

# C.I. Lewis was a Foundationalist After All

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**ABSTRACT:** While C.I. Lewis was traditionally interpreted as a consistent foundationalist throughout his major works, this interpretation is contested in virtually every recent treatment of Lewis' epistemology. I defend the traditional interpretation, arguing that Lewis thinks our apprehensions of "the given" are certain independently of the support of—and constitute the ultimate source of warrant for—our objective empirical beliefs. That Lewis took the given to serve this autonomous epistemic function is clear from his repeated insistence that only apprehensions of the given allow us to answer the regress problem and so vindicate the possibility of empirical justification. Additionally, non-foundationalist readings of Lewis' epistemology cannot accommodate Lewis' explicit opposition to coherentism, while worries about how self-satisfied apprehensions of present experience can justify objective beliefs can be met (to Lewis' satisfaction). Moreover, non-epistemic accounts of the given's function in Lewis are either flatly mistaken or else support the epistemic account after all: the suggestion that it puts subjects in touch with mind-independent reality founders on Lewis' rejection of metaphysical realism, and Carl Sachs' recent suggestion that the given grounds the possibility of objective meaning is correct, but ultimately presupposes the given's epistemic function. Since, finally, the foundationalist interpretation can accommodate apparently contrary textual evidence concerning the chaotic, non-conceptual, and ineffable character of the given, it merits acceptance over non-foundationalist interpretations of Lewis.

**KEYWORDS:** Lewis, Clarence Irving; foundationalism; coherentism; regress problem; skepticism; empirical justification; metaphysical realism; cognitive semantics; verificationism; the given; qualia

## 1. Introduction

C.I. Lewis published his first book, *Mind and the World-Order (MWO)*, in 1929, and was nigh-unanimously interpreted as a foundationalist for sixty years. Lewis (in)famously held "that our knowledge of the external world can be justified [...] only by indubitable apprehensions of the

immediate data of sense” (1968: 329), Roderick Firth claimed. BonJour (1985), Dancy (1985), Goodman (1952), Haack (1985), Moser (1988), Reichenbach (1952), and Williams (1977) concurred. Christopher Gowans (1984, 1989) alone dissented.

But non-foundationalist interpretations are now standard. They disagree about how consistently Lewis opposed foundationalism: while Cheryl Misak (2013: ch. 10), Eric Dayton (1995), and Carl Sachs (2014: ch. 2) think he rejected foundationalism in both *MWO* and his 1946 *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation (AKV)*, Kenneth Westphal (2017) claims he rejected it in *MWO* but endorsed it in *AKV*. Gowans (1984) initially agreed, but later (1989) claimed Lewis opposed foundationalism in only *MWO*’s first nine chapters, embracing it in its final two. Meanwhile, Christopher Hookway (2008) reads *MWO* as consistently non-foundationalist, remaining agnostic about *AKV*. All challenge the traditional, unified foundationalist interpretation. Meanwhile, no rejoinders have appeared: the only post-1990 foundationalist treatments are Haack’s (1993: ch. 2) and BonJour’s (2004) elaborations and Hunter’s (2016) encyclopedia article, which don’t critically engage non-foundationalist readings. Such readings thus require examination.

Each non-foundationalist interpreter conforms to (and some rehearse) Gowans’ (1984: 241) definition of epistemological foundationalism. Two theses are essential to foundationalism:

- (1) Some justified beliefs are “self-justified”—justified independently of support from other beliefs.
- (2) All justified empirical beliefs that aren’t self-justified are justified by beliefs that are.

Two further theses are commonly associated with it:

- (3) Self-justified beliefs are certain.
- (4) Self-justified beliefs are about sensory experiences, not physical objects.

Lewis was a foundationalist, I argue, endorsing (1)–(4) consistently throughout *MWO* and *AKV*.

He claims we have infallibly warranted beliefs about sensory experiences that require no support

from objective empirical beliefs. Objective empirical justification derives entirely from these “apprehensions of the given.”

I should note, though, that Lewis doesn’t himself call apprehensions of the given *beliefs* or *judgments*, or *justified* or *knowledge*. That’s because he stipulates definitions of these terms different from Gowans’. As I’ll show in §5, he ties these terms to objectivity and possible error, while in (3) and (4), Gowans allows *justified beliefs* to be immune to error and about subjective phenomena. Once Lewis’ account is translated into Gowans’ language, it is clearly foundationalist, I’ll argue.

In §2, I explain Lewis’ account of “the given.” I endorse the *epistemic approach* concerning its function (which entails the foundationalist interpretation) but note two alternatives: the dominant *metaphysical approach* and Sachs’ *cognitive semantic approach*. In §3 I argue that only the epistemic approach accommodates Lewis’ deploying the given to answer the regress problem. Coherentist readings of Lewis’ epistemology are textually inadequate, while the foundationalist interpretation can explain how apprehensions of the given apparently secure objective warrant. In §4 I critique the non-epistemic approaches: the metaphysical approach is mistaken, while the cognitive semantic approach, though correct, presupposes the epistemic one. I accommodate apparent problem passages for my interpretation in §5 and explain my argument’s importance in §6.

## 2. “The Given”

*MWO*’s fundamental premise is that experience manifests contributions from two distinct sources: “the immediate data [...] of sense [...] presented or given to the mind, and a form, construction, or interpretation, which represents the activity of thought” (*MWO*: 38). These

immediate data are *the (sensuously) given* (*MWO*: 37). Lewis offers two “criteria of givenness”: its qualitative character and its independence of active thought. The second criterion is “definitive” (*MWO*: 66). For our “thick experience of the world of things” (*MWO*: 54) has qualitative character but, as conceptualized, exceeds the given, “that element [of experience] which [...] we do not create by thinking and cannot, in general, displace or alter” (*MWO*: 48).

