

## P. F. Strawson (1919– )

P. F. SNOWDON

**Life**

Peter Frederick Strawson was educated at St. John's College, Oxford, where he read Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, graduating in 1940. He then served for six years in the British Army, becoming a captain. After a short period as a lecturer at the University of North Wales, Bangor, he returned to Oxford, becoming a Fellow at University College in 1948. In 1968 Strawson was appointed Gilbert Ryle's successor as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy. He was made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1960, was knighted in 1977, and retired in 1987, though since then he has continued his philosophical activities. Strawson's major publications include *Individuals* (1959), an exploration in what he called "descriptive metaphysics," *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), a constructive and critical study of Kant, *Scepticism and Naturalism* (1985), a study of both general skepticism and some more specific variants, and *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (1971), a collection of his highly influential papers about language, including "On Referring," the article that first made Strawson famous.

**Themes**

Strawson established his pre-eminence in postwar Oxford philosophy by the extraordinary range and depth of his work. He has written about the philosophy of language, of logic, metaphysics, epistemology, the history of philosophy, but also about the nature of philosophy itself. And within each of these broad areas he has investigated many topics. Thus, within the philosophy of language he has written about reference, meaning, truth, the subject/predicate distinction, speech acts, the meaning of connectives, and the nature of grammar. One aspect of the depth of Strawson's work has been his attempt to establish explanatory links between the different branches of philosophy. For example, he illuminatingly links the metaphysical distinction between particular and universal to the logical subject/predicate distinction. The special quality of his work resides in his ability to develop original ideas across such a wide range, the care and ingenuity with which he develops these ideas, and a persistent tendency to pursue issues to a deep level. Strawson also writes in a stylish, distinctive, and untechni-

cal manner, conferring on his works an elegance as literature unusual for recent philosophy.

Strawson's views have developed and been modified, and he has neither tended to repeat himself nor engaged overly much with the extensive critical discussions of his work. In consequence, and in contrast with some other leading philosophers, there is no core set of repeatedly defended doctrines which might be called Strawson's philosophy. There are, however, certain abiding and recurring themes in his writing which deserve to be formulated.

Strawson's picture of human thought, which has links, in different ways, to those of Hume and Kant, is that, despite its impressive development over time, with, for example, the emergence of science, and the improvement of its understanding in all domains, there is an abiding, fundamental, unrevisable framework. As he says in the Introduction to *Individuals*,

there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history – or none recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialities of the most refined thinking. They are the commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and are yet the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. (1959: 10)

Charting these central concepts is one task for philosophy, the task which Strawson calls descriptive metaphysics. This task is theoretical and constructive, and represents a vision of philosophy which contrasts significantly with what was a more negative, critical, and piecemeal approach associated with Austin, an approach which dominated part of the Oxford landscape in the early stage of Strawson's presence there. Strawson's development of his own program significantly changed that landscape.

According to Strawson, one part of this framework is the physical world of perceptible bodies, constituting an abiding framework in space and time, with their manifest, and not so manifest, causal properties; another part is persons, entities with both bodily attributes, such as weight and height, and also psychological attributes, such as consciousness, perception, thought, and action, and, of course, an understanding of the very concepts being described. Persons understand and use language which is shaped to express the basic concepts. Our employment of these categories cannot be eliminated in favor of those of science, since the categories of science itself are accessible only via the basic framework. Further, these categories do not earn their right to employment by being justified in the light of arguments based on experience as traditionally conceived by empiricists, for there is no such neutral experience describable in more basic terms. The rejection of the empiricist conception of experience, advanced in a relatively sophisticated form by A. J. Ayer, represents one theme shared by both Austin and Strawson (see AUSTIN; cf. AYER). These categories do not earn their right to employment, either, by being shown to be reducible to more basic categories, for no such reduction is possible or needed. As an ontologist, therefore, we might call Strawson's attitude "relaxed realism." He endorses the reality of such entities and their properties – hence, the realism – without supposing that this requires some strong unification between the different levels of thing or property – hence the relaxedness.

Further, although the grounds presented for saying this have changed, Strawson regards skeptical criticisms of the framework as essentially based on misunderstandings of one form or another, and Strawson's main (although certainly not sole) epistemological interest has been to display the errors of skepticism. In his early discussion of induction, and also in *Individuals*, he appears to suggest that the skeptical thought that in circumstance C (the best circumstances that can obtain) we do not know that P (or do not reasonably believe that P) can be shown to be inconsistent with the meaning of P. In *The Bounds of Sense* Strawson sympathetically explores a strategy of transcendental arguments, according to which there is an inconsistency in the skeptic's attitude, in that the concepts the skeptic is prepared to apply presuppose the application of the concepts about which he is skeptical. More recently Strawson has attempted to discredit skepticism on the basis of its inability to genuinely persuade anyone. As well as such extreme traditional skepticism, Strawson is also opposed to the more limited skepticism of some current philosophers, such as Quine, who reject parts of our conceptual scheme, in his case those to do with meaning or psychological states. Strawson argues that there are no legitimate metaphysical requirements which such notions fail to satisfy, and they are, moreover, indispensable to our thought and to the very inquiries which are supposed to supersede them. There is, in Strawson's approach, a conceptual conservatism similar to Wittgenstein's, but Strawson reveals no sympathy with Wittgenstein's opposition to theoretical philosophy.

