Problems and Paradoxes of Convention[1]

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David Lewis' famous philosophical text, *Convention,* is an early attempt to systematically study the topic of convention. Employing concepts from game theory, such as coordination games, Lewis gives a rich account of what it means for a behavioral regularity to count as a convention. This paper will explore his definition and examine how Lewisian convention matches up with our intuitive notion of the word. I posit a small class of games in which I believe our intuitive understanding of convention and Lewis' definition of convention diverge; I put forth a possible means to reconcile these differences. Additionally, if we consider convention to be a subset of norms, as Lewis does, I find that this may lead to some interesting paradoxical results.

Our intuitive notion of convention is the following: a particular behavioral regularity is considered "conventional" if we are expected to carry out the behavior in question and expect others to similarly adhere to said behavior as well in certain situations. The regularity itself is rather arbitrary and could easily be replaced with another regularity. Basic mathematical symbols are a good example. We are expected to mean and presume others to mean "addition" when the symbol "+" is used. Yet the addition symbol could just as well be "×" or any other symbol, for that matter. It is this type of intuition about convention that Lewis attempts to pin down in his analysis.

Lewis first starts with the notion of a coordination game. A coordination game is a game in which individuals' preferences align over various outcomes. He defines a coordination equilibrium to be an outcome in which no individual has an incentive to deviate from the equilibrium, because each prefers that outcome to any other outcome that would result from deviating (holding fixed what the others do). Additionally, he restricts his analysis to problems in which there exist at least two proper equilibria. A proper equilibrium is one that each agent likes better than any other combination he could have reached, given the others' choices. By requiring that there exist at least two proper equilibria, Lewis is ensuring that there are at least two outcomes in which no one would prefer to change his strategy. Choosing a convention from among these possible outcomes, all acceptable to everyone, is thus a purely arbitrary matter. Lewis' conditions, therefore, capture a large amount of our intuition about convention, namely that everyone prefers for all individuals to abide by a set "convention" and yet that convention is, nonetheless, to an extent, arbitrary.

To cement the concept of convention, Lewis must factor in expectations. Having a game with two or more proper equilibria is problematic because the individuals are uncertain which equilibrium they should conform to. For a regularity to be a convention, it must be the case that (1) the individual knows that everyone is conforming to this regularity, and (2) the individual knows that it is expected that all should conform to it. Thus, Lewis believes that a regularity is a convention if, in a recurring situation, all members of the population satisfy the above two conditions, have similar preferences over all of the possible outcomes, and prefer that everyone conforms to said regularity. Also, there must exist at least one other regularity, which all prefer, that would meet all these conditions if everyone were to conform to it instead. Now that we have

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a solid understanding of Lewis' analysis of convention, I would like to provide an example that might be incorrectly labeled as convention.

Two mountaineers go on a monthly camping trip together. Both men work for the forestry department and manage two separate plots of land adjacent to each other: Ethan oversees the eastern mountain while Wesley oversees the western mountain. This month they decide to set up their camp on the border between their two territories. In search of firewood, they reason that it is optimal for Ethan to look to the east and Wesley to search in the west because both men are more familiar with their own land than the other's. The arrangement makes for a more efficient use of time and resources. Lewis would rightly not consider this situation to be a convention because a second regularity, that both men would prefer they both conform to, is non-existent. The game is represented in the following table and it is easy to see why this is true:

	Ethan		
Wesley		**West**	**East**
	West	4,2	5,5
	East	3,3	2,4

(West, East) is the only coordination equilibrium in this game and thus this scenario is not a convention.[2]

Now imagine a week later that two brothers, E. Greenhorn and W. Greenhorn, are camping in the same spot as our mountaineers. They are from out of state and unfamiliar with the park. When faced with the same problem of collecting firewood, the two individuals are indifferent between going east or west, just as long as the other individual goes in the opposite direction. Lewis would argue that *this* situation is a true coordination problem and can give rise to a convention.[3] Notice that there exist two proper equilibria: E. goes east while W. goes west and E. goes west while W goes east.

