David Kellogg Lewis (1941–2001)

When news of the death of the American philosopher David Lewis reached us a deep cloud of sadness settled over the Australian philosophical community. From 1971, when I had organised for him to give Gavin David Young lectures at the University of Adelaide, he came to Australia nearly every year until a few months before his death. The year before he died he had not made his usual visit, but his devoted wife Steffi gave him a kidney and on his final visit a few months before he died he appeared to have much improved health. On his visits to Australia he was usually accompanied by Steffi, herself no mean philosopher, though her work as a financier kept her visits shorter. He attended our annual conferences and visited other universities, but was based mainly at the University of Melbourne where he liked to write in the Philosophy Department library. David and Steffi loved Australian Rules football and became members of the Essendon club.   Lewis liked Australia and its philosophers who in turn regarded him with reverence and affection.   He much valued his Honorary Fellowship in our Academy and his honorary DLitt from Melbourne.   He was Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and an honorary LittD of Cambridge. There were many philosophers who regarded him as the best philosopher of his generation and one critic placed him as the best metaphysician since Leibniz. At the least the comparison is by no means absurd. He was a philosophers' philosopher, and like many of the very best scientists, not widely known to the general public.

I first met Lewis when I visited Harvard in the Fall term, 1963. He was beginning his second year as a graduate student and he came to my graduate class where I learned much more from him than he did from me. More importantly he met Steffi who, though only a sophomore, was auditing the class. She later became a financier but kept up her interest in philosophy. Incidentally, Lewis and she jointly wrote one of the most amusing (but also instructive) articles on philosophy. It was a parody of disputes between those (such as Lewis himself) who identify mind and brain on the one hand and their opponents on the other hand. Argle, who worries that holes do not seem to be material entities, identifies holes with hole linings (which are material things) and Bargle denies this, at one stage bringing up the case of a lavatory paper cardboard cylinder rotating one way inside a paper towel cardboard cylinder rotating the other way, so that on Argle's view there is the contradiction that a hole is rotating two ways at once. Not so, says Argle, there are two holes, one rotating one way and the other the other way. And so the debate went on!

Lewis's contributions to philosophy spanned many parts of the subject. Early on there was his prize winning book *Convention,* which was important for an understanding of rule–governed behaviour and of how words get meaning. Later on he produced several books and four volumes of selections of his very many published papers. In these he ranged over the most important topics in

metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of logic, mathematics and science, and even in ethics, where in a brief article relating to his ideas on convention he provided a vital tool for the defence of utilitarianism. In his book *Parts of Classes* and in a subsequent elegant paper in *Philosophia Mathematica* he provided a new and technically brilliant way of understanding the whole of classical set theory. (For the technically interested, it combines plural quantification with mereology, the theory of part and whole.) In effect it provides a new and interesting philosophy of mathematics. An Australian connection can be seen in the *Appendix* to the book, in which together with John P. Burgess of Princeton and Allen Hazen of Melbourne he gives the solution of a vital and particularly tricky problem left unsolved in the main text. With his counterpart theory he made a technical contribution to the logic of necessity and possibility.

Lewis's first degree was at Swarthmore College. His father was Professor of Government at Oberlin College and his mother was a noted medieval historian. When his father went for a year to Oxford, Lewis interrupted his course at Swarthmore and went too. David Armstrong has conjectured to me that this time in Oxford may have helped to give Lewis an interest in conceptual analysis and in Ryle's behaviourism as a stepping stone towards a more satisfying and materialist philosophy of mind. It also diverted him from a career in chemistry to one in philosophy.

Many philosophers, who are not properly acquainted with Lewis's work, overemphasize his realism about possible worlds. In fact most of Lewis's contributions are independent of this. Moreover it is easier to disbelieve the theory than to say what is wrong with Lewis's defence of it in his book *The Plurality of Worlds,* part of which was delivered as John Locke lectures at Oxford. Lewis held that all logically possible worlds exist. Most of us would say that there is no real possible world in which, say, Mary Queen of Scots (or, more accurately, a counterpart of her) ascended the English throne. He takes the word 'actual' to be indexical, like for example the word 'I' which has a different reference according to who utters it. The actual world is the world in which we are and a denizen of another possible world would call *that* world 'actual'. Even if we do not accept Lewis's realism about possible worlds we can admire the subtlety with which he defends his view. Furthermore most of Lewis's contributions to philosophy are either independent of his theory of possible worlds or can be satisfied by reference to what Lewis calls 'ersatz' possible worlds, that is by models, perhaps mathematical ones, in the actual world. One of Lewis's applications of the theory of possible worlds was to the topic of universals. He had friendly debate and correspondence with Armstrong and other Australian philosophers on this topic which he and they agreed to be to be of particular importance.

Though an academically conservative person he had a few endearing eccentricities. Ever since his graduate student days he had a beard which was long and entirely below his chin. He had a great interest in railways, on which he

loved to travel. He had a model railway which was of a possible world in which Isambard Kingdom Brunel (or rather his counterpart) had routed the Great Western Railway differently. He and Steffi liked cats, whom they always gave Australian sounding names. Lewis indeed wrote an article which was published in our Australasian journal apparently by one Bruce le Catt of Princeton. Readers no doubt thought it to be by an emerging young philosopher. Lewis's most notable eccentricity was in its way a considerable virtue. If at a conference or seminar he was asked a question, or a comment or objection was made, he would delay answering for about ten seconds while his brain prepared an answer and then a reply would come out of possibly a paragraph's worth of beautiful oral prose. (It could be disconcerting on social occasions to those who did not know him that small talk or 'Would you like some jam?' evinced similarly lengthy deliberation.) His written prose was similarly beautiful, completely lucid, often technical but never unnecessarily so. He could give excellent lectures to the public: among many examples, there was his Gavin David Young lectures, when he introduced the audience to metaphysics using examples from science fiction, and at a recent lecture at the Australian National University in which he discussed questions arising from the Everett interpretation of quantum mechanics which has some analogies with his realism about possible worlds. In conclusion, both students and friends and colleagues will remember his many acts of kindness.

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