One fundamental task of philosophy is to describe this framework, to display connections between the basic categories, (say between the categories of perception and causation), to disarm philosophical skepticisms or reductions, and to describe, in a realistic way, the language we have for expressing these concepts, without restricting the categories we employ in the description of our language to those favored by formal logicians, whose purposes are rather different.

## **Definite descriptions and reference**

Strawson's first major publication was "On Referring," which, in 1950, established for him more or less immediately, an international reputation, and also initiated a still continuing debate about the nature of reference. In that article, Strawson's principal aim was to criticize and replace Russell's famous theory of definite descriptions. Noun-phrases beginning with the definite article, for example, "The Prime Minister of England," "The man over there," "The cleverest man in the world," are called definite descriptions. Russell's theory proposes that a sentence of the form "The F is G" (call this sentence S), is equivalent to, or is to be analyzed as, "There is one and only one F and it is G" (call this sentence SR). According to this analysis the occurrence of a definite description signals the assertion of an existential claim, "there is an F," and a uniqueness claim, "and only one F." The analysis also implies that the utterance of sentence S is false if there is no such thing as "the F," since S is analyzed as saying that there is an F (see RUSSELL).

Strawson makes three main criticisms. (1) He first argues that the theory is unsupported. According to Strawson, Russell regarded S as equivalent to SR because he thought that sentences of the S form are meaningful even if there is no F, which they could not be if they are of subject-predicate form. Strawson comments that it is neces-

sary in thinking about language to distinguish between roughly a sentence and the use of a sentence. Sentences have meaning, but that does not require that each use of a meaningful sentence expresses a true-or-false assertion. Strawson's distinction is important and has had a prominent place in recent theories of indexicals and demonstratives. However, the claim that Russell's overlooking of the distinction is "the source of Russell's mistake" has not been widely accepted. The reason is that Russell's own arguments and intuitions primarily relate to what Strawson calls "uses." It is the content conveyed by uses to which Russell is attending. (2) Strawson further argued that S would not be regarded as false in cases where there is no F, rather the question of its truth or falsity does not arise. This became known as the "truth-value gap" thesis. (3) Strawson's main argument, however, is that it is obvious that a speaker who uses "the F" is simply not *saying* that there exists such a thing as the F; rather the speaker implies that there is an F by employing "the F," in speaking to the audience, to refer to the object. In this respect he compared the use of definite descriptions to that of demonstratives (such as "that" and "this"). Arguments (2) and (3) were both contested and debated. The existence of truth-value gaps was denied, and it was also denied that we can just tell what we are saying in such cases. Further, evidence was produced that supported the conclusion that in many cases "the" is not a device of reference, for example, as in the sentence "The person that each man most admires is his mother."

In subsequent work Strawson refined and limited his account. In *Introduction to Logical Theory* he introduced the term "presupposition" for the relation that he thought existed between saying "The F is G" and the claim "There is an F." Roughly, presupposition holds between P and Q if the truth of P requires the truth of Q, but the falsity of Q does not require the falsity of P. If Q is false the question of P's truth does not arise. This terminology and the investigation of such a relation (or related relations) has been more prominent in linguistics than philosophy.

Strawson added two other important ideas. First he investigated the nature of reference (both in *Individuals* and "Identifying Reference and Truth Values" in Strawson 1971) and provided an account or model of what he calls "identifying reference." The very commonsensical idea is that both speaker and audience have their respective and different knowledge of objects in the world, and in the central case the speaker chooses a referring expression that he judges appropriate to enable the audience to identify amongst the objects they know, the one being spoken of. The speaker invokes or rather relies on the audience's knowledge of the object but does not need to inform or tell the audience of the object's existence. This is an amplification of Strawson's central intuition about the use of the definite article. Second, Strawson persuasively separated the claim that at least one role of definite descriptions is to make identifying reference from the claim that sentences containing empty definite descriptions are neither true nor false (the truth-value gap thesis). He claims that identifying reference can be characterized without implying that such gaps exist. He proposed instead that the consequence for truth-value of reference-failure is partly determined by the relation between the definite description and the different topics of the discourse. Where the description aims at fixing the topic the result of reference failure is a truth-value gap; where the description figures in a supplementing claim about another topic, the result is falsehood. For example, if, in a talk on the constitution of England, I start by telling you about the president of England, you would dismiss my remarks as confused, but if, in

describing the visitors to the Tower of London I listed the president of England you would dismiss that as false.

This proposal has not persuaded everyone and the debate continues, fueled by later important contributions by Keith Donnellan and Kripke. One fundamental question about Strawson's more recent account is whether it accords an over-central role to the notion of identification in understanding reference. It is a mark, though, of the importance of Strawson's contribution that his original article is still influential.