	E. Greenhorn		
W. Greenhorn		**West**	**East**
	West	2,2	3,3
	East	3,3	2,2

I claim that this game will, in time, morph into the same game the mountaineers faced. Imagine that the brothers are camping for a number of weeks and must search for firewood multiple times. Let us say that the convention is for W. to go west and E. to the east. Over time, W. will become familiar with the western land and get better at scouring for firewood in this direction. He will be able to bring in more firewood when searching in the west than in the east. The same goes for E. Thus, the payoffs of our game will have changed —most noticeably the outcome of (East, West) is no longer the same as (West, East). This game will have changed into the same game the mountaineers faced: there now exists only one equilibrium, namely (West, East). This situation no longer can sustain a convention because no other alternative regularities exist that both would prefer to conform to.

[2] We expect that if they both search in the same direction, they won't bring as much firewood back as they would if they had split up.

[3] This example is from Lewis' book. He thinks this situation is a good example of a convention.

Interestingly, this shows the existence of a class of games that initially appear to give rise to convention, but upon further inspection, fail to satisfy Lewis' precise definition of convention. This is because these games possess a unique quality: the equilibrium selection in period "t_1" affects the payoffs of the game in the succeeding period "t_2" and, over time, one of the proper equilibria is discarded. Yet I claim that we would still want to say that the Greenhorn example is an instance of convention, because it has all the descriptive qualities of a convention. The initial decision to engage in one regularity over another was arbitrary—both options seemed to be equally plausible. Additionally, this equilibrium is self-perpetuating. This situation seems to stay true to the spirit of Lewis' account of convention. In fact, Lewis himself says of convention that "once the process gets started, we have a metastable self-perpetuating system of preferences, expectations, and actions capable of persisting indefinitely" (P 42). It is clear that the Greenhorns' game has satisfied all of these criteria.

I do not believe this alone poses much of a problem to Lewis' concept of convention. We can sort through this problem by defining a game not as the semi-daily decision of whether to go east or west, but as a decision about the camping trip as a whole. Imagine our campers go on many lengthy camping trips a year. In this case, we can view each camping trip as a single game instead of considering each time they look for firewood as a game. Before going on a trip, each camper chooses a strategy: either to search solely in one direction or in a combination of east and west. For example, the strategy "always look to the east for firewood" could be represented as $<E,E,\ldots,E_k>$, while $<W,E,W,E,\ldots W,E_k>$ would be the strategy that on the first day the camper goes to the west, the second day to the east, and so on.[4]

Thinking about the camping trip in this light makes W. Greenhorn, $<W,W,\ldots,W_k>$, and E. Greenhorn, $<E,E,\ldots,E_k>$, a possible convention. This is because our campers reach a proper equilibrium and there exists another regularity they could just as well have conformed to: E. Greenhorn: $<W,W,\ldots,W_k>$ and W. Greenhorn: $<E,E,\ldots,E_k>$. During their next camping trip (game), they can switch to the other regularity and reap the exact same rewards. This is drastically different from our previous example, for as time passes, the second proper equilibrium does not disappear. Just because one always went east to look for firewood at Yosemite does not mean he will be better prepared to always go east to look for firewood during their next trip, say, to Yellowstone. Yet, in our day-by-day analysis, this is the case—your past moves affect the payoffs in the next period. By examining this game on a trip-by-trip level instead of on a day-by-day level we avoid the problem of the disappearing second proper equilibrium.

There is still a minor problem with this approach, however. The definition of a Lewisian convention requires that the individuals will interact in this particular situation a multiple number of times. Our solution assumes that these individuals will go camping repeatedly, but this may not necessarily be the case. If camping is a once in a lifetime event, it appears the proposed trip-by-trip analysis will not help. Yet there is still a possible way out of this conundrum. Even if our Greenhorn brothers only go on a camping trip once, splitting up the firewood directions for the duration of the trip can still be a convention. Lewis acknowledges that "the agents who set the precedent" need not be the only "ones who follow it" (Lewis, 38). Thus if our Greenhorn brothers tell their friends how they coordinated wood-gathering on a trip, their friends may be moved to follow this regularity as well when they go on a camping trip.

