individual empirical statements is plausible. However I shall conclude that his attempt to justify our use of these procedures is unsuccessful.

One of the questions I shall consider when examining Lewis' account of the justification of empirical knowledge claims is whether he ought to be classified as a phenomenalist. I shall attempt to demonstrate that his theory has all the features

alien accusative is the name of something which can exist independently of that process. The problem concerning sense-data is whether they can exist independently of the process of sensing. Are sense-data connate or alien accusatives of sensing?

generally considered to be characteristic of phenomenism and Lewis must therefore be classed as a phenomenalist, at least insofar as his epistemology is concerned.

At the end of this thesis I shall consider various criticisms which have been made of phenomenism in general and of Lewis' version in particular. I shall show that Lewis has avoided most of the possible objections to this kind of theory. However, I shall also demonstrate that a criticism made by Berlin seems to be telling against Lewis' position and that a criticism made by Chisholm, while invalid as it stands, suggests another criticism which may be valid. My final conclusion is that Lewis' attempt to justify our empirical knowledge claims is on the whole unsuccessful.

CHAPTER I

TERMINATING JUDGEMENTS

In An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, Book II, Lewis presents a phenomenalist account of empirical knowledge. He claims first of all that the meaning of statements about physical objects, or of "statements of objective belief", can be completely expressed in terms of sense experience. Secondly he claims that both the justification and the verification of statements of objective belief are ultimately grounded in immediate experience. He does not however make any claims at all about the nature of the objects referred to in the statements of objective belief and his phenomenism is therefore epistemological but not metaphysical. Lewis also holds a full-blown verificationist theory of meaning, since he claims that the meaning, in one sense, of a statement of objective belief is equivalent to its verification.

Expressive Statements

One fundamental notion of epistemological phenomenism is the basic statement - the statement which refers to the content of immediate experience. This statement is basic both temporally and epistemically.

The basic statement is temporally basic because it is the experience of the senses (or the apprehension of the given, to

use Lewis' terminology) which gives rise in the perceiver to an objective belief about physical objects. The perceiver places an interpretation on this experience. The sense experience plus the interpretation constitute perception. For example, when we perceive a red ball, we have sense experiences of red and round and we believe that certain other experiences will follow. The interpretation given by the perceiver is based on past experience; the interpretation results from an induction from past experience to the effect that since similar experiences in the past were followed by certain other sense experiences this present sense experience can be expected to be followed by sense experiences of a similar type.

The statement of immediate experience is also regarded as epistemically prior to the physical object statement. This is because it is used to justify the physical object statement. The basic statement is thought to be indubitable, both in the epistemic sense that it ought not to be doubted and in the psychological sense that it is psychologically impossible to doubt it. Basic statements are supposed to terminate an evidential chain for physical object statements. An evidential chain is a series of statements in which the first is justified by the second, the second by the third, and so on. It is thought by many philosophers that such an evidential chain must not go on forever - there must be some point at which it is possible to stop and say "This statement is now justified". Such a stop-

ping point is known as the terminating point of an evidential chain. Many philosophers who seek such a terminating point claim to have found it in the basic statements. Since the basic statement is the ultimate point in a chain of evidence for a physical object statement it is epistemically prior to the physical object statement.

To establish that statements about immediate experience are epistemically prior to statements about physical objects is to take merely the first step in the process of explanation. Why is the statement about immediate experience indubitable? Is it because the immediate experience described in the statement is itself indubitable? If so, how can immediate experience, which is not a statement, render a statement indubitable? What sort of experience is meant when "immediate experience" is discussed? There are a number of difficult problems in this area.

The basic statements in Lewis' epistemology are what he calls "expressive statements" and these are described as "formulations of the given".¹ Lewis does not make completely clear what form these statements are to take. He claims that "the difficulty of formulating precisely and only a given content of experience is a relatively inessential consideration for the analysis of knowledge".² It is inessential because, in his view,

1 C.I. Lewis, An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, (LaSalle, Illinois, The Open Court Publishing Company, 1946) p. 184.

2 Ibid., p. 182.

analysis need not be carried out exclusively in terms of language. It is not necessary that a fact be linguistically expressed in order to know it or make use of it. But just because it is difficult to formulate precisely in words the nature of the direct experience it does not follow that the "hard kernel in experience" ought to be doubted.³ This "hard kernel" of experience is the immediate experience itself, distinguished from any interpretation which might be made on the basis of this experience. It is the fact that the experience has occurred which is to be conveyed in the expressive statement, and it is the content rather than the form of the statement which is important.