## Truth

In an early paper, Strawson endorsed a Ramsey style redundancy theory of truth, according to which the fundamental characterization of truth is that to say it is true that  $p$  is simply to say that  $p$  (see RAMSEY). To this he added some observations about the speech acts standardly performed by use of "true," stressing these to such an extent that he was interpreted as endorsing an analysis of "true" solely in terms of the speech acts it is used to perform, a so-called "performative" theory of truth. In the 1950s and 1960s the idea of a performative analysis, by then renounced by Strawson, was ignored and replaced by a debate, involving Strawson, Austin, G. J. Warnock, and others, into the respective merits of the redundancy theory compared to a version of the correspondence theory suggested by Austin, and refined by Warnock. Strawson's approach was to propound and defend against criticism the redundancy theory, and to criticize the correspondence theory. This was the main debate about truth until Dummett, with his anti-realist approach, and Davidson, moved it in new directions (see DUMMETT).

Austin offered the following analysis of truth: a statement is said to be true when the historic state of affairs to which it is correlated by the demonstrative conventions . . . is of a type with which the sentence used in making it is correlated by the descriptive conventions. His aim was to analyze truth as a correspondence relation between statement and world without explaining the correspondence relation, as correspondence theorists have often done, in terms of a structural isomorphism between world and representation. Austin's reference to conventions is meant to avoid such a notion.

Strawson's critical response to Austin is very rich, but we can distinguish three main lines of criticisms. (1) Many attributions of truth cannot be regarded as saying anything about actual statements, as Austin's account seems to imply they have to be. Someone might, for example, begin a talk by saying, "Although it is true that  $p$ ,  $q$ ," without it being necessary that there is a statement that  $p$  by someone else to be talked about. (2) Strawson treats talk of states of affairs as equivalent to talk of facts, for which he proposes, in effect, its own redundancy theory. Talk of facts cannot figure in a serious analysis of truth, since to say that it is a fact that  $p$  is equivalent to saying that it is true that  $p$ , both simply saying  $p$ . As Strawson puts it; "There is no nuance, except of style, between 'That's true' and 'That's a fact'" (1971: 196). (3) Strawson's major criticism is that "although we use the word 'true' when the semantic conditions described by Austin are fulfilled," the word "true" patently does not state that those conditions are fulfilled. In using the word "true," it is, according to Strawson, obvious that nothing is being *said* about the conventions of language. "It is true that  $p$ " is no more about language than is " $p$ ." This argument, the initial concession in which seems not to be entirely consistent with objection (2), resembles Strawson's main argument against

Russell's theory of definite descriptions. In both cases, Strawson is relying on his sense of what is being said or spoken about in particular parts of natural language.

Strawson's criticisms were generally taken as persuasive, but the debate continued in at least two very interesting directions. One arose out of an observation by Warnock that, even if Strawson's criticism (1) had revealed problems for Austin's account, it remains plausible to claim that in ascribing truth very often something is said about a statement. Indeed, Strawson himself had endorsed the common claim that statements rather than sentences are, as it is said, "the bearers of truth." What is it, then, that they bear? Agreeing to this is, though, difficult for the redundancy theory since it does not treat ". . . is true" as expressing a property of anything. Strawson clarified this issue and ingeniously showed that even in a redundancy theory analysis it is possible to include reference to statements. Thus, "S's claim that *p* is true" can be treated as "As S claimed, *p*." It is difficult not to feel that in this debate the real problem which Warnock was gesturing at was lost; the intuition (whether right or wrong) is not simply that a statement is referred to, but that something is ascribed to it, that it is the bearer of something.

Second, Strawson revised his earlier view that Austin's account of the two types of conventions is at least an accurate specification of *when* we use "true." Strawson, in effect, argues that once the referential conventions attaching to certain words in a sentence and the descriptive conventions attaching to others are worked through to determine what is said, there is no discerning separable demonstrative convention attaching to the sentence as a whole to contrast with the descriptive conventions also governing the sentence as a whole. It is a measure of Strawson's success as a critic that Austin's version of the correspondence theory lacks current supporters. Moreover, in the course of his articles Strawson contributed much to the amplification of a redundancy view. (Searle's contribution to Hahn 1998, plus Strawson's reply, illuminate the debate.)

## Logical theory

Some account must be given of Strawson's first book, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (1952), but of all of his books it is the one that has dated most and so I shall be brief. The book has three main aims: first, to be an introductory description of formal logic; second to provide a philosophically adequate analysis of the concepts central to thinking about logic, in particular the concept of entailment; and, third, to determine how far the devices of artificial formal logic provide an accurate account of the significance of the expressions in natural language. This last task is simply a generalized form of what is at stake in Strawson's response to Russell.