For most adults, thick experience is introspectively immediate: “We do not see patches of color, but trees and houses; we hear, not indescribable sound, but voices and violins” (*ibid.*). While an infant perceiving a house for the first time cannot perceive it *as a house* but simply experiences various given qualities,<sup>1</sup> she gradually learns how momentary experiences of it relate to future possible ones: which actions she must perform, given an experience of the house’s front, to obtain an experience of its back. She learns how to conceptually interpret given experience, classifying it according to her interests, and subsequently deploys this ability unconsciously in perception. Subsequently, she does not infer worldly objects from sense-data but simply perceives them. There remains “something in the character of [the object] as a merely presented colligation of sense-qualities which is for [her] the clue to [its conceptual] classification” (*MWO*: 49); still, this given element of experience isn’t introspectively accessible, but co-mingled with interpretive dispositions.

Thus the given is an “abstraction,” never discovered in isolation (*MWO*: 66). Thick experience “constitutes the datum for philosophic reflection” (*MWO*: 54). But it isn’t philosophically ultimate: for Lewis, “the acceptance of such preanalytic data as an ultimate epistemological category would, if really adhered to, put an end to all worthwhile investigation of the nature of knowledge” (*MWO*: 54). The given plays a necessary role in making thought and knowledge possible, rendering it philosophically fundamental. Clearly Lewis thinks this role

involves *constraining* thought: “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” (*MWO*: 38f.). But what specific constraints does it impose?

I distinguish three approaches to this question. I endorse the *epistemic approach*, on which the given constrains thought by providing foundational justification for objective empirical beliefs, warranting some as against others. I defend the epistemic approach exegetically in §3. For now, note that it requires interpreting Lewis as a foundationalist:<sup>2</sup> the given can epistemically constrain thought only if apprehensions of it are warranted, and (dis)confirm objective empirical beliefs, independently of support by such beliefs. Non-foundationalist interpreters require an alternative approach. But this might seem necessary anyway for two reasons. First, some of Lewis’ statements apparently preclude the given’s having epistemic import. It is an “ineffable” “chaos” (*MWO*: 53, 230); apprehensions of it are “not knowledge”—indeed, “not judgment[s]” (*MWO*: 125). In §5, I offer foundationalism-friendly interpretations of these passages. But initially, they apparently contradict the epistemic approach. Second, note that Lewis doesn’t explain his claim that, without the given, knowledge would be arbitrary in explicitly epistemic terms, but in *semantic* and *metaphysical* terms: he says that, without the given, knowledge would *lack content* and would have nothing to *be true to*. Non-foundationalist readers have interpreted its function in both ways.

On the *metaphysical approach*, given experience is our contact with mind-independent objects, to which objects knowledge aims to be true. Lewis does describe apprehensions of the given as “our confrontation with reality” (*MWO*: 279, 310), and Hookway naturally concludes that the given “captures something [...] fully mind-independent [...] vindicating realism” (2008: 282). Gowans (1989: 574), Dayton (1995: 259), and Misak (2013: 184) similarly endorse the

metaphysical approach. Sachs, however, proposes a *cognitive semantic approach*.<sup>3</sup> Cognitive semantics identifies “the minimally necessary conditions that must be satisfied in order for an utterance (spoken or written) to count as an assertion, as expressing a thought or judgment, at all” (Sachs 2014: 2). Sachs interprets the given’s function as grounding meaning, preventing our beliefs from being *contentless*, since “unless I can associate a term with some range of sensations and images, it will have no empirical content for me” (ibid.: 25f.). Apparently metaphysically neutral, Sachs’ approach is distinct from the metaphysical one, but likewise interprets Lewis’ initial description of the given’s function plausibly.

I evaluate these non-epistemic approaches in §4. First, in §3, I argue that Lewis’ response to the regress problem strongly supports the epistemic approach.

### 3. The Epistemic Function of the Given

Lewis urges us to *take skepticism seriously*.<sup>4</sup> This attracted him to Kant:

[Kant] had [...] followed scepticism to its inevitable last stage, and laid his foundations where they could not be disturbed. I was then, and have continued to be, impatient of those who seem not to face the sceptical doubt seriously. (*CP*: 3f. [1930]).

Lewis isn’t concerned to vindicate certainty regarding our ordinary beliefs, but only their probability (*MWO*: 323; *AKV*: 259). But he refuses to dismiss skepticism about this deeper issue.

It is, he argues in “The Given Element in Empirical Knowledge” (GEK; 1952), “nonsense to hold [...] that] any empirical judgment is as good as any other—because none is warranted” (330). Skepticism threatens the rationality of every commitment, theoretical or practical. If we take *anything* seriously, we must take skepticism seriously (*AKV*: 228).

Lewis’ response to skepticism, I argue in §3.1, motivates foundationalist interpretations of him. §3.2 argues against coherentist interpretations. If sound, these arguments critically

undermine any non-foundationalist reading of Lewis stronger than Gowans' 1989 reading (which I treat in §4). §3.3 explains *how* Lewis thinks the given can justify objective empirical beliefs.

### 3.1. Lewis' Foundationalism

Just after *MWO*'s publication, we find Lewis arguing that empirical knowledge must be grounded in "given data of sense" (*CP*: 71 [1930]). For Lewis, objective empirical beliefs are conceptual interpretations of the given, linking present given experience to future possible experiences based on our possible actions.<sup>5</sup> And a given "presentation [...] must serve as clue to" its interpretation: given sense data "constitute such ground as we may have that, in this circumstance [...], a particular mode of action will yield a predictable result" (*ibid.*). Such data constitute, then, our sole ultimate grounds for objective empirical beliefs. As he contends in *GEK*: "in order that [an empirical] belief have *validity*, that which functions as the ground of it must be present and given" (330). The given grounds empirical justification.