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[4] The number of elements in this array is equivalent to k, the number of times they go hunting for firewood on a given trip. Refer to Appendix for a decision matrix of this situation.

I believe this approach will yield very good results. Indeed, it mirrors another phenomenon in game theory: in dynamic games (games in extended form), it is possible for certain sub-games to be in or out of equilibrium while the game as a whole is nonetheless in equilibrium. Equilibria that are also equilibria for the sub-games are called sub-game perfect equilibria (SPE), and being an SPE is a much stronger condition than being an equilibrium. We could have an extended form game that is in equilibrium but that is not an SPE. Take the example of the dictator game. The dictator gets to distribute ten dollars between his subject and himself. If the dictator's distribution is not acceptable to the subject neither of them get any money. Prima facie it seems as though the dictator could keep all ten dollars for himself—between an option of zero and zero dollars, the subject is indifferent. Yet if the individual makes the following threat, "I will reject all distributions in which I get less than four dollars," and if the threat is credible, the dictator will do best by leaving six dollars for himself and four dollars for his subject. Although this extended form game is technically in equilibrium (no one has incentive to unilaterally change his strategy), particular sub-games are not in equilibrium.[5] Similarly, it is possible for a convention to exist when we look at the extended game as a whole but nonethless a number of sub-games fail to be conventions. Furthermore, a case in which both the game as a whole and all sub-games are conventions is designated a sub-game perfect convention.[6] The case of our Greenhorn brothers would be an example of a sub-game imperfect convention—the sub-games are not conventions, but the whole game is a convention.[7]

As we have seen, changes in payoffs over time pose something of a threat to Lewis' definition of convention. Let us now turn our attention to a similar worry that stems from the problem of formulating convention as a subspecies of norms. Lewis goes to much trouble to contrast convention with a number of similar concepts, such as rules, agreements, social contracts and norms. Lewis defines norms as statements that dictate conduct one should or ought to engage in—"regularities to which we believe one ought to conform" (Lewis, 97). A norm can be something as trivial as an etiquette ("when drinking tea, one ought to raise one's pinky"), or as grave as a moral command ("one should never intentionally do harm to another"). In other words, norms attempt to dictate which actions are permissible and which are impermissible. As in the Greenhorn example, seeing conventions as norms may lead to payoff changes that alter the nature of the game so that it can no longer sustain two proper equilibria. The aim of the rest of this paper is twofold. First, I demonstrate that Lewis' premise connecting conventions to norms results in an intriguing paradox, and second, I attempt to resolve this paradox by giving a critique of Lewis' reason for designating conventions as norms.

Lewis concludes that conventions are norms because they give us "reasons, according to our own common opinions, why that action [which the convention prescribes] ought to be done"

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[5] For example, if the dictator offered the subject three dollars it is in the subject's best interest to take it. Yet if he stays true to his threat and refuses the distribution, he will do poorly and get nothing. Thus this subgame is obviously not in equilibrium for the subject has incentive to change his strategy.

[6] Lewis' example of phone etiquette is a prime example of a sub-game perfect convention. If we get disconnected the individual who initiated the call is to call back. If over the course of an hour long conversation we get cut off five times the original caller calls back a total of five times. This, however, does not make the original caller anymore equipped to call. The payoffs of the decision matrix remain untouched and every time I get disconnected (every sub-game) is a convention.

[7] Each time the two go looking for wood, E. goes to east and W. goes to west. After a number of these excursions, this will no longer be a convention. Thus in each sub-game, they are not playing a convention (for there exists none) yet when we look at this game on a trip-by- trip level, it turns out that there is a convention, <E,E,…> and <W,W,…>.

