
David Lewis

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David Lewis died on October 14 of last year, from complications due to diabetes. He was 60 years old. A professor of philosophy at Princeton University, Lewis received his doctorate in philosophy from Harvard University in 1967, working under Willard van Orman Quine. He took up a teaching position at UCLA before moving to Princeton in 1970, where he remained for the rest of his career.

Lewis's work reached into every significant philosophical domain. Given this breadth, it is remarkable that all of this work was at least first-rate, and most of it better: Whereas the most accomplished of Lewis's peers could each typically cite but a small number of their essays that deserve to be called "classics," Lewis could cite dozens. Nor was his very best work confined to a narrow range of specialties. On the contrary, he wrote brilliant and seminal papers, and four books, in logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and other areas. It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of these contributions. In the curious currency of our profession, we typically pay one another respect by disputing each other's positions with as much force as we can muster, in the idealistic hope that in the fire of argument lasting philosophical insights occasionally can be forged. Keeping this measure in mind, one need merely scan the best professional philosophical journals to see with what reverence Lewis is held.

And one need only read a Lewis paper to see why his work will remain of such lasting value. There are the philosophical insights, thick on every page. There is the breathtaking ease with which he moves back and forth between close technical work and "big picture" considerations. There is the stunningly lucid prose—unlike too many other famous philosophers, Lewis will not continue to be talked about merely because we don't understand him. There is the deft use of the second person, which quickly makes you feel as though Lewis is talking directly to you, gently and inexorably persuading you of the merits of his position.

Not that persuasion was always forthcoming. Much (though by no means all) of Lewis's work was controversial, albeit almost always in an agenda-setting way. Consider *On the Plurality of Worlds*, which is perhaps Lewis's most famous book and is the one in which he sets out and defends his notorious thesis that possibility is ontologically on a par with actuality. If, for example, I could have arisen earlier than I did this morning, that is because in another possible world—a world every bit as concrete as our own—a flesh-and-blood "counterpart" of me does in fact arise at the earlier time. Very few philosophers agree with this understanding of modality. Most, I suspect, either secretly or not-so-secretly consider it slightly mad. But after reading Lewis's book, none could dismiss it, as witness the myriad attempts in the subsequent literature to pinpoint exactly where Lewis's arguments go wrong. Moreover, in the course of his defense of the thesis, Lewis presents such an aston-

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ishing array of perceptive philosophical arguments that, by widespread agreement, *On The Plurality Of Worlds* now ranks as one of the very best treatises in abstract metaphysics in the history of Western philosophy.

Lewis was a systematic philosopher par excellence—although not by design, so he tells us in the introduction to one of his collections of essays—seeking to forge positions on perennial philosophical problems that would fit together neatly into one grand scheme. One element of this scheme was the modal realism just mentioned; but more important for Lewis, I think, was a thesis he dubbed “Humean supervenience,” after, as he put it, that “great denier of necessary connections.” According to this thesis, every fact about a possible world (with the possible exception of aberrant worlds sufficiently dissimilar from our own) obtains in virtue of facts about the instantiation of properties at spacetime points (or: by spacetime-point-sized particulars), together with the geometrical arrangement of those points. (Call this basis for reduction the “Humean mosaic.”) What’s more, the way in which truths in general reduce to truths drawn from the Humean mosaic can, Lewis thought, be revealed by careful philosophical analysis. Thus, fundamental laws of nature are to be analyzed as certain prominent patterns in the Humean mosaic; counterfactual conditionals (conditionals of the form “if A were the case, B would be the case”) are to be provided, via careful philosophical analysis, with truth-conditions that appeal directly to these fundamental laws; causation is to be analyzed by means of such conditionals; the relationship between mind and body is to be analyzed in complex causal terms. And this is but one strand in the intricate and strikingly coherent body of philosophical doctrine that Lewis developed.

A different, and from a pedagogical perspective even more valuable, kind of systematicity characterizes Lewis’s work as well, for the construction of his philosophical edifice carefully followed well worked out and clearly articulated methodological principles. Here is a sketch—perilously close, I fear, to a caricature, but it will have to do: Suppose you want to come up with an analysis of some concept of great philosophical interest—say, our concept of causation. You collect together platitudes involving the application of the concept. These might take the form of firm intuitive judgments about hypothetical cases; for example, in such-and-such a situation, A causes B, but C does not cause D, and so forth. Or they might take the form of much more general claims; for example, for any A, B, and C, if A causes B and B causes C, then A thereby causes C. Keeping in mind the reductive character of the analytical project, you come up with a provisional analysis, in more fundamental terms, to explain these platitudes as simply and elegantly as possible; for example, A causes B iff A and B both occur, but if A had not occurred, B would not have occurred. Now comes a long process of tinkering: for you quickly find counterexamples (an easy exercise, in this case), revise the analysis in light of them, look for more counterexamples, revise again as necessary, and so on. If all goes well, you ultimately arrive at an analysis that does the best possible job of capturing and explaining the platitudes in a clean and theoretically elegant manner. Sometimes the results are quite surprising: Lewis’s belief in concrete possible worlds, for example, grew out of his conviction that only by means of them could one provide the theoretically most attractive analysis of possibility, necessity, and other modal notions.