Lewis' argument for this foundationalist stance is that only thus is empirical justification possible at all. For Lewis, a belief is "certain" iff infallibly warranted: certainty requires decisive verification that renders the belief invulnerable to future disconfirmation. But objective empirical beliefs are only ever probable (*AKV*: 180). To determine how probable some such belief is, I must examine its grounds, considering their independent probability and how probable they render it. If they're themselves certain, I can assign the initial belief a definite probability. But if not, I must first examine *their* grounds. An infinite regress looms, which would prevent any objective empirical belief's having any assignable probability at all.<sup>6</sup>

We could avoid the regress in three ways. First, we might assign some beliefs primitive probabilities.<sup>7</sup> But this seems ad hoc: can we evade skepticism simply by insisting that some

beliefs *just are* justified, without further explanation? Second, we might endorse coherentism, suggesting that antecedently unwarranted beliefs can derive justification simply from their mutual support. But Lewis rejects this option (see §3.2). Instead he posits grounds for belief that are certain; since objective beliefs are never certain, these must be given experiences. Lewis summarizes:

If anything is to be probable, something must be certain. The data which eventually support a genuine probability, must themselves be certainties. We do have such absolute certainties, in the sense data initiating [and confirming] belief [...] (*AKV*: 186).

Apprehensions of the given are self-satisfied: making claims only about present experiences, they can't be disconfirmed by future ones, and so can be certain. I consider *how* they can warrant objective beliefs in §3.3. But clearly Lewis thinks them foundational for empirical justification:

Empirical truth cannot be known except, finally, through presentations of sense. [...] Our empirical knowledge rises as a structure of enormous complexity, most parts of which are stabilized in measure by their mutual support,<sup>8</sup> but all of which rest, at bottom, on direct findings of sense. Unless there should be some statements, or rather something apprehensible and statable, whose truth is determined by given experience and is not determinable in any other way, there would be no non-analytic affirmation whose truth could be determined at all, and no such thing as empirical knowledge. (*AKV*: 171f.).

Only because given experience makes apprehensions of it true can we verify or know empirical statements. Such apprehensions are foundational empirical warrants.

Could non-foundationalist interpreters, following Gowans (1984) and Westphal, hold that Lewis opposed foundationalism throughout *MWO*, endorsing it only later? One obstacle is that Lewis denied changing his mind in an autobiographical essay: “there is nothing in [*MWO*] which I would now recant.” Between *MWO* and *AKV* his epistemology changed only in “strategy of exposition” (namely, introducing *expressive language*, which refers to the given as such) (A: 17). Lewis’ self-assessment might be mistaken, but it carries weight.



Moreover, Lewis already endorses *AKV*'s foundationalism in *MWO*'s final three chapters. In a passage I discuss in §3.3, he claims empirical warrant derives from infallible apprehensions of given experience's qualitative character (*MWO*: 289–92). Later he raises the very worry voiced in *AKV*—“if all empirical truth [...] is only probable, then there can be no genuine knowledge of nature at all; [...] for probability itself must rest upon some antecedent certainty” (*MWO*: 309)—and appeals to “an absolute certainty of the empirical [...]—the immediate apprehension of the given.” Such apprehension is “requisite to the distinction of particular empirical truths from falsehood” and “functions as an [Archimedean point] for the knowledge of nature” (*MWO*: 310). Later, discussing the regress problem, Lewis contends: “Unless this backward-leading chain [of probable grounds] comes to rest finally in certainty, no probability-judgment can be valid at all” (*MWO*: 328f.). Empirical knowledge requires “ultimate premises” that are certain: “actual given data for the individual who makes the judgment,” “given appearances, having a specific and later recognizable character” (*MWO*: 329, 335). Thus “we have in the immediate awareness of the given that certainty which becomes the basis of a probable knowledge of the particular object or the occurrence of an objective property” (*MWO*: 335f.). Lewis already claims objective empirical knowledge can be warranted only fallibly—and thus, ultimately, only by empirical certainties: apprehensions of the given. The textual evidence contravenes unqualified non-foundationalist readings even of *MWO*.

### 3.2. *Lewis' Coherentism?*

Non-foundationalist interpreters must accommodate the texts canvassed in §3.1. Surprisingly, most discuss them only briefly, ignoring Lewis' treatment of the regress problem altogether. They interpret Lewis as “consistently [endorsing] epistemological coherentism” (Sachs 2014:

34), holding that only conceptually interpreted “thick [...] experience, not the thin given, can [...] justify beliefs” (Misak 2013: 183). Dayton agrees that, for Lewis: “The network of concepts by which the given is interpreted does *all* the work of *justifying* knowledge” (1995: 270), since an apprehension of the given is “only a kind of inarticulate pointing. It carries no cognitive content at all and thus by itself is justificationaly trivial” (ibid.: 274). Such apprehensions are justificatory only “in an existential sense: their *occurrence*, in the context of a set of inductively established concepts to interpret them, makes empirical knowledge possible.” As I learn which sorts of experiences typically follow which others, a presentation of a particular type will *cause* me to conceptually classify it. This fallible conceptual interpretation admits of justification—but only by other fallible conceptual interpretations. Apprehensions of the given acquire epistemic import only once “*interpreted as a sign of experience to come* by inductively established concepts in conjunction with other beliefs,” which interpretation renders them “neither self-justified nor certain” (ibid.: 274, 271). On this reading, Lewis adopts “an *experientially grounded*, pragmatic, coherentist theory of justification” (ibid.: 278)—“experientially grounded” in recognizing that “unless we had experience none of our empirical beliefs [...] could have any justification whatsoever” (ibid.), but coherentist in denying that given experience justifies independently of conceptual interpretation.

This coherentist reading is textually inadequate. Consider first texts discussed in §3.1. Lewis calls “the immediate awareness of the given that certainty which becomes the basis” of empirical knowledge (*MWO*: 335f.). Discussing empirical justification, he says that all empirical knowledge “rest[s], at bottom, on direct findings of sense,” mental contents “whose truth is determined by given experience and is not determinable in any other way” (*AKV*: 171). And he says that “in order that [an objective perceptual] belief have *validity*, that which functions as the

ground of it must be present and given” (GEK: 330). Lewis thinks given experience immediately yields *certainty* about empirical *truths*, which ground objective empirical beliefs’ *validity*. But on the coherentist reading, given experience yields no cognitions of truths; it grounds only objective beliefs’ existence, not their validity. The coherentist reading thus cannot accommodate these passages.