The first task is elegantly done in many respects, for example in his discussion, in chapter 2, of logical form, but there is no serious attention to the role in formal logic of proof systems, nor is a rigorous semantics developed; and because of this the fundamental contrast between syntactic and semantic notions is not explained, nor are the notions of consistency and completeness. Strawson (in chapter 1, part 3) analyzes the proposition that A entails B as saying that the proposition (A and not B) is self-contradictory, and adds that the defect of self-contradiction is that one does not say anything by uttering a contradiction. However, no clear account is given of self-contradiction, nor is any proper defence given of the claim that self-contradictory sentences

say nothing (rather than that they say something contradictory). It is in relation to the third task that the book is still relevant. In chapter 3 Strawson undertakes a careful comparison between the significance of the formal logical constants and their natural language analogues. He argues that there are significant differences in each case. For example, he claims that “&” is purely conjunctive, whereas “and” can sometimes convey information about temporal order. He also argues that “ $P \rightarrow Q$ ” is true if  $P$  is false, but that “If  $P$  then  $Q$ ” is not automatically true in those circumstances. Strawson’s arguments are ingenious but they stimulated Grice to devise his own theory about how to distinguish what is literally meant and what is otherwise conveyed or implied. In the light of Grice’s theory some of Strawson’s points look disputable. However, Strawson and others have themselves disputed elements in Grice’s theory, and the debate, in particular about conditionals, remains open.

The general slogan that Strawson endorses is that “ordinary expressions have no exact and systematic logic” (1952: 57). Strawson means by this that it is not possible to give to natural language expressions an abstract meaning assignment which exhausts what they count as conveying across all contexts. Strawson’s slogan anticipates recent and very fruitful ideas about language. However, Strawson himself did not embed this intuition in a full theory. The final chapter of *Introduction to Logical Theory* is a famous discussion about induction, which I shall consider when discussing Strawson’s epistemology.

## Meaning and related notions

Only a brief account of Strawson’s discussion of meaning and related notions is possible. He has been critical of at least three approaches to meaning in recent philosophy. Of the approach associated with Quine, which is broadly skeptical about a range of intuitive notions of meaning, Strawson has written in numerous places. Against it he makes the following points. First, the skepticism is grounded on arguments which claim that the meaning-notion cannot be adequately explained in certain preferred terms, say behavioral ones, but there is no reason to ground the semantic notions that way. Second, the notions can be validated by the plain agreement between people in the judgments they make. Third, the notions are indispensable to us as language users; thus, we simply cannot speak and think in the way we do without talking of meaning and sameness of meaning. And fourth, the notions are indispensable to the theoretical study of language and logic as well; thus logic cannot do without propositions.

In “Meaning and Truth” (in Strawson 1971) Strawson criticized another approach, that of Davidson, according to which a theory of meaning should be a truth definition (see DAVIDSON). Strawson’s argument, which is rather complex, is, in effect, that the notion of truth is secondary to the notion of saying and thinking, and that therefore, meaning, together with truth, has to be grounded in a relation between sentences and the cognitive roles and communicative purposes of speakers and hearers. This idea led him to endorse a modified version of Grice’s approach to meaning. In other places he has criticized specific proposals by Davidson about the analysis of language. Finally, Strawson has rejected the anti-realist ideas of Dummett and others, with their approaches to meaning (see DUMMETT). Strawson sees anti-realism as a version of revisionary metaphysics, which is unbelievable and unsupported, and it cannot form the

core of a satisfactory account of the meaning of ordinary judgments. Whether finally successful or not, Strawson's clear and elegant discussions of these views have been influential.

## Individuals

*Individuals* was published in 1959. It proved immediately, and has remained, both controversial and extremely influential. The book is divided into two parts, and it is the first part, called "Particulars," which includes the three very famous chapters, "Bodies," "Sounds," and "Persons," that has attracted special attention, and that I shall describe.

In the Introduction, Strawson sets out the important distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics. "Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure" (p. 9). Strawson makes a number of claims employing this distinction; (1) *Individuals* is an example of descriptive metaphysics; (2) revisionary metaphysics is "at the service of" descriptive metaphysics; (3) Aristotle and Kant are descriptive metaphysicians, Descartes, Leibniz, and Berkeley are revisionary; and (4) descriptive metaphysics being general cannot avail itself solely of the resources generated by ordinary conceptual analysis. This vividly expressed distinction, which is certainly valuable for philosophical taxonomy, and these claims, have often been accepted, but queries can be raised, of which I shall mention two. First, Strawson's own practice is not purely descriptive. He offers explanations, propounds necessities, and rejects criticisms, as well as simply describing. Second, and relatedly, the division does not exhaust the types of metaphysics. There is also what we might call "anti-revisionary metaphysics" which amounts to a defence of the extant conceptual scheme, or a criticism of a suggested revision. As well as being descriptive, Strawson's practice is also anti-revisionary.

In the first chapter, "Bodies," Strawson introduces some important concepts and argues that material bodies are the "basic particulars from the point of view of identification" (p. 5). The first concept is that of a speaker identifying a particular object for an audience. This occurs when a speaker refers to an object and the audience is able to identify the object being referred to. The second concept is that of identification dependence. Thus, it might be that our ability to identify, in the first sense, one sort of particular depends on our ability to identify another sort of particular, but not vice versa. If so, there is identification dependence of the former sort on the latter sort. The third concept is that of reidentification; this is Strawson's term for an identity judgment in which an item encountered on one occasion is identified with an item encountered on another.