I noted that this methodological systematicity of Lewis’s has a great deal of

pedagogical value. What I had in mind is this. Almost every serious student of philosophy who makes the decision to pursue a career in the subject faces, at some point, a daunting and disheartening obstacle. She knows that she wants not merely to learn, but to contribute. She knows which are the questions she wants to tackle. But she doesn't have any clear idea of how to go about tackling them; no one has bothered to tell her, "These are the methods to apply in order to achieve solid philosophical results." From the perspective of someone faced with this quandary, the singular virtue of Lewis's work is that it not only displays example after example of solid philosophical results, but does so in a way that makes it perfectly clear how they were arrived at. As a graduate student, I was deep in just such a quandary at the time I happened to pick up *On the Plurality of Worlds*. I can still taste the exhilaration I felt as I read through it—the sense that there was something here that I could do; not nearly as well as my teacher, perhaps, but well enough that I need no longer feel helpless. Even had I never known David personally, I would be eternally grateful to him for this gift.

It must, therefore, be possible to be more than eternally grateful, for the gifts he gave to me and countless other students over the years in his role as teacher, mentor, and friend were vastly greater. David possessed all the virtues of the best teachers: patience, generosity with time and attention, skill at finding the nuggets of sound philosophical points in our barely coherent ideas, wholly unselfish concern for our philosophical and professional development. Then there were other and much rarer virtues. For example, I noted above that David could cite classic papers he had written by the dozen. That he would never do so simply testifies to his modesty. But this was a special sort of modesty: not the modesty of self-effacement but the modesty that comes with caring about truth much, much more than about honor. From the beginning, Lewis's pursuit of excellence in his philosophical research was driven by a consuming and infectious passion for trying to discern the truth about questions of perennial and fundamental philosophical interest. Those of us lucky enough to be his students quickly learned from his example that to serve this passion was to renounce ego and acclaim as irrelevant.

One singular way in which he helped us to learn this lesson deserves special mention. For David delighted—absolutely delighted—in being refuted, or (since that didn't happen often) at least in having revealed to him some philosophical argument or point of interest that he had overlooked. That is a rare trait indeed, even among philosophers who have not exposed themselves as much as David did, by taking stands on such a wide range of philosophical issues. Rare, and of unsurpassed value to the practice of our discipline. It is a hard and unavoidable feature of philosophy that the touchstones that allow us to distinguish truth from falsehood are few and extremely subtle. Any of a number of widely available obfuscatory techniques can obscure them from view—and so allow refuge to the philosopher whose concern for truth pales before his concern to defend his philosophical turf. David, by contrast, showed us what we need to do—what kind of people we need to be—if, left in our hands, philosophy is to have hope of making genuine progress.

It is an exquisitely sharp blow that Lewis's death dealt to contemporary analytic philosophy. His was possibly the greatest—and purest—philosophical mind of the last century, and at any rate easily one of the greatest of any century. Mark Johnston, chair of the philosophy department at Princeton, and a philosopher who

knows Lewis's work as well as anyone, has called Lewis "the greatest systematic metaphysician since Gottfried Leibniz." This is not the kind of inflated estimate commonly provoked by the fervor of eulogy, but a sober reckoning of the scope and majesty of Lewis's contribution to the field. His presence is and will continue to be sorely missed. For those of us fortunate enough to have known him as teacher, mentor, and friend, the pain at his passing is immeasurably more sharp. In my own case, this pain has taken a bittersweet form: Often, as I work through some philosophical issue, a thought instinctively takes shape: "Hmmm, that might be an interesting point. I can't wait to run it by David!" An image takes shape with it: me explaining the idea to David; the characteristic long pause; the beautifully formulated reply, accompanied, perhaps by a distinctively mischievous twinkle in his eyes. All this happens in an instant. And then the happy moment vanishes, destroyed by the crashing realization that he is gone from us. What is left is anguish, of a kind that shows no prospect of diminishing with time.