

旧闻一则: 著名哲学家、逻辑学家大卫·刘易斯去世

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David Lewis, Princeton philosopher who formulated ground-breaking theories on everything from language to identity to alternative worlds

- David Kellogg Lewis, philosopher, born September 28 1941; died October 14 2001.

Jane O'Grady

Parallel universes and other possible worlds are currently much in vogue, as evinced by the films *Sliding Doors* and *Possible Worlds*. In science, these intriguing intuitions assume rigour through the many-worlds theory of quantum mechanics, and in philosophy through the possible-worlds theories of the Princeton professor David Lewis, who has died, aged 60, of complications from diabetes.

Lewis is most celebrated for his "modal realism", a theory which argues that possible worlds are not just a concept for explaining possibility and necessity, but as real as our own universe. He also produced outstandingly innovative theories on scientific laws, chance, probability, causation, the identity and functionalist theories of mind, (linguistic) convention and a vast range of other issues. Together, his ideas in different areas form a grand, all-embracing theory, and to his many devotees he ranks as one of the great metaphysicians in this, or perhaps any, era.

Born in Oberlin, Ohio, Lewis was an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, initially in chemistry. While spending a term at Oxford, he attended lectures by Gilbert Ryle, who had disputed the existence of the mind in his controversial book, *The Concept Of Mind*, and became so enthused that he changed to philosophy on returning to the US. After graduating in 1964, Lewis took a PhD at Harvard under the great Willard van Orman Quine (obituary, December 30 2000).

Even as a graduate, Lewis had enormous standing in the philosophical world. The much-debated theory that had replaced Ryle's analytic behaviourism argued that mental states will ultimately turn out to be nothing but physical processes in the brain, and JJC Smart, one of the initiators of this identity theory of mind, visited Harvard in the mid-1960s. "I taught David Lewis," he said afterwards, "or rather, David Lewis taught me," and in 1966, the year before obtaining his doctorate, Lewis produced the essay *An Argument For The Identity Theory*, which improved on Smart's position.

Typically, Lewis not only got to the nerve of the issue, but took it in a new direction. Trying to rebut the commonsensical dualist objection that surely "experiences are non-physical and physically inefficacious", he said that experiences should be (in fact, implicitly were) considered as the effects of certain stimuli and the causes of certain behaviour. Pain, for instance, is

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whatever causally links a certain sensory input (having your eyes gouged out, for instance) with behavioural output (screaming) and other mental states (urgent desire to be rid of the pain).

Neural science will eventually show this causal "whatever" to be a particular state in the brain, just as (Lewis wrote in his 1972 paper, *Psychophysical And Theoretical Identifications*) a detective who knows in detail the roles - but not the identities - of conspirators involved in a murder will ultimately be able to establish who exactly these conspirators are.

Simultaneously, Lewis was setting the agenda in other areas of philosophy. In 1966, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (his rehashed thesis) broke new ground in the philosophy of language, in which it remains a seminal work. He became assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the same year, associate professor at Princeton in 1970, and full professor there three years later.

In *Counterfactuals* (1973), and many articles before and after it, he was working out his controversial theory of modal realism, which is most fully expressed in *On The Plurality Of Worlds* (1986). Since Leibniz's formulation of the idea in the 17th century, philosophers had treated possible worlds as a purely conceptual notion useful for explaining concepts of possibility and necessity: anything that we can coherently conceive as possible can be called a possible world, but if something is necessarily true, then it is true in all possible worlds.

Lewis argued that possible worlds were not concepts, but real - existing in the same way as our universe does and no different from it except in the details of what happens there. "The inhabitants of other worlds may truly call their own worlds actual, if they mean by 'actual' what we do," just as "the inhabitants of other times may call their times 'present', if they mean by 'present' what we do". After all, "our present time is only one time among many". "Actual" is on a par with "I", "here" or "now"; what it refers to depends on who says it and the world at which (Lewis's terminology) it is said.

As for counterfactuals, which appeal to what might have been, the counterfactual "If he hadn't pressed the alarm, she would have been killed," for instance, is true if there is a possible world in which he didn't press the alarm, and she was killed, that is more similar to our own world than one in which he pulled the cord and she wasn't killed. Of course, the person who was killed is only a counterpart to her equivalent in the actual world, even if both play similar roles in each of their worlds. And there is no spatial, temporal or causal connection between possible worlds and our own.