Further, it renders Lewis’ solution to the regress problem unintelligible. Lewis repeatedly insists that “If anything is to be probable, something must be certain” (*AKV*: 186; cf. *MWO*: 309f., 328f.), but that objective empirical beliefs cannot be certain (*MWO*: 279ff.; *AKV*: 180). So, if Lewis held that one conceptual interpretation (i.e. objective empirical belief) can be justified only by another, he would be committed to skepticism about empirical justification. But Lewis clearly loathed skepticism. To avoid it, he *answers* the regress problem, appealing to empirical certainties. The coherentist reading ignores this.

This reading also founders on Lewis’ criticisms of coherentism in *AKV* and *GEK*. In *AKV*, immediately after answering the regress problem, Lewis considers an alternative coherentist solution. He objects that, although mutual support may further justify two antecedently probable propositions, “objective judgments *none* of which could acquire probability by direct confirmations in experience, would gain no support by leaning up against one another in the fashion of the ‘coherence theory of truth’. No empirical statement can become credible without a reference to experience” (*AKV*: 187). Lewis’ framing notwithstanding, the objection applies primarily to coherentism about *justification*, not truth: Lewis denies that mutual support suffices for *credibility*. He later concludes: “However important [mutual support is] in the building up of our structure of empirical beliefs, the foundation stones which must support the whole edifice are still those items of truth which are disclosed in direct experience” (*AKV*:

353). *Pace* the coherentist reading, given experience supports empirical beliefs not only *causally*, but by disclosing *truths* that render them *probable*.

In GEK, against Reichenbach's position that mutual support between fallible empirical beliefs suffices to justify them, Lewis replies:

[this] probabilistic conception strikes me as supposing that if enough probabilities can be got to lean against one another they can all be made to stand up. I suggest that, on the contrary, unless some of them can stand alone, they will all fall flat. If no nonanalytic statement is categorically assertable, without probability qualification, then I think the whole system of such could provide no better assurance of anything in it than that which attaches to the contents of a well-written novel. I see no hope for such a coherence theory which repudiates data of experience which are simply given [...] (GEK: 328).

*Pace* Misak (2013: 184) and Dayton (1995: 278), clearly Lewis holds here not simply that given experience is a causal ground of objective empirical beliefs, but that it must yield *categorically assertible data*, lest no such belief be even probable. Lewis thinks any "coherence theory" that rejects such "simply given" data hopeless.

### 3.3. How Given Experiences Justify Objective Beliefs

The coherentist reading seemed plausible partly owing to problem passages for the foundationalist reading (see §5), but also because it's initially unclear how apprehensions of the given *could* carry epistemic import. As subjective and self-satisfied, how can they warrant claims about objective reality?

The answer lies in Lewis' claim that objective empirical statements are conceptual interpretations of the given, "assert[ing] a certain regularity or predictable interconnection between experiences" (*MWO*: 319). The knowledge required to grasp an empirical concept like *<round>* is

expressible by some set of propositions of the form: If this is round, then condition *A* being provided, empirical eventuality *M* will accrue. If this is round, then condition *B*

being provided, empirical eventuality *N* will accrue. And so on. The totality of the complex “then” classes expresses the complete and a priori meaning of the concept “round” in denotation. (*MWO*: 288f.).<sup>9</sup>

The “conditions” are possible actions that test the claim experimentally, while “empirical eventualities” are possible presentations. “This is round,” then, asserts an (infinite) conjunction of predictions of possible presentations resulting from possible actions. In *AKV*, he would call these statements that predict “something taken to be verifiable by some test which involves a way of acting” *terminating judgments* (*AKV*: 184).

Justified assertion of “This object is round” thus requires an *a priori* grasp of <round>—of which sorts of experiences would (probably) result, were it round—but also knowledge that “This present given is such that further experience (probably) *will be*” of those sorts (*MWO*: 289). And we can know *that* only “by a generalization from previous experience: ‘Things which look as this does, under conditions like the present, usually turn out to satisfy the criteria of roundness in further experience.’” The subject of this statement “is not the *object* presented [...] but the *presentation itself*” (*MWO*: 290), so that: “The apprehension of objects, objective events, and properties, is built upon and presumes as valid antecedent generalizations, in terms of direct experience, which are the only basis of our terminating judgments” (*AKV*: 261). Just like a terminating judgment, such a generalization, though about subjective experience, is nevertheless an “empirical belief, which [...] is] only a probability” (*AKV*: 327). Were these generalizations the ultimate warrants for objective beliefs, fallible beliefs would indeed be warranted only by mutual support, vindicating the coherentist reading.

Instead Lewis maintains that such generalizations’ credibility must itself first be assured (*AKV*: 328). They, too, must be “rooted in immediate experience”:

The first apprehension [...] is of given appearances, having a specific and later recognizable character, and of their continuity with further and equally specific

experience. Coincidence of such progressions in immediacy give rise to habits of action, which may become explicit in generalizations of the form “What appears like this will turn out thus and so.” Granted that such coincidence in experience can establish probability for the future, we have in the immediate awareness of the given that certainty which becomes the basis of a probable knowledge of the particular object or the occurrence of an objective property. (*MWO*: 335f.).

The generalizations about experience that support objective empirical knowledge (of the form “What appears like this will (probably) turn out thus-and-so”) are themselves supported by grounds of two prior sorts: first, apprehensions of the specific qualitative character of present appearance, and second, memories of the appearances that followed *past* appearances of that character.

Concerning the first, Lewis insists that “the immediate comparison of the [presently] given with a memory image” and predication of sameness between them is *not a conceptual interpretation*: “like the awareness of a single presented quale, such comparison is immediate and indubitable; verification would have no meaning with respect to it” (*MWO*: 125). (A *quale*—pl. *qualia*—is a repeatable character within given experience; qualia are “directly intuited, given, and [are] not the subject of any possible error because [they are] purely subjective” [*MWO*: 121].) Mere qualitative classification doesn’t introduce fallibility into our ultimate warrants; rather, “the recognized qualitative character of the given presentation is one” of the “two elements” of empirical knowledge “concerning which we have certainty” (*MWO*: 292).<sup>10</sup>

Still, our qualitative classification of present given experience cannot by itself warrant any objective belief: we need past apprehensions indicating “what empirical eventualities are likely to be connected with any given type of experience” (*MWO*: 290). But past experience is no longer infallibly given; are our ultimate warrants for objective empirical beliefs therefore uncertain? No, because “something is absolutely given—the present recollection” (*MWO*: 337).