Armed with these concepts, Strawson advances three main claims. The first concerns the way we are able, in the course of understanding reference, to identify what items are referred to. Strawson's picture is that we can do so either by locating them amongst those sensibly present to us, roughly, perceivable by us at that time, or by possessing identifying descriptions which items satisfy. Seeing such a two-fold structure to reference is well known. Russell spoke likewise of knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Strawson's view of perception is, though, quite different from Russell's, and so the items discernible through experience can really be in space. There

is, though, a worry about descriptions: how do we know that only one item falls under them? Strawson's answer is that the particulars we identify are locatable uniquely in the spatiotemporal framework, say at the unique intersection of various spatial coordinates, and we can therefore guarantee uniqueness within that framework. We can relate the general framework to the segment of the world we currently perceive.

Second, Strawson suggests that the intelligibility of locating items in the spatiotemporal framework (e.g. as the fountain in Trafalgar Square) requires relatively abiding structures of reidentifiable items (e.g. the National Gallery). Hence, to talk of objects within this framework is inconsistent with skepticism about reidentification.

Third, Strawson argues that our ability to identify bodies does not depend on an ability to identify particulars of any other kind, but all other kind of particulars, for example, private particulars, such as the pain in my left foot, unobservable particulars, and particular events, do depend on the identification of bodies. "Material bodies, therefore, are basic to particular identification" (1959: 55).

Many features of Strawson's argument have been challenged, but I shall note only two things. First, Strawson argues in the case of some other candidates, notably events, that they are not basic because they do not present a regular enough framework to be the basis for defining a coordinate system. Clearly, this failure (if it is a failure) is contingent. So, the conclusion about the unique status of bodies is itself contingent. Second, Strawson's notion of identification is an interpersonal one; it concerns what a hearer is able to identify as being referred to by another. It must, therefore, be recognized that the dependency thesis need not be true of the individual thought capacities of a single person.

Strawson continues his investigation of the role of space in our conceptual scheme, argued to be fundamental in chapter 1, by seeing to what extent we can imagine a subject of non-spatial experience who is capable of applying concepts of objective and reidentifiable particulars. The contrast that must be present in this conceptual scheme is that between type identity – being the same sort again – and numerical identity – being the same individual again. Strawson chooses a creature with pure sound experience, which he claims would be non-spatial. He asks whether (1) a subject of such experiences could make sense of numerical identity and (2) whether it could make sense of the self/non-self distinction, which Strawson takes to be central to thinking of objects. In considering (1) Strawson's idea is that an analogue of space is necessary. He imaginatively proposes to generate that by putting into the experience a master sound of constant timbre, but varying pitch and loudness, changes in which are meant to represent movement, along with a relatively constant correlation between points on the master sound and collections of other sound to generate the idea of reidentifiable particular objective sounds. Strawson does not claim that this is sufficient, but only that it is not obviously insufficient. In relation to (2) Strawson suggests that there are no very hopeful grounds for introducing the distinction in such an impoverished experience world.

Strawson's imaginative exercise is brilliantly discussed by G. Evans (in Van Straaten 1980), who proposes that Strawson's employment of the master sound underestimates the significance of space and space-occupation in our thought about the world. It can be said, though, that Evans's further insights rest on Strawson's pioneering explorations.

## **Persons and states of mind**

Chapter 3 of *Individuals* is, perhaps, the most discussed chapter of the book, and it deserves a separate section, bringing in, as well, Strawson's later consideration of related issues in *Scepticism and Naturalism*, chapter 3. Strawson's argument begins by picking up on a theme that had emerged in relation to the sound world. How is the self/non-self distinction drawn? To consider this, the nature of our basic concept of ourselves needs to be described. Strawson claims that the fundamental aspect of this concept is that there is a single thing to which we attribute both physical features and states of consciousness (or psychological properties more generally).

Thus I, a single thing, am six feet tall *and* in pain. The question then is transformed into two; why do we ascribe states of consciousness to anything, and why to the same thing as physical states? Strawson then argues that we do not answer either question by noting the causal importance of our bodies to the character of our psychological states. This is simply not the right kind of fact to answer the question. Two other accounts of our thought about ourselves are introduced, and argued to give incoherent accounts. The first claims that contrary to appearances we do not ascribe mental states to anything – the so-called “no-ownership theory.” But such an account must explain what is going on when we seem to self-ascribe states of consciousness. It proposes that we are noting the facts of causal dependence cited earlier. But, as Strawson points out, the causal dependence is of my own experiences on this body, not of all experiences on this body, and so the disavowed ascription of experiences to myself reappears.

The other account, Cartesian dualism, denies that we ascribe the two sorts of properties to the same thing; rather we ascribe the physical sort to our body and the mental sort to ourselves, a non-physical ego. The problem, according to Strawson, with this is that self-ascription of mental states presupposes the ability to ascribe such states to others, since it is in the nature of predicates to have a general application, and within the Cartesian framework there is no way to pick out other subjects to make such ascriptions. The problem is that to pick out another subject I must do so via the idea that the subject relates to a certain body as I do to mine. But this presupposes I can already think of myself. Strawson further argues that the very notion of a non-spatial particular, such as an ego is supposed to be, lacks intelligibility, for how can we understand how it is possible that there be two such which are otherwise the same when they cannot be distinguished spatially?