(Lewis, 97). It is thought that one should in general follow "ought" statements—especially when one's doing so affects the welfare of those with whom one is engaged. To do otherwise, in Lewis' opinion, would elicit negative reactions from others. Thus Lewis takes negative reactions to be the consequence of one's failure to conform to the convention. If I fail to search for wood in the right direction, my fellow camper's "opinion of me suffers [and] these are bad consequences" (Lewis, 100).

To formalize this, consider the following coordination game where the convention is (R, R). If we incorporate the negative utilities that individuals who fail to conform receive from others, the game now changes:

	R	S
R	g,g	d,d
S	d,d	g,g

=>

	R	S
R	g,g	d,d-p
S	d-p,d	g-p,g-p

Let g, d and p be payoffs such that g>d, p>0 and p represents the "punishment" or bad consequences of not conforming to a regularity. Note that g is obviously greater than d-p. Yet, if p> g-d (if the punishment is greater than the differences in utilities between coordination and non-coordination), then R is a strictly dominating strategy, and it is never rational for either player to engage in R ′.

As in the camping example with our Greenhorn brothers, this drastically changes the nature of the game. To sustain a convention, at least two proper equilibria must exist. If punishments for deviation are high enough, it is possible for the alternative proper equilibria to disappear completely. If this occurs, the game now has only one equilibrium, and individuals will simply play their dominant strategy. Thus we encounter a problem: R will no longer be a convention by Lewis' account.

Of course, not all coordination games with two proper equilibira will face this problem. Imagine a situation in which a study group has, via convention, settled to study at one of the two cafes in town. For some members to go to cafe B while the rest go to cafe A would be inefficient. A study group is a cooperative effort and a certain amount of economies of scale is at work; to diminish the number of individuals involved would be disadvantageous to all. Yet if they were to all accidentally meet at the wrong café, they may consider themselves to be lucky, and simply be grateful that they were all able to meet. The study session will be just as effective, since cafe A and cafe B are equal in all dimensions. The outcome of all of them accidentally choosing the alternative regularity would not prompt a need to punish each other or form bad thoughts. If this is the case, then the paradox never occurs because our alternative proper equilibrium is never destroyed. However, it is fair to say that most situations won't lend themselves to being resolved by this happy outcome, no punishment scenario.

Another possible response to the problem is to say that it is inappropriate to incorporate these "bad consequences" into the payoffs of the current game. Individuals who wish to punish the person who refuses to conform to a convention may put sanctions on him in the future. Not conforming may alter the interactions individuals have in the future, but this effect should not be incorporated into the payoffs of the current game, according to this approach. This doesn't seem realistic. The possibility that others' judgments will affect the payoffs in the current game seems high, to me. If I do something that angers another, then that anger is a negative consequence that I will likely realize immediately.

Another response could be to employ a strategy similar to the one used in the Greenhorn example of sub-game imperfect convention. Once a convention is established, sanctions prevent a particular regularity from counting as a convention in sub-games, but nonetheless the regularity can still count as a convention in an "overall" game. The same goes for the alternative regularity. Since sanctions will be attached to it, the alternative regularity leads to a sub-game imperfect convention as well. For example, if we all choose to wear tuxedos to a party, then wearing tuxedos will become the only equilibrium because of sanctions. However we could just as easily have chosen Hawaiian shirts and that, due to sanctions, would also be the only equilibrium—just as if E goes east, that will become the only equilibrium, but if he goes west, then that will become the only equilibrium.

However, the strongest response to this paradox is to give a critique of Lewis' logic in concluding that conventions are a subspecies of norms. He posits that individuals are irritated by their compatriots who do not conform to convention because, among other things, these defectors have "knowlingly acted contrary to [their own] preferences, and contrary to [others'] preferences and [others'] reasonable expectations" (Lewis, 99). The interpretation I have been using so far is that these unfavorable sentiments will be incorporated into the payoff matrix (as Lewis seems to imply they will). If we apply this logic to a simple game, we will find it gives bizarre results, calling into question Lewis' logic in concluding that conventions are a subspecies of norms. Consider the following game, G:

