



CASIMIR LEWY

Casimir Lewy 1919–1991

CASIMIR LEWY WAS A MEMORABLE TEACHER of philosophy who left a deep imprint on the ways that subsequent generations of Cambridge philosophers (wherever they might work) thought, wrote, and taught. He was able to do so when the university still took its chief glory to be the way that it educated undergraduates. Dr Lewy, as he was always called by his charges, did not have students: he had pupils. He did not give graduate seminars: he lectured undergraduates about philosophical logic and analysis with a furious passion, an intimidating rigour and an unmatched body language. Yes, of course he had research students, many of whom had been his pupils, and some of whom now hold distinguished chairs of philosophy at Cambridge and elsewhere. But he better fitted the traditional model of the philosopher as teacher than the picture of the modern academic writing books, supervising graduate students, and attending committee meetings. But he was not a teacher in some timeless mould. He practised his art in the curious luxury of post-war Cambridge. He would meet each of his pupils for an hour a week, in order to discuss the written work that they had posted or delivered to him the night before. He had early acquired the conviction that one should publish only when one got something absolutely right, so he left very little in print. Many of his pupils have gone on to write a lot, but in hours of honesty they may still feel residual guilt at doing so. Even the most prolific of them have thrown completed book manuscripts in the dustbin as being not up to scratch.

Casimir Lewy was born in Warsaw on 26 February 1919, the son of Ludwig Lewy and Izabela Lewy, née Rybier. His father, who was a doctor, died when he was a boy, and so he grew up in his mother's family. The

city was cosmopolitan and for a time optimistic, a place where the middle classes could be proud of the intellectual and artistic activity in their midst. The Rybier family was itself involved in the musical life of the city. Casimir was sent to the Mikolaj Rej school at the age of eight. The school is named after the Renaissance poet and moralist, one of Poland's cultural icons. In 2005 the Polish parliament commemorated Rej's five-hundredth anniversary. In Lewy's day the school was owned by the Lutheran congregation, and it continues to be governed by the Mikolaj Rej school society, an organisation within the Evangelical Church. The school recently installed a plaque commemorating Casimir's attendance. In his youth it attracted a wide range of boys from the Warsaw middle classes, many of whom have gone on to pursue distinguished careers at home and abroad. He is remembered as being passionate about poetry, but at the age of fifteen he came across a philosophical article in a literary magazine that changed the course of his life.

The author was Tadeusz Kotarbiński (1886–1981), professor of philosophy and Dean of the Faculty of Human Sciences at the University of Warsaw. At that time Kotarbiński was an outstanding public figure, taking a vigorous stand against the combination of nationalist, clerical and anti-Semitic movements that were beginning to loom large in Polish public life. What Lewy found in Kotarbiński was a philosopher with deep metaphysical and epistemological concerns, whose research was conducted within the framework of the most rigorous logic. One of Kotarbiński's colleagues and closest friends was the leading logician Stanisław Leśniewski. Warsaw was briefly the most important centre in the world for formal logic. The Polish logical tradition, fully appreciative of the *Principia Mathematica* of Whitehead and Russell, developed its own distinctive approach, based as much on philosophical insights as mathematical techniques.

Lewy at once bought Kotarbiński's 1929 textbook on methodology, logic and the theory of knowledge, and decided to attend his lectures at the university. This he did, missing (with permission) his regular school classes whenever necessary. He graduated from Mikolaj Rej in 1936, and, at the age of seventeen, went to England, officially to learn English. But he needed philosophy, so he matriculated at Cambridge in October, intending only to spend the year. G. E. Moore and C. D. Broad were the Professors. They became his exemplars in philosophical method. He went from Fitzwilliam House to Trinity College. Supported by family and friends of the family in Poland and England, he stayed on to complete the Moral Sciences Tripos. He took a First in 1939, by which time—he was

20—he had already published short notes in *Analysis*, a journal that had recently been founded with the conviction that points in analytic philosophy could be rapidly resolved by brief statement and quick publication. (*Analysis* is still going strong, but lacks the messianic air of those early days.)

Lewy originally intended to return to Poland, where he in fact spent the Long Vacation of 1938 in the gloom of the Munich Crisis. But when he returned for his final year in Cambridge, it was, contrary to his plans, to be for ever. He began to work for his doctorate under G. E. Moore. The supervision was, however, more epistolary than in person, because Moore retired from his chair in 1939, the year that Lewy took his first degree. And in October 1940 Moore went to the United States to lecture at a number of American universities, not returning until 1944. Lewy's dissertation topic was, 'On Some Philosophical Considerations about the Survival of Death'. He proceeded to the Ph.D. degree in 1943, and in the same year presented the core ideas of his thesis to a meeting of the Aristotelian Society, and published them in its *Proceedings*.

