A Pragmatic Conception of the *A Priori*
C. I. Lewis

*A priori* truth is necessary, or true before the fact (independent of experience) no matter what.

Two mistakes with the traditional concept of the *a priori*: the relation of necessary truth to mind, and the relation of the *a priori* to empirical fact.

Example of the *a priori* par excellence: laws of logic: e.g., the law of (non)contradiction which demands that something (sufficiently qualified and defined) cannot be both true AND false at the same time ($p \land \neg p = F$).

- This principle still perfectly – or consistently – applies to something that is true in one respect and false in another, logically represented as $p \land q$, where $q$ looks a lot like not $p$ exactly because it has NOT been sufficiently qualified and defined. Simply stated, what is being referred to as $\neg p$ in fact does not negate $p$ (hence, the schematization should be $p \land q$ instead of $p \land \neg p$).
- “The laws of logic are purely formal; they forbid nothing but what concerns the use of terms and the corresponding modes of classification and analysis” (p. 365).
- However, if we are to “discover what contradicts what we must always consult the character of experience” (p. 365).

Q: How are *a priori* truths independent of experience then?

A: Because “they impose not limitations whatever on it [experience]. They are legislative because they are addressed to ourselves – because definition, classification, and inference represent no operations of the objective world [as the empiricists thought], but only *our own categorical attitudes of mind* [my italics] (p. 366). These categories can change, however, and the dynamic nature of mind is counter to Kant.

Central Implication: The law of contradiction is necessarily true “no matter what” at this time and given the current “structure” of human consciousness (at $T_1$), but will not necessarily be true in the future (at $T_2$).

- “Newtonian” examples do not show how such a change would work (as I tried to establish in class) because we still “necessarily” think, and understand our experience in this way.
- For example, we still distinguish between truth and falsity, and so once we sufficiently qualify and define what it is we are talking about in pragmatic fact, we see we are just mistaken and that there is no real contradiction, or the “counterexamples” are not really counterexamples at all.

Lewis’s insight applied accurately: If human intelligence substantially evolved so that we no longer experienced things in the dichotomous fashion currently characteristic of mind, i.e., if we experienced things in terms of a perfect unity and not in terms of separation and distinctness, then the law of contradiction would lose its usefulness and so would become obsolete as an “uncompelled initiative of mind”. It would lose its evolutionary favor and would no longer be instrumental to how we understand our world.

- A less drastic example where this has already happened: logical disjunctions are no longer treated as only being exclusive ($A$ is either $p$ or $\neg p$, but not both).
- A way to make logical sense of how $A$ can be both $p$ & $\neg p$ is NOT by getting rid of the law of contradiction, however; it is to include the excluded middle by showing how $p$ is true in one sense and false in another. The effect is this: what is truly being schematized once the EM is taken into account is $p \land q$.
- Again, $q$ looks a lot like $\neg p$ but technically is not ($A$ is $q$ instead of $\neg p$); what is more, $q$ is to be distinguished from both $p$ & $\neg p$ (hence, is the excluded middle or “third term”).
- The point is: that such distinctions are made on pragmatic grounds and increase understanding!
- Consider my example that $A$ is changing and not changing. This looks like a contradiction but in reality can be conceived as a *paradox* or apparent contradiction that is resolved by finding the sense in which $A$ is changing and the sense in which it is not.
- This requires experience in order to determine “what contradicts what” and in this case, what in reality does not contradict $p$ but looks as if it does: it requires a practical determination that $\neg p$ or what is not changing about $A$ does not sufficiently capture the practical meaning of the term.
**Law of excluded middle** [From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia]

In logic, the **law of excluded middle**, or the principle of ** tertium non datur**, is formulated in traditional logic as "A is B or A is not B ". It is conventional in contemporary logical systems to give the same name to the axiom or theorem of propositional logic that typically takes the syntactic form \( p \lor \neg p \), where \( p \) is a propositional variable, "\( \lor \)" means "or", and "\( \neg \)" means "not".

For example, if P is

Joe is bald

then the **inclusive** disjunction

Joe is bald, or Joe is not bald

is true.

[Note: it is inclusive, depending on what you mean by “bald”!]

My commentary in light of Lewis's insight: the **exclusive** disjunction would read,

Joe is bald, or Joe is not bald

and it is not the case that Joe is both bald and not bald

is true.

Put most simply, the law if the excluded middle is this: every statement is either true or false and there is no in between (excluded middle). The point I am trying to make is that the inclusive disjunction allows for a statement to be both true and false and is still not contradictory, as we look for the different **senses** in which something is both true and false. [Recall that, according to Lewis, we exclude for simplicity's sake.]

Hence, my example above about something changing or not changing: BOTH CAN BE TRUE (that is, A is \( p \land \neg p \)) if we go to the **a posteriori** and to resolve the paradox. Again, what we find is that technically we have the claim that A is \( p \land q \) in re-classifying \( \neg p \) more definitively.

**Q:** But what of an even more drastic change in the **a priori**, is it possible for even the **most basic laws** to change, so that what “must be true not matter what” is not longer true?

**A:** Yes, when that a priori truth is no longer useful and so no longer acts as an uncompelled initiative of mind. [The example from mathematics is really difficult to grasp, since Lewis seems to give it a more static nature than it may deserve to be consistent with his overall view.]

Such radical change in consciousness is hard to imagine because we (can) only see things through the lens that we now have, but remember: a priori laws prevent nothing; “they are compatible with anything which happens or could conceivably happen in nature” (p. 367).

Mistake 1 is resolved concerning the relation of the a priori to mind: it is possible (and has happened) that what is true “by definition” at one time is no longer true at another, e.g., when our definitions have changed. [Counter to Kant]

Mistake 2, the connection to experience, is resolved because our definitions change, not willy-nilly or by fiat, but because they are no longer useful or productive in increasing our (progressive) understanding of, and interaction with the world. A priori truth remains the same or changes for pragmatic reasons only – ones that require the test of human experience. [Counter to the empiricists]