	Player B		
Player A		**Q**	**P**
	R	5,1	5,0
	S	0,-1	0,0

Assume that both players have perfect information of the game. Additionally, each player is rational and takes the other to be rational as well. In this case, the solution to the game is trivial. Player A will play strategy R because R strictly dominates S. Player B, knowing that Player A is rational, realizes player A will enact R, and thus plays Q since it fares better against R than P does. If Player A were for some reason to play S instead of R, he would knowingly play contrary to his own interests. Additionally, given that player A can predict that Player B will anticipate his playing R and thus will play Q, playing S will be contrary to player B's interests. Playing S will also go against the "reasonable expectations" player B has of player A. By Lewis' account, these violations warrant player B to form negative sentiments toward player A. Player B is confused as to how player A could be so illogical as to use strategy S (especially when it was strictly dominated!), and this surprise and confusion morphs into judgment and punishment. Taking into account this harsh sentiment and anger, player A's payoffs change. Specifically, the utility he gains from playing S is now less than zero, -p.[8] The game is now identical to the game above except strategy S now yields utility -p for player A in all outcomes.[9]

[8] p>0. This assumes that player 1 cares about the opinion that player 2 has of him. This seems reasonable for most games, and is in fact what Lewis himself assumes. Even in one-shot games between strangers, individuals value "saving face."

[9] Both outcomes for player A enacting strategy S yield him –p. This is because no matter what player B does, player B, being rational, would expect player A to choose the strictly dominant strategy. Thus in both cases, player A's failure to conform to R is taken by player B as a sign of his incompetence.

Now let us introduce two premises. First is the Reasonability premise: one has more reason to choose the better of two acts, G (good) and M (mediocre), as the lesser of the two acts becomes increasingly worse. Thus choosing to go to the fair (G) instead of staying home to read a book (M) is made that much easier a choice if the only book one possesses is not particularly interesting. This premise seems to be not too controversial. Rational choice theory posits that one has reason to go to the fair whether the book waiting at home is exciting or dull, just as long as going to the fair trumps both literary options. Suppose that by going to the fair one derives ten utils, while an evening at home with a good book or a dull book provides eight or two utils, respectively. The decision theorist could argue that in the first case, choosing between the fair and the exciting book, one has good reason to go to the fair, namely the two extra utils one derives. Likewise, one has good reason to choose the fair over the evening with a dull book, having eight utils to convince him so. It appears that in the second case one has more reason than in the first case, to go to the fair. Thus, the decision theorist would find it less reasonable for an individual to stay at home with a dull book than with an exciting book if the fair were in town.

Second is the Irritability premise: an individual tends to think less highly of an agent the more unreasonable that agent's decisions are. This seems to ring true with Lewis and with our own intuitions. We would think much less of an individual who acts strongly against his and others' preferences (e.g., failing to adhere to vital conventions such driving on the right side of the road), than we would of an individual who only mildly acts against his and others' preferences (e.g., failing to wear a tuxedo to a formal party).

Now let us return to the game above. Since player B forms a negative opinion of player A when the latter enacts strategy S, the new game, G′, is:

	Player B		
Player A		**Q′**	**P′**
	R′	5,1	5,0
	S′	-p,-1	-p,0

Given our acceptance of the Reasonability and Irritability premises, the following argument is made:

(1) Player A has less reason to do act S′ in G′ than he has to do act S in G.
(2) Player B, having perfect knowledge of the payoffs, realizes (1).
(3) Player B will think more poorly of Player A if S′ is chosen.

(Step (3) assumes that Player B accepts the Irritability premise, and judges someone more harshly the more unreasonable his action is.)

(4) The payoffs for Player A will take into account the judgment and punishment of player B.
(5) If Player A enacts S′, his utility will now be -q-p, where q>0.