Moore continued to edit *Mind*, the premier British philosophy journal, as he had done since 1921, and as he went on doing until 1944. In his absence overseas, the day-to-day chores of the job were assigned to Lewy. Editing an academic review was in some ways a more genteel affair than it is today, but in other ways far more demanding of the editor. Moore read every submission, consulting other Cambridge philosophers only on technical issues in, for example, logic. He wrote copiously, in ink, to the authors. He proofread the galleys and the page proofs himself. Lewy of course assumed the latter duties and some of the others as well.

The way in which business was conducted may be suggested by a postcard. From Moore to Lewy, it is dated 'Sept. 25/43', bears a 3¢ stamp, and was posted in New York. It deals with getting twelve offprints of a Critical Notice (a long review) by Ernest Nagel to their author: 'We don't of course usually give off-prints of reviews; but whenever anybody has specially asked for them, I have always agreed to; and I think we can certainly afford it.' It begins with Nagel's address, discusses the issue in which the piece will appear, and ends by promising to send Lewy an article for the January number in a day or two. Despite the fact that such cards travelled by sea in the midst of the war in the Atlantic, things may have been arranged more expeditiously then, than in our instantaneous electronic village of today. After the war, and until the end of Moore's life in 1958, Lewy continued to have frequent discussions with his former teacher, and Moore chose him as his literary executor, as did C. D. Broad.

Wittgenstein was giving classes in Cambridge when Lewy arrived, and continued doing so—with breaks for example for his serving as a porter in Guy's Hospital during the war—until 1945. Lewy attended virtually all of these. The two men also went for walks together, as often as not discussing various nostrums for real or imaginary health problems, for both of them could be described as eccentric hypochondriacs. Unlike many other young men who attended those classes, Lewy never fell fully under the spell of Wittgenstein. I mentioned the three short pieces published in *Analysis* while Lewy was still an undergraduate. They are, respectively, on the very idea of (philosophical) analysis, on empirical propositions and the evidence for them, and on the (in quotation marks) 'justification' of induction. They are very much the work of a young man who has been attending Wittgenstein's classes, who has mastered the ideas but not imitated the style.

Wittgenstein appears to have fully respected Lewy's later persistent gnawing at logical difficulties in a way that he had learned from Moore. Moore and Wittgenstein shared a complete contempt for sloppy work, and each respected the other enormously, even though the ways they did philosophy, and their conclusions, were so at variance. Lewy learned from both the importance of being a *careful* philosopher, an adjective which was the highest praise in those circles.

He lectured in the Faculty of Moral Sciences from the time he took his doctoral degree until 1945, in which year he was appointed Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. In the same year he married Eleanor Ford, who was completing her studies at the London School of Economics which, during the war, was working out of Peterhouse, Cambridge. She too gained a Lectureship at Liverpool, in Economic History. There they continued until 1952, when Lewy took up a University Lectureship in Moral Sciences at Cambridge. As was too often the custom in those days, Eleanor Lewy gave up her promising career when they moved. Casimir seems to have regarded this as the natural order of things. They had three sons, Nicholas, Sebastian and John.

He became Sidgwick Lecturer at the University in 1955, and was elected to a fellowship at Trinity College in 1959. He became a Reader in Philosophy in 1972. He took early retirement in 1982. He was from time to time a Visiting Professor at American institutions—the University of Illinois in 1951–2, the University of Texas at Austin in 1967, and at Yale University in 1969. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1980.

Lewy in many ways identified with English life but retained a strong residual accent—one hesitates to say Polish, for the accent was all his

own. Perhaps because he was early troubled with a hearing problem associated with some ill-diagnosed neurological disorder, he lectured in a strikingly loud voice, and often used that voice in private life as well. In some sense he regarded himself as wholly British. On one occasion, walking alongside the pavement beside which a Volkswagen car was parked, he exclaimed in a loud and very 'foreign' voice, possibly kicking the wheel of the offending vehicle at the same time, that it was 'shameful that anyone should buy such vehicles, when we make such good cars in England'. He remained proud of his Polish origins when it was appropriate, being very glad to be elected to an Honorary Fellowship of the Polish Society of Arts and Sciences Abroad. And he took a wry pleasure when persons of Polish descent attained eminence overseas—as when Zbigniew Brzezinski became National Security Advisor to President Carter.

