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0521845564 - Knowledge and Inquiry: Essays on the Pragmatism of Isaac Levi

Edited by Erik J. Olsson

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Knowledge and Inquiry

Isaac Levi, John Dewey Professor of Philosophy emeritus at Columbia University, has explored the principles of American pragmatism in greater depth and more consistency than others before him. The result is a sophisticated and powerful philosophical system whose key elements stand in stark opposition not only to current mainstream epistemology, but also to the positions of other contemporary authors writing in the same pragmatist tradition. The essays in this timely volume, written by some of philosophy's finest scholars, contribute substantially to the understanding and appraisal of Levi's work. Included in this volume are Levi's extensive and provocative replies to his critics, which offer unique access to his current thinking on a wide range of topics. The introduction provides a concise, systematic presentation of the cornerstone of Levi's pragmatism. Suitable for students and scholars who are interested in American pragmatism in general and Isaac Levi's work in particular, this book is an ideal companion to Levi's own writings.

Erik J. Olsson is senior lecturer in the department of philosophy at Lund University, Sweden. He has published extensively on epistemology, philosophy of science, and logic, and he is the author of *Against Coherence*.

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ERIK J. OLSSON

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*I dedicate this book to
my mother, Mary Olsson.*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction: The Pragmatism of Isaac Levi <i>Erik J. Olsson</i>	1
1. Isaac Levi and His Pragmatist Lineage <i>Cheryl Misak</i>	18
2. Is Pragmatist Truth Irrelevant to Inquiry? <i>André Fuhrmann</i>	32
3. The Knowledge Business <i>Philip Kitcher</i>	50
4. Infallibility and Incorrigibility <i>Bengt Hansson</i>	65
5. Why Inconsistency Is Not Hell: Making Room for Inconsistency in Science <i>Otávio Bueno</i>	70
6. Levi on Risk <i>Nils-Eric Sahlin</i>	87
7. Vexed Convexity <i>Henry E. Kyburg, Jr.</i>	97
8. Levi's Chances <i>D. H. Mellor</i>	111
9. Isaac Levi's Potentially Surprising Epistemological Picture <i>Wolfgang Spohn</i>	125
10. Isaac Levi on Abduction <i>Maurice Pagnucco</i>	143

Cambridge University Press

0521845564 - Knowledge and Inquiry: Essays on the Pragmatism of Isaac Levi

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

11. Potential Answers – To What Question? <i>Erik J. Olsson</i>	157
12. Levi and the Lottery <i>Erik J. Olsson</i>	167
13. The Value of Truth and the Value of Information: On Isaac Levi's Epistemology <i>Hans Rott</i>	179
14. Decision-Theoretic Contraction and Sequential Change <i>Horacio Arló Costa</i>	201
15. Deciding What You Know <i>Mark Kaplan</i>	225
16. Levi's Ideals <i>Sven Ove Hansson</i>	241
17. The Mind We do Not Change <i>Wolfram Hinzen</i>	248
18. Psychoanalysis as Technology <i>Akeel Bilgrami</i>	266
19. Levi on Money Pumps and Diachronic Dutch Books <i>Wlodek Rabinowicz</i>	289
20. Levi on the Reality of Dispositions <i>Johannes Persson</i>	313
21. Replies <i>Isaac Levi</i>	327
<i>Index</i>	381

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[More information](#)

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[More information](#)

Preface

Isaac Levi has retired from his academic position as prestigious John Dewey Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, and yet there is no sign that he has retired from philosophy. On the contrary, he just published a new book entitled *Mild Contraction* with Oxford University Press, and he continues to write papers and participate in conferences and workshops. This collection is dedicated to Isaac on the occasion of his retirement, in celebration of his exceptional contribution to philosophy in general and to the great tradition of American pragmatism in particular. It is far more than a Festschrift in the usual sense; all the papers included are substantial contributions to the understanding and appraisal of Isaac's pragmatist philosophy by leading experts on his work. They were all written specifically for this volume and appear here for the first time. I am greatly indebted to all authors for their dedication and commitment to this project, and especially to Isaac for his extensive replies to all the papers.

My own intellectual debt to Isaac is great. My first internationally published paper, written jointly with Sven Ove Hansson, who was my thesis adviser back then, addressed Isaac's theory of belief contraction. In this connection, reading his book *The Fixation of Belief and Its Undoing* was especially rewarding, although some of his more intricate arguments were beyond my grasp at the time. Only gradually, on reading and rereading his books and articles, have I come to appreciate fully the extraordinary coherence and stringency of his thinking. I first encountered Isaac in Uppsala, Sweden, where he gave a lecture in the mid-1990s. Since then we have met and discussed philosophy on numerous occasions in the United States and in Europe, often attending the same conferences. He has always been extremely generous with his time and philosophical insight. As for personal qualities, I admire him above all for his intellectual honesty and integrity.

While the chapters in this book were being written, *Mild Contraction* had not yet appeared in print. I would like to thank Peter Momtchiloff and Rupert Cousins at Oxford University Press for making a preliminary electronic

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[More information](#)

version available to the authors. The chapters in this volume are very much up to date, as they take Isaac's most recent work into account. It can be read as a companion volume to *Mild Contraction* or indeed to any other of Isaac's books. While some of the chapters contribute to technical aspects of Isaac's work, the overwhelming majority address more general philosophical issues, such as the nature of pragmatism and the role of truth in inquiry. Isaac's replies give unique access to his current thinking on a wide range of topics.

I speak for all the authors when I wish Isaac many more productive years in philosophy. For a start, the criticisms and constructive proposals in this book should keep him busy for a while. Having said this, I hasten to add that I consider the eventuality that Isaac should run out of interesting new ideas when left to his own devices not seriously possible.

E.J.O.