My experiences of quale *G* having followed quale *F* are immediately given *now*. Lewis calls these *mnemic presentations*: “given presentations having the qualitative character of memory” (*AKV*: 356, 335). Apprehensions of mnemic presentations’ qualitative characters—like apprehensions of ordinary given presentations—are certain. So if, as Lewis insisted, mnemic presentations constitute *prima facie* warrant to believe that past given experience indeed had the characters they represent,<sup>11</sup> then such a belief about past experience, though not itself certain, is justified by foundational warrants that are.

For Lewis, then, memory-experiences of type *F* appearances (typically) followed by type *G* appearances are infallibly self-justified warrants that, in turn, fallibly warrant the belief that type *F* appearances (generally) were followed by type *G* ones. Consequently, when I infallibly apprehend a type *F* quale in present given experience, I’m justified in believing the terminating judgment that this appearance (probably) *will be* followed by a type *G* one via induction—at least, given induction’s reliability. Lewis defended induction’s reliability in different ways,<sup>12</sup> but he always thought it defensible somehow, and so thought terminating judgments justifiable. Since he analyzes objective empirical beliefs as conjunctions of terminating judgments, this constitutes warrant for objective empirical beliefs, too.

Therefore, although an apprehension of the given cannot itself warrant any objective empirical belief, it isn’t epistemically inert. Such apprehensions are, with memory-experiences, the empirical certainties Lewis took to constitute foundational empirical warrants.

#### 4. Non-Epistemic Approaches to the Given

§3 established the given’s epistemic function, and thus Lewis’ foundationalism, as early as *MWO*, ch. IX. But in §2, we noted two non-epistemic approaches to the given’s function: the

dominant metaphysical approach and Sachs' cognitive semantic approach. I shall now argue that neither is a viable alternative. The metaphysical approach is mistaken, since Lewis rejects metaphysical realism. And though the given does serve a cognitive semantic function, this actually presupposes its epistemic function.

The metaphysical approach stresses Lewis' claim that given experience is "our confrontation with reality" (*MWO*: 279, 310), giving knowledge something "which it must be true to" (*MWO*: 39). It takes the given to be caused by mind-independent reality, enabling knowledge to be true to reality and underpinning metaphysical realism. However, Lewis denies that "the norm of knowledge is some antecedent reality" (*CP*: 67 [1930]; cf. *MWO*: 381), contending that

the validity of understanding does not concern the relation between experience and what is usually meant by "the independent object"; it concerns the relation between this experience and *other experiences* which we seek to anticipate with this as a clue. In Berkeley's language, this experience is "sign of" other experience; it may be such [...] even if there be no "independent reality" to copy. (*MWO*: 165).

Knowledge's validity doesn't depend on its relation to mind-independent reality. Indeed, Lewis contends, talk of experience-independent reality is *meaningless*: "A predication of reality to what transcends experience completely and in every sense, [...] is nonsense" (*MWO*: 32; cf. *CP*: 267 [1934]). Instead, whatever "verifiable differences in experience" objects make "constitute what it means [for them] to be real": for Lewis, an objectively real entity is simply "a stability or uniformity of appearance which can be recovered by certain actions of my own" (*MWO*: 32, 139). Reality does not transcend experience, causing it and securing thought's objectivity, as the metaphysical approach suggests.

How does the given relate to truth and reality, then? For Lewis, that to which knowledge must be true is simply *the given itself*. Knowledge "proceeds from something given toward



something else. When it finds that something else, the perception is verified” (*MWO*: 162). A belief is true iff the diachronic pattern it predicts between given appearances is verifiable; knowledge is true to the given and nothing more (see *AKV*: 15). Moreover, the given’s independence of active thought *constitutes* reality’s mind-independence, our “confrontation with reality.” For Lewis, the independence of reality is just “its independence of the knowing mind”—of our conceptual activity. This is secured by “the *givenness* of the given”: thinking cannot alter actual given experience, and while future possible experience depends on our actions, which presentations will result from some action doesn’t depend on our beliefs about them (*MWO*: 193). *This is all there is* to reality’s mind-independence. Far from securing metaphysical realism, Lewis’ view that the given constitutes our confrontation with reality reveals “an idealist presumption which leads him to posit the given as an element within consciousness that can constitute ‘the independence of reality’” (Baldwin 2007: 182).<sup>13</sup>

On the cognitive semantic approach, the given prevents knowledge from being *contentless*, securing thought’s representational purport. This is correct: Lewis thinks “meaning altogether is derivative from the sensuous criteria of recognition” (*AKV*: 141), so that “unless I can associate a term with some range of sensations and images, it will have no empirical content for me” (Sachs 2014: 25f.). He is a verificationist, requiring that, for any meaningful proposition, “one can specify those empirical items which would [...] constitute the verification of the proposition” (*CP*: 258 [1934]; cf. 90 [1938]). For: “If there are no such empirical items which would be decisive, then your concept is *not* a concept, but a verbalism” (*CP*: 79 [1930]). If an objective empirical statement could not be “explicated in a form that mentions what is [...] given,” then, it “could not be verified by any possible sense-presentation; it would be

*meaningless*” (Sachs 2014: 33). The given enables (in principle) decisive verification or falsification of our statements, and so is fundamental to Lewis’ account of objective content.