To postulate the reality of possible worlds is to spin metaphysics out of logic, and when Lewis spoke about it he usually met with "an incredulous stare" - this expression became a philosophical joke and the name of a section of *On The Plurality Of Worlds*. Yet it was, he said, the only way to make sense of everything.

Soon incredulity gave way to a cottage industry of objections and interpretations. For what possible worlds actually are (and virtually no one, perhaps not even Lewis, accepted their reality) does not affect the brilliant,

sophisticated way he used them, analysing problematic notions in causation, universals, the content of thought, properties, probability, and the nature of propositions. Modal realism mowed down problems like a combine harvester (to paraphrase an admiring colleague) not only in philosophy, but in semantics, linguistics, game theory and economics.

Sometimes Lewis spoke as if he discovered his intentions, both practical and intellectual, almost by trial and error, and the same sort of induction seems to have occurred with his metaphysics. He said in the introduction to his *Philosophical Papers Volume II* (1986) that, like any analytic philosopher, he had set out to tackle problems piecemeal, but that he seemed almost inadvertently to have produced a coherent, unified thesis. This, which he called "Humean supervenience", says that the world is a "vast mosaic" of tiny facts and, at any instant, what it is, and what we can truly say about it, depends upon the patterns that these exemplify, just as in a pointillist picture what is depicted is determined by the dots.

Nothing that happens at one point logically fixes what happens at any other point, but it is the totality of what happens that fixes everything else. All Lewis's theories seemed to converge in this thesis, he said, but he admitted that there was a bug in the system - chance - which could subvert the whole thing. This was a problem he was still struggling with at the last.

Lewis expressed his esoteric ideas in brisk, sturdy, lucid prose, whether on paper or orally, but he was famously incapable of small talk. Shy, pale and lengthily bearded, he was affectionately nicknamed Machine in the Ghost (turning Ryle's disparagement of dualism on its head). But he could be unflamboyantly funny, especially in print, and his philosophical examples are witty without facetiousness or self-congratulation (a famous article contrasted a Martian whose response to painful stimuli is the inflation of cavities in his feet with a madman whose reaction is indifference).

Lewis was astoundingly modest and unpompous for a successful philosopher, always ready to respond to criticism, and unfailingly generous to students. Perhaps his dislike of pretentiousness and convention led to his love of Australia. His contacts with the Australian theorists Jack Smart and David Armstrong led to a lasting connection with the country, where he became a huge philosophical figure. Almost every year he and his wife stayed there for two or three months, and he became an aficionado of Australian rules football (he was buried with the Essendon club's season ticket), and its Bush ballads, birds and trains.

English railways were his favourites, however; he would travel on them for the sake of the journey. His basement was occupied by a model railway set, which the privileged were also allowed to play with, and walls were knocked down to accommodate it. Asked why he did not have a credit card, he said he did not want to be in debt.

Lewis restored philosophical respectability to systematic metaphysics. Like Hume, he tried to reconcile a scientific conception of the world with how it actually appears to us. He called himself "a commonsensical fellow (except where unactualised possible worlds are concerned)". The paper he was last

working on used possible worlds to link personal identity with immortality. This may not sound commonsensical, but it is poignant for the many people that loved him as a philosopher and as a man.

He is survived by his wife, Steffi.

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Princeton Professor David Lewis dies at 60

Longtime philosophy professor was leading figure in his field

Princeton, N.J. -- David Lewis, the Class of 1943 University Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University and a leading figure in philosophy, died suddenly Oct. 14 from complications arising from diabetes. He was 60.

Lewis joined the Princeton faculty as an associate professor in 1970 and remained at Princeton for the rest of his life.

Born in Oberlin, Ohio and brought up in an academic household, Lewis received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Swarthmore College in 1962 and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1967. His thesis advisor was W. V. Quine, on whose prose style Lewis modeled his own. He taught at the University of California at Los Angeles for four years before coming to Princeton.

"He is widely regarded as one of the outstanding philosophers of his time," said Mark Johnston, chairman of the Princeton philosophy department. "For more than 30 years, David has made seminal contributions in philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, metaphysics and epistemology. He is the greatest systematic metaphysician since Leibniz."

Johnston, who worked as a graduate student at Princeton with Lewis, described him as "sweet and stern," noting that "the gentle part came out more often. He was always unfailingly generous with his time and with positive philosophical suggestions, and ruthless with his criticism." He was a mentor to scores of students, many of whom have gone on to be significant figures in the field, Johnston said. "Lewis inspired students to approach systematic philosophy with a new seriousness," he said.

