



PETER STRAWSON

Gillman and Soame, Oxford

Peter Frederick Strawson

1919–2006

Introduction

PETER FREDERICK STRAWSON WAS BORN in Ealing, London, on 23 November 1919, and died in Oxford on 13 February 2006. His life as a philosopher was spent mostly in positions at Oxford, first as a Fellow at University College, and then, after 1968, as Ryle's successor as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy, at Magdalen College. Writing primarily about the philosophy of language, metaphysics, epistemology and the history of philosophy, he succeeded in redirecting Oxford philosophy away from the limitations which had to some extent been accepted under the influence of J. L. Austin, towards a re-engagement with some traditional and also some new abstract philosophical issues. He established from the early 1950s onwards a pre-eminence within Oxford philosophy, both through his publications but also by his quite exceptional, although never brutal, critical abilities. Simultaneously, he established himself as one of the leading philosophers in the world.

His achievements were recognised by election in 1960, at a remarkably early age, to the British Academy, the conferring of a knighthood in 1977, and by many other honours and invitations from universities throughout the world. He lectured widely in North America, Europe and India. In 1998 he became the twenty-sixth philosopher to have a volume devoted to him in the famous, and famously exclusive, Library of Living Philosophers series. Earlier British recipients of this honour were Whitehead, Russell, Moore, Broad and Ayer. He carried on working after his retirement in 1987, and a volume of essays, of which he was co-editor

and which includes two essays of his own, came out after his death.¹ Unlike some other recent British philosophers of distinction, notably A. J. Ayer and Bernard Williams, Strawson did not, and had no desire to, become a figure in popular culture or the world of the 'great and the good'. He was, however, probably the most famous and most discussed British philosopher within the academic world of philosophy from the 1950s until the late 1980s. His status is evidenced by the fact that his writings attracted the attention of, and were discussed by, the world's leading philosophers, including, Russell, Sellars, Putnam, Quine, Davidson and Kripke.

Life and works

Strawson was brought up in Finchley, and educated at Christ's College. His parents were both school teachers, and his mother had, like Strawson himself, an excellent memory for verse. Strawson was the second child, between two brothers, and he also had a younger sister.² One of his passions then (and, indeed, throughout his life) was English literature and he was awarded an open scholarship at St John's College, Oxford, to study English. However, in part because he had already developed an interest in philosophy, and in part because he wanted to study subjects which he felt to be relevant to the threatening political climate in Europe, on arrival at the college in 1937 he immediately changed subjects to Philosophy, Politics and Economics. His tutors in philosophy were J. D. Mabbott, later to become Master of the college, and H. P. Grice, whom Strawson himself described as 'one of the cleverest and most ingenious thinkers of our time'.³ Tutorials with Grice clearly inspired Strawson, and the two continued as colleagues and collaborators (and also rivals) after the war. Strawson famously gained a second in finals, the reason being that by

¹ P. F. Strawson and Arindam Chakrabarti (eds.), *Universals, Concepts and Qualities* (Aldershot, 2006).

² Strawson's younger brother John had a military career of considerable distinction. He attained the rank of Major-General, was for three years Chief of Staff United Kingdom Land Forces, and was awarded a CB and OBE. He is also a military historian of note and author of a dozen books. Between them they have written over twenty books!

³ This quotation comes from Strawson's own 'Intellectual Autobiography' contained in the volume about him in the Library of Living Philosophers. Strawson's description of his own life also provides much of the information upon which my account of it is based. It is also a marvellous document which conveys or reveals, as well as much about his life and thought, a lot about his character and passions.

1940 finals marking heavily involved older dons, many of the younger ones being away promoting the war effort, and Strawson's novel views about philosophy did not win favour with an older marker. Rumour also has it that efforts by a younger don, who shall be nameless, to argue in favour of Strawson were not helped by his having lost Strawson's scripts in the proverbial taxi.⁴

Strawson was then called up for military service, and so belongs to that generation of British philosophers, including Ayer, Hare, and Hampshire, who saw service in the Second World War. Strawson described his own military career as in 'no way distinguished'. It began in the Royal Artillery, when his training in Sussex allowed him to watch the aerial activity of the Battle of Britain and to observe the night sky over London as it was bombed by the Luftwaffe. He was then selected by the Army to master the intricacies of radar, leading to the command of a radar station, and, in 1942, to a commission in the corps of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. His eloquence and quick wit made Strawson highly effective in the role of defending officer at courts martial, helping many to receive punishments far more lenient than perhaps they deserved. After postings to Italy and Austria, Strawson left the army in 1946 with the rank of captain.