To perform this function, however, Lewis thinks the given must have autonomous epistemic import—the capacity, by itself, to verify or falsify statements. As he argues in an unpublished paper, “Verification and the Types of Truth”: “if empirical truth did not somehow come down to experience in the end, then [...] the phrase ‘empirical truth’ [would be] a terrible misnomer” (*CP*: 289 [1936]; cf. *AKV*: 135). Yet: “We cannot claim, with hope of justification, that a verification consists in finding something true or false which could be stated as an objective character of an objective thing” (*ibid.*). If only thick experience can verify empirical claims, then verification yields only further objective empirical propositions. But: “Such objective propositions, one and all, turn out to involve predictions, to be further testable, and hence theoretically no more than probabilities” (*ibid.*). So, I cannot decisively verify the original claim before verifying the further one—and so on *ad infinitum*. But then I cannot confirm the original claim *at all*: since no objective statement has antecedent, determinate probability, none can confirm further statements. Empirical confirmation—and so empirical content—are impossible.

By now Lewis’ solution is easily anticipated:

what we absolutely find true, in the verifying experience, is not such assertions of objective properties, but is just that something looks or sounds or feels in such and such a determinate fashion. When we phrase ourselves with complete accuracy, what we shall state, as our absolute truths, will be just such formulations of the content of our given experience. And it is on such formulations of the given that the whole pyramid of our more and less probable hypotheses will rest [...] (*ibid.*: 290f.).

For Lewis, only because given experience plays an independent epistemic role, enabling us to “absolutely find true” apprehensions of it, can experience confirm objective statements at all, securing their contentfulness. The cognitive semantic approach is correct, then, but not an

alternative to the epistemic one. Sachs rightly recognizes that Lewis' commitment to the given rests on cognitive semantic considerations, but is mistaken in concluding that it is “fundamentally *semantic* rather than *epistemic*” (2014: 34); rather, it is semantic *precisely through* being epistemic. For Lewis as for Quine (1969: 89), epistemology and semantics coalesce: “epistemology [is centered] on evidence, and meaning [is centered] on verification; and evidence is verification.”

We can finally address Gowans' (1989) interpretation of *MWO* as divided, with its early chapters opposing foundationalism but its later chapters affirming it. Since its early chapters don't directly concern epistemological topics, our discussion of Lewis' epistemology didn't undermine Gowans' reading. But its early chapters treat cognitive semantics: if Lewis endorses verificationism there, he will thereby accord the given epistemic import. Indeed, in chapter V, he maintains: “If concepts are to be articulate and meaningful, then the application of them must be something verifiable” (*MWO*: 130). A conceptual interpretation is correct iff, “starting from the given experience and proceeding in certain ways, we reach other experience which is predictable” (*MWO*: 133). But then this further experience be capable of (dis)confirming predictions. And Lewis ascribes this epistemic function specifically to the given, which, he thinks, is

not formless in the sense that [the] qualitative and ineffable character of it is indifferent for knowledge. [...] [T]he implicitly predicted relationships [between experiences], comprised in the conceptual interpretation of what is presented, must be such that further possible experience could verify or fail to verify them. Without the correlation of concept and qualia, no experience could verify or fail to verify anything. My presently given experience leads me to say that if I should move ten feet to the left I should reach the wall. If the visual presentation interpreted as “wall” were not identifiable by its sensory qualities, or if stepping and contact did not have this identifiable qualitative specificity, then my statement could have no meaning. (*MWO*: 143f.; cf. Moser 1988: 203n11).

Future experience can verify or falsify conceptual interpretations only if *given* experience carries epistemic import. My conceptual interpretation “This is a wall” is analyzable as a conjunction of terminating judgments like “if I move ten feet to the left, I will reach the wall.” But this latter statement would not be meaningful if I couldn’t definitively identify both the action and predicted presentation by reference to *qualia*. In holding that qualia verify or falsify conceptual interpretations, Lewis accords given experience an epistemic function.

One leading alternative to the epistemic approach is mistaken. The other presupposes the epistemic approach, showing that even *MWO*’s early, non-epistemological chapters endorse foundationalism. These results strongly motivate the consistent foundationalist interpretation of Lewis over all its competitors—provided that a plausible explanation of the problem passages noted in §2 is available. I offer one in §5.

### 5. Problem Passages

*MWO* is a somewhat unwieldy book. As Gowans remarks, no interpretation can accommodate all its “ambiguities” concerning the given (1984: 249), but only its central claims. Three key claims about the given early in *MWO* chiefly imperil the foundationalist interpretation.<sup>14</sup> First, Lewis calls the given a “chaos” upon which the mind must “impose [...] some kind of stable order” (*MWO*: 230), suggesting it lacks determinate structure before conceptual interpretation. But then it couldn’t normatively constrain its interpretation in the way the foundationalist reading claims. Second, Lewis claims: “There are no concepts of immediate qualia as such” (*MWO*: 128). Awareness of qualia is “not judgment” and “not knowledge” (*MWO*: 125). But then how can given experience warrant objective empirical beliefs? Finally, Lewis calls the given “ineffable”

(*MWO*: 53, 124, 143). But can incommunicable experiences be epistemologically significant? These three claims threaten to undermine the foundationalist reading of *MWO*.

In this section I offer a competing reading of these passages on which they're consistent with Lewis' foundationalism. I won't claim so much as that my foundationalist reading of them is more natural than the non-foundationalist one, taking them in isolation. But I do think it sufficiently well-motivated to enable the unified foundationalist interpretation of Lewis to remain the most plausible interpretation overall, absent any plausible non-foundationalist reading of the textual evidence marshaled in §§3–4.

First, Lewis calls the given a “chaos,” a “blooming, buzzing confusion” (*CP*: 250 [1926]). But this doesn't mean the given lacks *all* structure pre-conceptualization. Lewis' subsequent remark that the mind, responding to the chaotic given, “seeks to discover within or impose upon [it] some kind of stable order, through which distinguishable items may become the signs of future possibilities” (*MWO*: 230) entails that distinguishable items are already present within given experience. Again: “Experience, when it comes, contains within it just those disjunctions which, when they are made explicit by our attention, mark the boundaries of events, ‘experiences,’ and things” (*MWO*: 59). The given already contains synchronic differentiation and so can constrain conceptual interpretation. The absent structure imposed by conceptual interpretation is clear from Lewis' stipulation that “the object of the concept must always have a time-span which extends beyond the specious present; this is essential to the cognitive significance of concepts. The qualia of sense as something given do not [...] have such temporal spread” (*MWO*: 60f.; cf. 130f.). The given is chaotic in that no appearance intrinsically signifies particular future appearances. Concepts solve this problem, “impos[ing] upon experience certain patterns of temporal relationships, a certain order, which makes one item significant of others”

(*CP*: 250 [1926]). We need concepts to grasp motivated, diachronic connections between given experiences. Still, present given experience is qualitatively determinate, and so can (dis)confirm predictions about it.