When Lewis goes on to speak of the expressive statements as being certain, he does not mean that they are analytically true or a priori. What he seems to mean is that their content is certain, and certain in a psychological sense. The content of an expressive statement is the fact of the occurrence of an immediate experience and it is this fact which the statement is meant to convey. What Lewis really thinks is certain is therefore not the expressive statement but the fact that the immediate experience occurred. Lewis seems to mean, when he claims that the fact that the immediate experience has occurred is certain, that if I have an immediate sense experience then it is psychologically impossible for me to doubt that I had this experience.

3 Ibid., p. 183.

He also seems to assume that because it is psychologically impossible for me to doubt that I had the experience, I ought not to doubt it.

Lewis also applies the word "incorrigible" to the content of the expressive statements. This use of the word "incorrigible" is rather curious since the fact of the occurrence of an experience is not the sort of thing to which "corrigible" or "incorrigible" would be thought to apply. The having of an experience just is, and is neither correct nor incorrect.

The expressive statements as distinguished from the occurrence of a sense experience which they describe, are themselves neither certain, indubitable, nor incorrigible. They might well be false if the speaker is lying. If true they convey the fact that there has been an immediate sense experience. It would appear to be very difficult for anyone to establish that they accurately convey the nature of the experience, or for anyone besides the speaker to be sure that any experience whatsoever has occurred.

The "certain" basis required by Lewis for his statements of objective belief must be found in the occurrence of the experience and not in the statement describing that experience. This certain basis - "certain" being used in both a psychological and epistemic sense - is required, Lewis states, because "if anything is to be probable, then something must be certain".¹

1 Ibid., p. 186.

This statement of Lewis' obviously leads to a search for a terminating link in an evidential chain that will be certain - "Evidence must go back to something which is certain - or, as we have said, it will go round in a circle and fail of any genuine basis whatever".¹ Lewis' position on the justification of statements of objective belief is the one usually taken by phenomenologists. However Lewis does not point out that it is the occurrence of the experience alone which is certain, and that as soon as this experience is expressed in words in the expressive statement, this certainty disappears.

The expressive statements themselves are in fact only probable. But the degree of probability they have and how it is to be established are subjects ignored by Lewis because he mistakenly assumes that they are certain. However it seems likely that expressive statements are rendered probable simply in virtue of having been made. It is unlikely that they would be made unless an experience of the described type had occurred.

Expressive Language

Expressive statements are made in what Lewis calls "expressive language" which "denotes experience as such".² This language is often called "sense-datum language", particularly when used in the context of a theory of knowledge which is

1 Ibid., p. 187.

2 Ibid., p. 203.

formulated in terms of sense data. Examples of the words used in this language are "red", "soft", "loud", or "sweet". These are all general words, since they attempt not merely to name the experience, but to describe the nature of it. In saying "red now", I am not merely trying to convey the fact that I am having a sense experience. I am also claiming that I am having a visual experience which is similar to the experiences that I remember having on other occasions when I said "red now". In using general terms we thus appeal to memory and since memory is corrigible, memory statements must be corrigible too. Expressive statements, which all appeal to memory statements, are therefore corrigible.

There is only one English language. Whether we are talking about physical objects or about sense experiences, we use the same words. We say "I see a red ball" and "red now", using "red" in both cases. It might be claimed that "red" in both cases is a phenomenological term - that in both cases it describes sense experience. However the statement of objective belief "I see a red ball" not only gives a phenomenological report of the present experience, but also implies that the ball will continue to be and to appear to be red on subsequent occasions. On the other hand, "red" contains none of these implicit predictions when used in "red now", but is simply a phenomenological report.

In this latter case, the possibility of ambiguity arises. When a statement is made using one of these general phenomenological terms, there should be some way of determining if it is being used in a predictive or non-predictive sense. One way in which the two senses may be distinguished is by the grammatical form of the statement. "I see a red ball" would in most occasions be taken as a statement of objective belief, while "red now" is likely to be recognized as a phenomenological report. However, there are instances in which the distinction between the two kinds of reports is not so clear. For example, the statement "I hear a loud sound" may suggest either that there is a loud sound which I am hearing, or that I am having an aural sensation of loudness. In order to make the distinction perfectly clear words in the expressive language can be qualified by such words as "seem", "appear", or "as if". When the statement is qualified in this way, there is no question but that it should be interpreted only as a phenomenological report. The need to make this distinction explains Lewis' frequent use of such statements as "sense experiences as if I were doing so-and-so".

Expressive statements are statements which are intended to assert that a sense experience has occurred and to describe the nature of this experience by the use of such phenomenological terms as "red" or "soft". They are made using qualifying words which indicate that they are intended to give only a