Strawson proposes that we have to take the concept of a person as primitive, not illusory or decomposable into elements. He then divides the predicates that we self- and other-ascribe into P-predicates, those which are unique to persons, and M-predicates, those which we share with material bodies. It follows, he thinks, that the criteria on the basis of which we ascribe P-predicates to others must be logically adequate, that is, be such that no skeptical problems can arise in the optimal case, on pain of not having an intelligible structure of concepts at all. So the philosophical problem of other minds cannot arise. Strawson adds two things: that the existence of our predicative practice here is partly explained by the special nature of action, the fact that it mixes the bodily and the mental, and that the incoherence of the Cartesian model does not imply that we cannot imagine becoming disembodied.

Strawson's description of the way we think of ourselves, as, that is, double-sided single things, seems completely correct and very important. Two lines of criticism or debate (amongst many), however, deserve mentioning. It is unclear what epistemological implications can be drawn from the plausible idea that predicates must have an intelligible potential application to a range of things. It is also unclear that Strawson should have allowed that persons can become disembodied. (For deep criticisms along the second line see C. B. Martin 1969.)

Strawson's discussion leaves quite open what should be said about a question which became central in the philosophy of mind shortly after the publication of *Individuals*, which is: what is the relation between a person's physical states and his or her mental states? Strawson at most insists that they are states of a single thing. In *Scepticism and Naturalism* (ch. 3) he considers this question and argues that there is a causal relation, rather than one of identity. He therefore rejects materialism and, in effect, espouses a type of theory that used to be called "double aspect." His interesting argument is that there will be no way to unify the mental and the physical stories, and the point of identity judgments is unification. The second premise might, of course, be questioned.

The chapter on Persons, together with that cited above, and his discussion of the Paralogisms in *The Bounds of Sense* (for which see later), constitute a profound and unified treatment of selves.

## **Subjects and predicates**

In Part Two of *Individuals* Strawson provides a theory of the subject/predicate distinction, a task which he regards as fundamental and to which he has, repeatedly, returned. His full theory is given more recently in *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974b), and I shall briefly describe it. It has a strong resemblance to his earlier account. Strawson starts with a series of what might be called marks of the subject/predicate distinction. Thus, predicates have a number of places, whereas subject expressions do not. Predicates can be negated and genuinely compounded whereas subject expressions cannot. Subject expressions are open to quantification, whereas predicates are not, as Quine suggests. Strawson's attitude is that these marks (which may need some modification too) need to be explained and do not give the basic distinction. He proposes to explain them by linking, initially in a central case, the logico-grammatical distinction to an ontological one, namely, the distinction between particulars and universals. Roughly, universals represent ways of classifying or collecting particulars. With this goes the idea that universals form structures; thus, if an object falls under one classification it follows there are others under which it does not fall; or, if it falls under one classification it follows there are others under which it does fall. Universals come in incompatibility ranges or requirement ranges. Nothing analogous applies to particulars.

The suggestion which Strawson develops is that in a language such as English, the logical features of predicates flow from the fact that the role or function of predicates is to introduce a universal, together with the second role of indicating that the referred to item exemplifies the universal. Thus the idea that subject expressions cannot be negated but predicates can is to be explained by the fact that universals form logical structures, whereas particulars do not. The inaccessibility of predicate expressions to

quantification is to be explained by the fact that they have a dual role: of introducing a universal and of indicating exemplification, for the latter is not, as one might say, a something. Strawson then extends his account beyond the basic case. No received assessment of Strawson's highly ingenious proposal has emerged.

## The bounds of sense

Seven years after *Individuals*, Strawson produced *The Bounds of Sense*. In it, he analyzes, criticizes, and develops the central ideas of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The treatment of Kant is unlike that of most commentators in that it is not marked by a hagiographical reverence towards Kant, nor does it simply repeat Kant's language by way of explaining it, nor does it aspire to the length of the *Critique*. Strawson's aim is primarily to separate, insofar as it is possible, Kant's constructive and critical theses from the transcendental idealist framework in which Kant places them, and also to separate them from the outdated science and logic of Kant's time. Strawson's main claim is that transcendental idealism is incoherent, but that there are various theses that are defensible and important, defensible either in the light of what Kant himself offers or on the basis of other arguments which Strawson constructs. What, finally, is most distinctive of Strawson's treatment is the brilliant way in which he attempts to extract and defend these metaphysical and epistemological claims.