Second, Lewis denies that we have concepts of qualia or that apprehensions of them constitute judgments or knowledge.<sup>15</sup> But Lewis repeatedly insists that his claims here are purely *stipulative*:

At this point it would be very easy to fall into controversy about the use of language which above all things I wish to avoid. Whether one should say that there must be concepts of qualia because they are recognized, or no concepts of qualia because they are ineffable; whether the immediate apprehension of qualia should be called “knowledge” because of its function in the cognition of objects, or should not be called “knowledge” because it neither needs nor can have any verification; whether this direct awareness should be merely so designated or should be termed a “judgment”—all this has to do only with the meaning of the terms “concept,” “knowledge,” “judgment.” What I wish to point out is the real and important distinction between qualia and the immediate awareness of them on the one hand and the properties of objects and our knowledge of them on the other. (*MWO*: 123f.; cf. 125, 275, & *AKV*: 30).

Lewis reserves “judgment” and “knowledge” for that “which is verifiable and has a significant opposite ‘error’” (*MWO*: 275), stipulating that what concepts denote “must have a temporal spread” (*MWO*: 130). For: “If the denotation of any concept were an immediately apprehensible quale or complex of such, then the ascription of this concept when such qualia were presented could not conceivably be in error” (*MWO*: 131). Of course, apprehensions of qualia are immediate, admitting no possible error, and thus not “knowledge in the sense that there could be mistake about [them]” (*AKV*: 30). But we shouldn’t infer, from their failure to satisfy this stipulation, that Lewis sees them as epistemically inert. Rather, he insists, his terminological decision regarding “knowledge” must not be allowed “to exclude from consideration any fact of cognition,” specifically including apprehensions of given sense data. He thinks “the content of

immediate awareness must be recognized as pertinent to knowledge, whether it be regarded as included in knowledge or not” (*AKV*: 29f., 25).

How could a state that isn't knowledge be epistemically “pertinent” to a state that is? Well, given Lewis' stipulation concerning “knowledge,” this will occur provided only that an *infallibly* warranted cognitive state epistemically supports a merely *fallibly* warranted one. And why shouldn't that be possible? Moreover, recall that Lewis analyzes contents of states of the latter type as conditional predictions of contents of states of the former type. This makes it straightforward for “immediately given facts of sense”<sup>16</sup> to bear on the truth-values of objective empirical statements, and so for apprehensions of such facts to (dis)confirm objective empirical beliefs. Thus apprehensions of the given can found Lewis' verificationism and enable solving the regress problem precisely because they aren't “knowledge” in Lewis' sense. They constitute that “absolute certainty of the empirical” that “is requisite to the distinction of particular empirical truths from falsehood” and “plays its indispensable part in any verification” (*MWO*: 310).<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Lewis sometimes calls the given ineffable. But he vacillated about this both in *MWO* and afterward. Sometimes he suggests that immediate awareness is “inarticulate” without “the relational element which conception introduces” (*MWO*: 276), and so that “The use of predication is completely pre-empted to the conveying of the objective, and there is no language whatever, unless of primitive cries, which expresses awareness of the given as such” (*MWO*: 278f.). It perhaps expresses Lewis' uncertainty regarding the premise that he nevertheless insists we can make “a direct report of the momentarily given” via locutions like “looks like,” “feels like,” etc., which report may be “approximately successful”—if *only* ever approximately (*MWO*: 274f., 278). He never resolved this ambivalence: even in *AKV*, where “expressive language” is

central to his account, he concedes that formulations of given experience are likely “impossible to state in ordinary language” (*AKV*: 182).

Regardless, Lewis always thought experience’s relation to language an “inessential consideration for the analysis of knowledge” (*AKV*: 182). In *MWO*, immediately after suggesting that no language expresses awareness of the given, he maintains that this awareness nevertheless “represents an essential element in knowledge—that which distinguishes truth from lies” (*MWO*: 279)—indeed, that by which we verify truths and falsify lies (*MWO*: 310). Even if apprehensions of the given “should not be clearly expressible in language, they would still be the absolutely essential bases of all empirical knowledge” (*AKV*: 182). For: “Without such apprehensions of direct and indubitable content of experience, there could be no basis for any empirical judgment, and no verification of one” (*ibid.*; cf. *GEK*: 327). Ineffable or not, the given remains foundational to Lewis’ cognitive semantics and epistemology.

## **6. Conclusion**

The unified foundationalist interpretation should be preferred because it more adequately accommodates countervailing textual evidence than non-foundationalist interpretations. Problem passages for the foundationalist interpretation initially appear daunting. If they could be countered only by texts that support it, an impasse would result. But we’ve identified independently motivated, foundationalism-friendly readings of them, softening their blow. Contrariwise, the textual evidence I’ve marshaled presents apparently insuperable difficulties for non-foundationalist interpretations, undermining the metaphysical approach and subsuming the cognitive semantic into the epistemic. Meanwhile, no adequate non-foundationalist treatment of Lewis’ claim that only empirical certainties—apprehensions of the given—can found fallible



empirical warrants has been advanced. (It is hard to imagine how one might go.) Non-foundationalist readers might most plausibly retreat to Gowans' 1989 interpretation, attempting to accommodate *MWO*'s cognitive semantics without according qualia epistemic import. I doubt this attempt can succeed, but if my argument establishes even that only Gowans' heavily-qualified non-foundationalist reading is viable, it remains important, since every novel interpretation of Lewis' epistemology since 1990 defends a stronger non-foundationalist position.