Thus, the payoffs of the game will change once again and we are left with a new game, G′′:

	Player B		
Player A		**Q′′**	**P′′**
	R′′	5,1	5,0
	S′′	-q-p,-1	-q-p,0

Note that although the form of the game is still the same—R″ still strictly dominates S″ and Player B still does best to play Q″ instead of P″—Player A now has even *less* reason to perform S″ in G″ than he did to perform S′ in G′. The above steps (2) through (4) apply once again, and the payoffs of performing S″ become increasingly negative. This cycle continues indefinitely. What started as a game in which Player A was deciding between a strategy that guaranteed him five utils and a strategy that guaranteed him a zero utils has now morphed into a game in which, if he picks the wrong strategy, he may end up with a substantial amount of negative utility. In fact, if player A very much values player B's opinion of him, and if positive feedback occurs (i.e., the small amount of negative opinion in G causes even greater negative opinion in G′, which results in a huge amount of disgust and disbelief in G″), player A may face a game in which picking S would leave him with enormous negative utility. In other words, negative payoffs can snowball in just a matter of one or two game cycles.

Results such as the one above are the inevitable consequence of Lewis' rationales for why conventions are norms and seriously bring into question how valid these rationales are. When we apply his logic to a simple game such as the one above, we find that it completely hijacks certain payoffs and leaves us with a result we would surely want to dismiss. Part of the reason we get this unwanted result is that individuals are judging others based upon how well they conform to the normativity of decision theory (i.e., whether they pick the act that best satisfies their preferences). It is this sort of judgment that leads to snowballing negative utilities and other bizarre effects. However, if we judge an act simply based on the content of that act, we will avoid these messy results. For example: if one is deciding to commit an offensive act, it is reasonable to incorporate negative judgments the actor may receive from others into the payoffs of his decision matrix. For example, a devout religious believer reared to believe that the act of betrayal is immoral may feel immense guilt and angst when contemplating such an act. These psychological states factor into his payoff matrix and may prevent him from defecting in the prisoner's dilemma, or at least give him more reason not to defect. Yet these reasons are not about game theoretic rationality and his ability to be a rational agent. They are about moral decisions and the content of his actions—not about whether his acting signals that he is rational. It is only when Lewis asks us to make a judgment, not of the moral kind, but a judgment on whether the individual in question is acting in accordance with his own preferences, that Lewis runs into trouble. This is one reason we should find Lewis' argument that conventions are a subspecies of norms to be suspect.

In conclusion, this paper examined a class of games in which Lewis' definition of convention does not merge with our intuitive definition of convention. Although I investigated two similar problems, the Greenhorn example and conventions as norms, it is only now clear what the vital distinction between the two is. In the case of the Greenhorns, the payoffs were being altered, but not due to adherence to rationality. Instead the content of the action, searching for wood in the West, affected the payoffs of the next period's game because the agent became better at gathering wood to the West. This is in sharp contrast to the case with norms, which, as we have just seen, incorporates changes in payoffs due to whether the action chosen was rational. Thus while these two cases may face the identical problem—an equilibrium is discarded due to payoff changes—the means by which we can solve these two cases differ due to the differing reasons that the payoffs changed in the first place. In the case of the Greenhorns we found the most efficacious approach was to appeal to our new notion of sub-game imperfect conventions. While similar tactics can be applied to the convention as norm paradox, I find that the best line of attack is to scrutinize Lewis' rationale for defining convention as a subspecies of norms in the

first place. Overall, it appears that Lewis' concept of convention is robust; however, the relation between norms and conventions Lewis posits may need re-working.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

This is the Game the two campers play when deciding which strategies to use when camping for N days. Each strategy is a vector of length N indicating whether they go to the east or the west on day 1, 2,…,N. There are 2^N possible strategies from which to choose. Only All W and All E lead to a proper equilibrium because any oscillation back and forth between W and E is inefficient.

	E. Greenhorn					
W. Greenhorn		**<W,W,…>**	**…**	**…**	**…**	**<E,E,…>**
	<W,W,…>	Sub-optimal	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Proper Equilibrium
	…	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt
	...	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt
	...	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt
	<E,E,…>	Proper equilibrium	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt	Sub-opt

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