Lewis' work was notable for its breadth, ranging over almost every area of philosophy. "Whether it was logic, philosophy of science, metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, political philosophy, he did it all," said Paul Benacerraf, the James McDonnell Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy and Lewis' colleague for 30 years. "The breadth of what he covered was astounding, and the originality of his ideas and the care with which he presented them were equally astonishing," Benacerraf said. "He was a wonderful stylist."

Lewis was also known for his fascination with trains, his love for Australia, Australian philosophy and Australian Rules football, and his profound lack of

interest in learning to use a modern computer. Lewis preferred to compose on an antique word processor that used floppy disks the size of small pizzas.

"He was a railroad buff; he had a detailed scale model of British Rail in his basement," Benacerraf said. When Lewis spent time in England, he would often hop on a train in the morning and spend the entire day riding various train lines, reading and writing during the rides.

Lewis met his wife, Stephanie, in a seminar given by a visiting Australian philosopher, J. J. C. Smart, in the fall of 1963. Beginning in 1971, the two made more than 20 trips to Australia, visiting philosophy departments and colleagues and friends around the country. Lewis came to know Australia better than many Australians and considered the city of Melbourne to be a second home. He was named an honorary fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1994.

Lewis wrote widely on many topics in philosophy. His first book, *Convention: A Philosophical Study*, published in 1969 when he was 28, brought him the Matchette Prize in Philosophy, a national award for the best book by a scholar in philosophy under 40 years of age. He also published *Counterfactuals* (1973) and *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986). The latter argued powerfully for the mind-boggling thesis that the actual world is just one among an infinity of possible worlds, each one as real as the rest. When defending this view against an astonished critic, he replied: "I cannot refute an incredulous stare."

Two volumes of Lewis' collected papers were published in the 1980s. In the last few years, the Cambridge University Press published three more collections of his writings, in the areas of philosophical logic, metaphysics and epistemology, and ethics and social philosophy. At his death he was completing a paper in the philosophy of physics called "How Many Lives has Schrödinger's Cat?"

Lewis delivered several major sets of lectures in philosophy, including the Hägerstrom Lecture, the Howison Lectures, the Whitehead Lectures, the John Locke lectures, and the Jack Smart Lecture. He received honorary degrees from the University of Cambridge, the University of York and the University of Melbourne. In 1991 he won a Behrman Award from Princeton for distinguished achievement in the humanities.

He is survived by his wife, Stephanie; his brother, Donald; and his sister, Ellen.

A memorial reception was held Thursday, Oct. 18 at Prospect House on the Princeton University campus, hosted by the philosophy department. A formal memorial service will be held in January.

In lieu of flowers, contributions may be sent to the American Civil Liberties Union, 125 Broad St., 18th Floor, New York, NY 10004-2400.

Note: A photo of David Lewis is available at <http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pictures/l-r/lewis,david/>

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Obituaries

Via [Finnegans Wake](#), I found a link back to a really well written [obituary of David Lewis](#) by Jane O'Grady. I remember at the time that the American

obituaries about Lewis mentioned modal realism and very little but modal realism. And while of course modal realism gets a run here, it's a very good systematic account of what's valuable in Lewis's philosophy. (As well as mentioning many of the reasons so many people were so fond of Lewis in person.) Anyway, the reason I'm linking to it here is to note the start of the final paragraph.

Lewis restored philosophical respectability to systematic metaphysics. Like Hume, he tried to reconcile a scientific conception of the world with how it actually appears to us.

I'm not entirely sure this is the most perspicuous way to describe Hume, but as a claim about Lewis it seems just right. I bring this up mainly to be self-deprecating. I think focussing on this reconciliation project is the right way to read Lewis, but I don't think in saying that I'm being particularly groundbreaking. Still, I'm not sure it's been said in the unpopular press quite so clearly before, so perhaps there's some value in me continuing to say it.

Posted by Brian Weatherson at February 22, 2006 09:56 PM
Comments

It's nice to read that one after the abomination the NYT published after his death.

Posted by: Mark van Roojen at February 23, 2006 01:14 AM

Given Lewis's complete lack of interest in quantum mechanics, it strikes me as odd to suggest that he was particularly interested in the "scientific conception of the world," or its potential conflicts with common sense.