He was known to make use of his hearing aid, turning it down to avoid boring public speeches. His pupils too sometimes had the impression that he would turn it down if one talked too long with the enthusiasm and misplaced conviction of an undergraduate. Oxbridge supervisors in those days had varying mannerisms, some having the essay read to them, others reading it in front of its author. Dr Lewy had always read the work beforehand; he tended to ignore the worst bits of it, and conducted a challenging examination of the remaining weaknesses. During his supervisions many topics were discussed in an open way, but his lectures were something else. In these public performances, he strode up and down, immensely excited by each logical point, snapping his fingers when he had demolished an error. Doubt was never an option. The effect was not always desirable. In his first year logic course he would denounce certain conclusions urged in P. F. Strawson's *Introduction to Logical Theory*, and in Strawson's influential 1950 paper, 'On Referring', which was a creative rebuttal of Bertrand Russell's 'On Denoting' of 1905. The latter in certain ways was the inaugural statement of British analytic philosophy: indeed in Cambridge it was called, in an odd mixture of joking irony and iconic respect, the paradigm of philosophy. Whatever the merits of this little debate, Lewy's dramatic put-down of Strawson had an unfortunate consequence. It took a long time for many of his pupils to take Strawson's later work seriously enough, and thus they may have missed some of the most important philosophising of the second half of the twentieth century.

His second year course on philosophical analysis did not practise philosophical analysis at a primary level, but increasingly turned to questions arising from the very idea of analysis, and on to Moore's paradoxes

of analysis, to questions of propositional identity, and to the relation of entailment between propositions. An example of John Wisdom's, to the effect that a vixen is a female fox, might pass unnoticed elsewhere, but in Lewy's hands became a discourse on whether the statement was about words, about things, whether it was an identity, and how it could say anything. He published the definitive form of his way of doing philosophy in book form in his *Meaning and Modality* of 1976. Since conceptions of, and the practice of, philosophical analysis have changed so much in the subsequent three decades, and since the centre of gravity of this kind of work has shifted to the United States, many of the presuppositions of this book of lectures are no longer current.

The list of Lewy's publications occupies a mere page and a half at the end of a festschrift, *Exercises in Analysis by Students of Casimir Lewy* (edited by Ian Hacking, Cambridge, 1985). The published articles on philosophical problems simply stop. The results of the dissertation on life after death became the question of whether it was self-contradictory to suppose one could exist without a body. The same way of attacking a problem appears in a paper of 1944 printed in *Mind*. Moore himself encouraged the paper although he had qualms, expressed in five pages of comments written out in a small hand.

The question began with a version of traditional scepticism, expressed in a way then taken to be rigorous. Take the proposition that all my present and future evidence confirms that I am not now dreaming; conjoin this with the proposition that I am now dreaming. Is the result self-contradictory? (Already, in shortening the question slightly, I betray certain nuances that Lewy held to be important.) About half way through the essay the discussion turned to statements about material objects that I see plainly before me, and about which I have never had any problems. Take the proposition: 'I have all the evidence which I do have that there is a desk in my rooms, but there is no desk in my rooms.' Is that self-contradictory? After some argument Lewy urged,

that it is *neither* right *nor* wrong to say that my evidential propositions do entail the 'desk proposition' and that it is *neither* right *nor* wrong to say that my evidential propositions do not entail the 'desk proposition'. In other words it is neither right nor wrong to say that the proposition ['I have all the evidence which I do have that there is a desk in my rooms, but there is no desk in my rooms'] is self-contradictory, and neither right nor wrong to say that it is not self-contradictory.

Yet even this did not satisfy him: 'I must confess I am still greatly puzzled, and I am probably very confused, about one of the things I have said in

this paper . . .’—namely the ‘neither right nor wrong’ statement just set out. Many readers can only wonder what on earth is going on, but they should recall that less intricate reasoning had left philosophy bemused over the Cartesian doubt about dreaming, and troubled by scepticism about material objects, for many hundreds of years. There was a conviction that if only we took sufficient pains, we should either clear these matters up for ever, or better understand why we could not.

On the other hand, it was perhaps the feeling that the task was Sisyphean that led Lewy, then 25, to become less and less inclined to publish his work. He did present his results on entailment and propositional identity to the Aristotelian Society in 1964, but he became more content to work in the shadow of his masters. In the same year he delivered to the British Academy a masterly lecture on Moore’s naturalistic fallacy, pronounced so long ago, in 1903, in *Principia Ethica*. He painstakingly edited Moore’s *Lectures on Philosophy* and his *Commonplace Book*, and later Broad’s lectures on Leibniz and on Kant.

Lewy died on 8 February 1991, in the days following an operation for cancer. His life as a philosopher was that of a teacher, perhaps the most honourable mode of all. He is commemorated at Cambridge by the Philosophy Faculty Library which is named after him, endowed in part by contributions from former students as a measure both of gratitude and as a token that such teaching should continue in that place.

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