The argument against transcendental idealism occurs in Part One and Part Four, reaching the conclusion that it is incoherent in two stages. In the first, it is argued that no interpretation of Kant's idealist claims (according to which, of course, the world of space and time is merely a form of appearance, contrasting with the realm of unknowable things in themselves) is satisfactory which treats it as saying something weaker than: real objects are supersensible and we can have no knowledge of them. The second stage reasons that any model sustaining such a claim must be incoherent. Strawson argues this in various ways, but one is to suggest that we ourselves cannot coherently fit into such a picture. If, as Kant says, we merely know how we appear, is this not a genuine truth about ourselves, hence itself not merely a matter of appearance? Typically, Strawson is concerned to dig deeper and to explain Kant's adoption of the model, and he argues that its source is a distorted response to the not-at-all incoherent, indeed, according to Strawson, central to our own thinking, idea that experiences and real objects are causally related. All three elements in Strawson's response to transcendental idealism – its interpretation, evaluation, and explanation – have been disputed. (See, for example, Allison 1983 and Walker 1978.) But Strawson's independent assessment has been the stimulus of this renewed interest.

Of much greater philosophical importance, though, is Strawson's attempt to detach the central constructive and critical theses of the *Critique* from transcendental idealism and to assess them. Kant represents the purpose of the *Critique* as explaining how the synthetic a priori is possible. In his constructive reinterpretation, Strawson replaces this by the question, What features are essential to any conception of experience that we can make intelligible to ourselves? He calls the task of answering this "the metaphysics of experience." The Kantian idea is that from the notion of a self-conscious subject, who can self-ascribe its experiences, we can derive substantial conditions that must be met by the content of experiences thus enjoyed. The first condition is that it

must include awareness of what are recognizably independent objects (the objectivity thesis). Further, these objects must be recognizably spatial (the spatiality thesis), and they must satisfy various principles of permanence and causation (the thesis of the Analogies).

Strawson argues that Kant's own thesis about permanence and causation are too strong, but that rather weaker claims about semi-permanence and the necessary applicability of causal notions can be defended. However, the most crucial and brilliant, but to some extent obscure, part of Strawson's reconstruction is his defense of the objectivity thesis. Why must experience sometimes be of, or as of, objects? The argument starts, of course, from the Kantian assumption that we are dealing with the experiences of a self-conscious subject, that is, one who can ascribe to itself the experiences. For there to be any content to such ascriptions, that is, for the classification of the status of such occurrences as experiences to have a point, there must be some understanding of the contrasting status of not being an experience. This contrast or distinction can be present only if the creature's experiences, which, after all, are what sustain its concept applications, sustain the application of non-experiential categories. But that is to require that some of the experiences must present, or be of, items of a non-experiential kind. Such items must, that is, be recognized as objects.

This, in a very compressed statement, seems to be Strawson's argument. He concludes that there cannot be a genuine problem of justifying our belief in objects, for such a problem requires a vantage point where there is self-ascription of experiences without any objective judgments, which collectively await justification. No such vantage point is available. Strawson's argument clearly has affinities with Wittgenstein's private language argument. Of course, it has received much critical examination, a particularly subtle example of which is Cassam's (1995). One point is that the argument seems to rely on the assumption that categories only have contentful application in virtue of there being cases which do not fall under them, but this assumption may be rejected. Another issue is whether a thesis like the objectivity thesis relates to how experience must seem, or to how its actual objects must be.

In subsequent chapters Strawson considers what can be defended from Kant's arguments in the Analogies. Here the strong Kantian thesis cannot be sustained, but weaker versions are, according to Strawson, defensible. Thus, for experience to be recognizably of objects, the experiencer must be able to distinguish the temporal history of the objects from those of the experiences, which requires that the objects as experienced yield a framework in terms by which to keep track of them, both spatially and temporally; and this requires that the experiences ground the application of concepts of enduring objects (in one sense, that is, of substances). Further, as Strawson puts it, objects have to be understood as the ground of "compendia of causal laws." So the application of causal notions is also required. The latter stages of argument here both resemble and develop the arguments in *Individuals*.

The *Bounds of Sense* also analyzes the critical program of the Dialectic. It does so in a deep and very illuminating way, especially in connection with the illusions of rational psychology as exposed in the Paralogisms. Strawson sees Kant's achievement in that section as refuting attempts to infer that selves are special non-physical things from what are undoubtedly special epistemological features of self-knowledge. The major incompleteness in Kant's account is his reluctance to settle for an embodied self, limited

as he is by his transcendental idealism. The result is that Strawson's book has had an enormous impact on both Kantian scholarship and recent metaphysics.

## Responses to skepticism

Strawson has had a number of interests as an epistemologist. He has not attempted to provide an analysis of knowledge, but he has tried to describe its structure, and especially to give an accurate account of the role of perception within that structure. However, his influence has been greatest in his role as opponent of skepticism. But his attitude to skepticism has evolved, and I want to describe briefly four main stages.