Posted by: Liz's Husband at February 25, 2006 11:21 PM

I don't really see Lewis this way either. I would have thought that someone who was interested in the "scientific conception of the world" and who was writing a paper called "Psychophysical Identifications" would pay a *little* bit of attention to actual cognitive science, neuroscience, and psychology. But Lewis' treatment doesn't even do this. In general, his supposed attempt to reconcile science and commonsense sounds to me more like a slogan than a research program he was very serious about. Anyone who is serious about such a project would spend a hell of a lot more time on the fine grains of scientific theories.

Posted by: hmmm at February 26, 2006 12:23 AM

There are very different types of philosophical work that can be said to aim "to reconcile a scientific conception of the world with how it actually appears to us." I suppose some such work may involve very fine-grained & advanced accounts of the relevant science. But since much of the need for reconciliation becomes apparent from even some of the more basic aspects of science, there is also room for very important attempts at such reconciliation that don't involve all the details of the science. & such work can be extremely serious & very valuable.

Posted by: Keith DeRose at February 26, 2006 01:49 AM

Keith DeRose's comment makes sense so long as Lewis's commitments were internal to, and consistent with, the "scientific conception of the world." Insofar as Lewis's commitments (e.g. locality) were not consistent with this conception, then there really is a problem.

Posted by: Liz's Husband at February 26, 2006 09:25 AM

Where did "Liz's Husband" get the idea that Lewis had "a complete lack of interest in quantum mechanics"?

Posted by: Fritz at February 26, 2006 09:34 AM

I'm with Fritz here. Someone who had a complete lack of interest in QM wouldn't have written a paper ("How Many Lives Has Schrodinger's Cat?") on a philosophical issue arising out of QM.

I also think the locality issue is a bit of a red herring. True, Lewis was interested in working out the consequences and plausibility of a theory according to which local properties played a crucial role. And it's true that QM doesn't look like it's a local theory. But given Lewis's motivation, it isn't clear this matters. The kinds of anti-Humean non-locality Lewis was arguing against are not the kinds of non-locality we find in QM.

On a similar note, it would be a mistake to say that Lewis, or anyone else who spends time defending free will compatibilism, isn't paying attention to indeterminism in QM. Since the kind of indeterminism in QM isn't the kind of indeterminism that will save free will if compatibilism is false, working out whether compatibilism is true or false is philosophically relevant. I think the same is true of Lewis's attention to locality. QM no more helps anti-Humeans who believe in primitive causation than it helps anti-Humeans who believe in libertarian free will.

Posted by: Brian Weatherson at February 26, 2006 10:37 AM

The "complete lack of interest" comment comes from, e.g., the discussion on page xi of the preface to "Philosophical Papers," vol. 2. I am not alone in the opinion that Lewis didn't take modern physics very seriously.

Brian's assertion about Lewisian locality being compatible with QM-nonlocality doesn't square with the comments on page xi of the preface to "Philosophical Papers," but let's put that to the side.

The deeper point is that Lewis's metaphysical commitments--Lewisian locality, Lewisian compatibilism, etc.--shouldn't be described as intrinsic to the "scientific worldview." Perhaps they are compatible with modern science, perhaps not. But they are not the only available metaphysical options, and the practice of science by no means depends on adopting them.

Posted by: Liz's husband at February 26, 2006 12:43 PM

Lewis in that old introduction said that (roughly) he wasn't ready to read

metaphysics directly off of the then popular readings of quantum mechanics. Seems like the right attitude to me - then and now.

Posted by: Fritz at February 27, 2006 10:05 AM

I agree with Fritz, this seems like the right view. And it is also one held by philosophers who everyone agrees take physics very seriously - such as Larry Sklar - see his comments about the analogue computer science's GIGO (Garbage-In, Garbage-Out) principle. Sklar calls the idea of trying to simply read off the metaphysical consequences from the physics the MIMO principle (Metaphysics-In, Metaphysics-Out) - the idea being that metaphysical assumptions are often already in a "standard" interpretation of a physical theory, and so in many cases one might have the illusion that one is simply "reading off" the metaphysics but in reality they're being snuck into the interpretation of the theory. See his book, Philosophy of Physics.

Posted by: Chris Stephens at February 27, 2006 12:32 PM

The passage says nothing whatsoever about "popular readings" of quantum mechanics, or about "reading metaphysics directly off" of quantum mechanics. The passage acknowledges that the lesson of Bell's theorem might be that Humean supervenience is false. There's simply nothing here about "popular readings" or "reading directly off." Instead, there's an explicit statement that one of Lewis's central theses might well be inconsistent with modern physics.