Is my conclusion of more than historical importance? I certainly don't think we should endorse Lewis' accounts of meaning and justification. Not that they lack appeal altogether: Lewis' position is natural given his deeply-felt need to demonstrate our beliefs' and actions' rationality to the skeptic's satisfaction. But it cannot ultimately deliver. As Chisholm (1948) shows, even it ultimately relies on assumptions it cannot adequately defend. And Lewis struggles mightily to account for central domains of knowledge, especially concerning other minds.<sup>18</sup> So, his writings, properly interpreted, caution us against taking skepticism so seriously. Some may think this moral obvious, but it bears reiterating.

Another, more novel upshot concerns pragmatism's historical and substantive framing. Historically, against earlier treatments of pragmatism as "eclipsed" by logical empiricism, contemporary histories emphasize its continuities with, and influence on, late 20<sup>th</sup>-century analytic philosophy via Quine and Sellars.<sup>19</sup> Substantively, against the received view of pragmatism as globally anti-realist, recent treatments emphasize its realist elements, including its conception of experience as indicating mind-independent reality (Misak 2013: 183f.; Westphal 2017: 193). Both correctives are valuable, but we shouldn't overstate them. Pragmatism contains anti-realist elements, too, and each major pragmatist is interesting largely for how they navigate

this tension. Lewis was the classical pragmatist most worried by skepticism, and so who most compromised realism for empiricism. Reading naturalistic realism as essential to pragmatism, or obscuring Lewis' differences with Quine or Sellars, prevents us from recognizing the commitments central to his philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Later Lewis suggests that "for any mind whatever, [the object] will be more than what is merely given if it be noted at all" (*MWO*: 50), but subsequently retracts this (*MWO*: 119, 136f.).

<sup>2</sup> It doesn't entail (3). But the given enables solving the regress problem only if apprehensions of it are certain. See §3.1.

<sup>3</sup> It's implicit in Hookway (2008: 274) and Westphal (2017: 178), but there intertwined with the metaphysical approach.

<sup>4</sup> See Flower and Murphey 1977: 893; Kuklick 1977: 535ff.

<sup>5</sup> Recall §2's house example and see §3.3.

<sup>6</sup> Reichenbach (1952) famously challenged Lewis here, but objected to the wrong argument, mistakenly assimilating Lewis' argument to one of Russell's (van Cleve 1977). Lewis thinks we need empirical certainties because otherwise the probabilities of the claims in question would be *indeterminate*, not *zero*.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis never considers this option (even in GEK, responding to Reichenbach and Goodman, who endorsed it).

<sup>8</sup> This clause establishes that the grounding relation in question in this passage is justificatory, not merely causal. (Mutual support helps to justify beliefs; it doesn't cause them.)

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<sup>9</sup> Pace Westphal (2017: 193), then, Lewis analyzed objective empirical statements as conjunctions of terminating judgments already in *MWO*.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis goes on to reject “knowledge by acquaintance”—but he means “a kind of certainty in our recognition of objects” and comments: “What we are directly ‘acquainted with’ are not objects but presentations” (ibid.). My interpretation accommodates that point. (Elsewhere he does apparently deny that qualitative classifications can be certain [*MWO*: 134]. Since this passage conflicts with his stated view both early [125] and late [289ff.] in *MWO*, we should dismiss it as an outlier.)

<sup>11</sup> Lewis thinks this thesis analytic (*AKV*: 334). Murphey (2005: 286ff.) critiques his argument persuasively.

<sup>12</sup> *MWO* (ch. XI) argues that induction’s reliability is an analytic truth. In *AKV*, without retracting *MWO*’s argument (xix, 362), Lewis stresses Reichenbach’s pragmatic justification instead (325).

<sup>13</sup> Might the metaphysical approach’s defenders simply abandon the realist dimension of the approach, confining themselves to claiming that the given’s function is causing thought (not justifying it)? This fallback position cannot explain the passages that initially motivated the metaphysical approach. That the given causally constrains thought does not explain how it constitutes our confrontation with reality, or how it gives knowledge something to be true to. It is only Lewis’ phenomenalist accounts of objects’ reality and of truth that fill these gaps. And the latter of these, at least, presupposes the given’s epistemic function in its conception of verification, as I’ll now argue in discussing the cognitive semantic approach. (Moreover, even if defenders of this merely causal approach could meet this objection, they would still need to

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explain away the positive evidence for the epistemic approach offered in §3.1.) Thanks to a reviewer for this journal for inviting me to consider this merely causal approach.

<sup>14</sup> Most non-foundationalist interpreters challenge foundationalist readings especially due to these three claims. Dayton appeals to the given's unstructured, non-conceptual, and unknowable character (1995: 267). Gowans (1984: §3; 1989: 581f.), Misak (2013: 181f.), and Sachs (2014: 24, 25, 27f., 31) do, too, and add its ineffability.

<sup>15</sup> I see no textual basis for thinking that apprehensions of the given lack truth-values (Gowans 1989: 581; Dayton 1995: 270; Sachs 2014: 33). Lewis claims apprehensions of the given are “absolutely [found] true, in the verifying experience” (*CP*: 290 [1936]; cf. *AKV*: 171, 183).

<sup>16</sup> See *AKV*: 327.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis does reject any “kind of cognitive apprehension [...] which terminates directly in the given” and that constitutes “the simplest and the basic type of knowledge,” from which all our “other knowledge rises [...] by some kind of complication” (*MWO*: 120). Gowans (1984: 245) and Sachs (2014: 28) think this strips apprehensions of the given of cognitive character. But Lewis is denying here only that ascriptions of *objective properties* can be definitively verified (compare *MWO*: 122 on “objective roundness”).

<sup>18</sup> In *MWO* (chs. III–IV, Appendix C), Lewis appreciates his view's difficulties regarding other minds. In later essays, he argued (unpersuasively) that his verificationism allows statements, and even knowledge, about other minds.

<sup>19</sup> Rorty (1979) and Misak read Quine and Sellars as pragmatists; Misak contends that Lewis' view “is also Quine's view” (2013: 196). But, we've seen, Lewis accepts the empiricist

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foundationalism Quine criticizes in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951). (The same is true regarding analyticity, but I cannot argue this here.)