In *Introduction to Logical Theory*, he argued in relation to the particular case of induction, that when the skeptic claims that no justification has been provided, there is no intelligible and possible thing that can be understood by "justification." The correct response to skepticism is, therefore, not to try to provide a justification but to see that there cannot be such a thing. Why cannot there be such a thing? The answer to this emerges when one of a range of fuller specifications of the task is given. Thus, one way of understanding the notion of justification here takes it to require showing that inductive support is really deductive. Clearly this is absurd, in that it requires an obliteration of the very distinctive method of support that raises the problem in the first place. Another understanding is that a justification would amount to showing induction is a reasonable procedure; but this is not something that needs to be *shown*, since "being reasonable" precisely means following induction. Another understanding is that a justification would be a proof that induction is bound to work; but such a proof is impossible. There is, according to Strawson, no coherent demand here. The structure of Strawson's argument here leaves room for someone to find a coherent interpretation of the skeptic's claim, and subsequent discussion has either aimed at doing that, or at disputing the analytic claims Strawson himself makes.

In *Individuals*, Strawson seems to have argued that skepticism is incoherent in that possession of the concepts that the skeptic needs to identify the topic of his own skepticism itself requires a non-skeptical attitude towards the (best) bases of application for those concepts. For example, having mental concepts involves understanding their application across a range including others and this requires that the criteria of application to others are logically adequate. Strawson argues in a similar way in respect of across-time identity judgments. The much-debated question about such claims is whether it is shown that the adoption of a skeptical attitude is really inconsistent with understanding.

The third sort of response that Strawson has explored, in *The Bounds of Sense*, are transcendental arguments. The idea is that the skeptic himself supposes that some conceptual applications are possible, for example, a non-committal description of experience. But it is argued that the very ascriptions that the skeptic is prepared to make presuppose the application of the concepts that he is skeptical about. Thus, Strawson argues, as we have seen, that the self-ascription of experiences requires judgments about objects. Now, there is no a priori reason to hold such an argument could not be correct, but any transcendental argument of more than minimal length runs the risk of overlooking a way in which the skeptic's concepts can have application without needing the ones in dispute.

Finally, in *Scepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson suggested another response. Arguing as he thinks in the spirit of Hume but especially of Wittgenstein, he draws a distinction between real doubts which are worth engaging with and unreal doubts which cannot assail anyone and which are not worth responding to. The traditional skeptical doubts fall into the second category. No one ever seriously wondered whether there is an external world. Strawson suggests that we do not need therefore to *argue* against skepticism. This very bold and historically informed response has not been popular, the ground being that it is not obvious that the non-persuasiveness of an argument means it need not be engaged with. It might also be wondered whether the historical roots for such a response are not more Lockean than Humean (see MOORE).

Still, in postwar analytical philosophy no agreed response to skepticism has emerged, and Strawson can be credited with the development of a number of the candidates still being investigated.

### **Freedom and resentment**

Strawson has written little about moral philosophy, his attitude to it being, perhaps, somewhat similar to that expressed by C. D. Broad, when he reputedly said that the whole of moral philosophy could be written on the back of a postage stamp. However, one of Strawson's essays on moral philosophy, namely, "Freedom and Resentment" (in 1974a, but first published in 1962) has been extremely influential. Interestingly, Strawson's argument in this article bears a close relation to the case against skepticism in his 1985 book.

Strawson's aim is to find a position in the debate about determinism and responsibility that avoids incompatibilism (which Strawson relabels "pessimism") but without distorting the nature of our moral view of ourselves and others in the way in which, according to Strawson, standard compatibilists do. Standard compatibilists observe that our practices of punishing and praising would have a utility even if determinism was accepted. Strawson claims that viewing the issue this way over-intellectualizes the basis for such practices, which is not reflectively shaped by considerations of utility, but rather is the upshot of certain central reactive attitudes engendered in the course of ordinary human life. Examples are resentment and gratitude, which are directed at others, but also guilt and remorse, which are self-directed. The reconciling project is based on the following claims: such attitudes and feelings are produced in us in the course of our normal participation in human life, with its necessary engagement with others; the attitudes can be suspended in exceptional circumstances, for example, when dealing with people who are palpably mentally abnormal. They cannot, however, be universally suspended, because they are integral to human relationships that we cannot abandon. And when they are suspended in the limited cases where this is possible it is not because we see the cases in the light of a general conviction in determinism, but rather because of more specific reasons, which vary from case to case. Strawson draws from the alleged impossibility of abandoning such reactions, and the absence of a dependence of them on a rejection of determinism, his central compatibilist conclusion that determinism is no threat to their legitimacy. He draws from the claim that they are natural and not governed by consequentialist considerations the conclusion that standard compatibilists have distorted the character of our moral responses.

Strawson's paper was important because it represented a novel compatibilist approach. The central issue it raises, though, resembles that raised by his observation that people are not persuaded by skeptical arguments. Does the fact that people will carry on believing or doing something show that it is beyond criticism, or legitimate for them to do so?

## Conclusion

The most striking aspect of Strawson's philosophical career has been his extraordinary fertility, combined with the consistent depth and clarity of what he has produced. In the present essay, there has not been space to survey many aspects of his work. A final indication of his importance, though, is his influence on the very best philosophers of the generations after his, of whom I wish to mention only two. The first is Gareth Evans, whose book *The Varieties of Reference* is clearly colossally influenced by Strawson. The second is John McDowell, who in the preface to *Mind and World* pays eloquent tribute to Strawson. What might be called a Strawsonian tradition has emerged.

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