Furthermore Lewis says that he doesn't uphold the "truth of Humean supervenience" but rather the "tenability" of it. As far as I'm concerned, this directly contradicts the claim that got this whole discussion started. If Lewis really was interested in conflicts between "the scientific conception of the world" and the way the world appears to us, then he would need to care about the truth -- rather than the tenability -- of Humean supervenience. If Humean supervenience is false, then it is not part of the scientific conception of the world, and its tenability is simply not an issue.

BTW, I'm switching my name because Liz has asked that she not be associated with the outre views of her nonphilosopher husband.

Posted by: Dmitri Tymoczko at February 27, 2006 07:42 PM

Well, here's Lewis on p.xi of the introduction to his philosophical papers volume 2 (the old ones). This is the passage I was recalling though I didn't have it in front of me when I wrote the gloss you complain about:

"But I am not ready to take lessons in ontology from quantum physics as it is now. First I must see how it looks when it is purified of instrumentalist frivolity and dares to say something not just about pointer readings but about the constitution of the world; and when it is purified of doublethinking deviant logic -- and, most of all, when it is purified of supernatural tales about the power of the observant mind to make things jump. If, after all that, it still teaches locality, I shall submit willingly to the best of authority."

My gloss was not a quotation of Lewis, so pointing out that there's no quote containing the words "popular readings"... etc... doesn't seem so relevant.

Beyond that, returning to the passage leads me to stand by my informal gloss on it. Lewis seems to be saying that he's willing to take instruction in metaphysics from physics only if the physics is distinguished from various things that some might say about physics. He's not willing draw metaphysical conclusions from various interpretations of it (involving for example, deviant logic) nor is he willing to take metaphysical instruction from a reading of the physics (e.g., a purely instrumentalist reading that some might like) that by design does not speak to metaphysical issues). It's true he didn't use the phrase "popular readings" (but again, I didn't try to quote him from memory...) but surely many of us recall the popularizations prominent at the time talking about, for example, required revisions in logic and/or magical powers of observers and/or a whole host of other things one might plausibly gloss as "popular readings".

But ok, others can read the Lewis page and decide for themselves.

Posted by: Fritz at February 27, 2006 08:54 PM

Funnily enough, I think that those lines from the introduction support the reconciliation interpretation. I think it all turns on how you read the Lewisian thesis. Consider the following two theses:

- (1) Localism is true.
- (2) There is no philosophical argument against localism.

Dmitri argues that Lewis doesn't care about science because his central thesis is inconsistent with science. But that assumes his central thesis is (1). I think his central thesis is (2), as he says in the introduction.

Now (2) obviously isn't inconsistent with anything in science. The question is why would anyone who takes science seriously bother arguing for (2)? Well, that suggests a prior question, why would anyone argue for (2)? I think the answer starts by nothing that (3) is true, or at least plausible.

(3) If there is no philosophical argument against localism, then there is no philosophical argument for expanding the ontology presented to us by science, whatever that ontology should turn out to be.

If (2) and (3) are true, then there is no philosophical argument that "one or another commonplace feature of the world" cannot find a place in the scientific ontology. And that's an important step towards reconciling science and commonsense, which is what I think Lewis was trying to do.


Obviously there's a lot to be said about (3), but this comment has gone on too long already! The big point is that if Lewis's central doctrine is (2) not (1), then it can be used in a reconciliation project.

On Fritz's point, I agree that Lewis didn't want to read ontology off QM circa 1986. I'm not so sure he didn't develop a more positive attitude towards QM over later years - he did after all bother to write a paper on QM at the end which he wouldn't have done 15 years prior. And given the work that philosophers (and physicists) have done to get the instrumentalism out of QM, I think that's a perfectly reasonable attitude to take.

Posted by: Brian Weatherson at February 28, 2006 12:06 PM

Like Keith DeRose, I don't see that not giving special attention to the details of current scientific theories means one is not in the business of trying to solve the placement problem (what Brian calls the location problem in his post). It's fair to say that McDowell's 'Mind and World' doesn't pay much (if any) attention to the fine details of contemporary science, but it's explicitly concerned with the placement problem (as even the title suggests). As DeRose points out, there doesn't seem to be any real reason to expect all - or even the best - work on these issues to proceed in that manner.

Posted by: Aidan McGlynn at February 28, 2006 03:40 PM



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