Shortly before that, in 1945, Strawson married Ann Martin, having bestowed the name Ann upon her in preference to her original first name of 'Grace'. He said that his decision to marry Ann was 'probably the most judicious action' of his life and described her as 'a perfect wife'. They had four children of whose different talents and achievements he was very proud. One of his sons, Galen Strawson, is himself an eminent philosopher, and his other son and two daughters are gifted musicians. John, Strawson's younger brother, described their marriage in these words; 'He shared a very happy marriage with his charming, intelligent, accomplished and loving wife, Ann, and they were fortunate indeed to have four comely and talented children, all of whom had a bent for music. Not every man after all could reflect that he had his own family quartet, capable of doing justice to Beethoven or Bach or Haydn.'⁵

Strawson returned from the war wanting to become a philosopher but handicapped by his aberrant finals result. Thanks to Mabbott's influence he secured an Assistant Lecturership in the subject at Bangor, but returned

⁴ I am grateful to Bill Child, of University College, Oxford, for that information (or, perhaps, misinformation).

⁵ This quotation comes from John Strawson's address at the memorial service for Strawson held in Magdalen College, Oxford, in 2006.

to Oxford to sit for and come first in the John Locke Examination. His success eased his financial position and also caused Ryle to ensure that he received an appointment at University College, Oxford, which made him a full Fellow in 1948. Strawson's Oxford career had by then properly started, and two years later, in 1950, the publication of 'On Referring' in *Mind* and his debate at the Aristotelian Society Joint Session with, and the publication of his reply to, Austin about truth, brought him instantaneous national and international fame.

(i) Reference⁶

Strawson exploded onto the scene of world philosophy when he published 'On Referring' in 1950. (Like Frege, Russell and, later, Kripke, Strawson ensured his philosophical immortality by writing about reference.) He subsequently modified and developed his views on reference, but the central claim of 'On Referring' is something he always defended. Strawson's title contains, of course, an allusion to Russell's famous article 'On Denoting', the central idea of which Strawson is criticising. Strawson's conception of the debate is that Russell offered his theory of descriptions as a complete account of the role of definite descriptions in English (such expressions as 'the queen of England') whereas the truth is that the role of the word 'the' when embedded in definite descriptions cannot be captured in a single account. There are uses which Russell's theory does not fit because the phenomenon is simply more complex than Russell allowed. It is not, therefore, that Strawson is offering his own complete theory; it is, rather, that he is picking out uses for which, according to him, Russell's theory fails, and characterising them. That this is the way to understand Strawson's contribution to the debate has the important consequence that it is no objection to his approach to point to uses of 'the' about which, arguably, Russell (or something close to Russell's view) might be correct. Such points do not touch Strawson's central claim. Strawson's paper initiated a debate about definite descriptions that has run ever since its publication, and in which his views have remained central.

Russell claimed that a sentence of the form 'The F is G' says; "There is one and only one F and it is G." The difference from 'An F is G' is that the latter merely claims that there is *a* (G) F, whereas the use of the defin-

⁶ All the papers by Strawson which are referred to in this section and the next are included in P. F. Strawson, *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London, 1971).

ite article imports the extra claim of uniqueness. Both are alike in making an existential claim about Fs, namely, there is an F, and hence, according to Russell, at least part of the role of 'the' is to be (or to introduce) what is called an existential quantifier. This, in a crude presentation, is Russell's famous Theory of Definite Descriptions. Against this Strawson argued, first, that it is unsupported. He claimed that Russell's main support for his theory is that a sentence such as 'The king of France is bald' remains meaningful even though there is no king of France. Its having meaning cannot, therefore, depend on there being a referent for the apparent subject expression. According to Strawson, Russell infers from that to the conclusion that the semantic role of the apparent subject expression in such sentences (i.e. 'the F') cannot be to refer to or designate an object, and must, rather, function as a quantifier. Against this Strawson suggested that the meaningfulness of 'The F is G' should be thought of as, roughly, there being rules as to what a use of the sentence in different circumstances will amount to. If the circumstances are right then it can be used in a referring way; if they are not then the use might not succeed in being an act of reference. Strawson's distinction between a sentence's having a meaning and the speech act performed by its use on an occasion is clearly sound and important. One question that was debated is whether Russell's reasons for his theory are all disarmed by the introduction of that distinction.

However, against the Russellian theory itself Strawson made the important point that the theory implies that a sentence of the form 'The F is G' must count as false when used in circumstances where there is no F. (These cases are often described as ones involving 'reference failure'.) It must do so because, according to the theory, part of the role of 'The F' (at least in such declarative sentences) is to say that there is an F. Contrary to this, Strawson claims that we would not always regard a saying of 'The F is G' as false in such circumstances. We would not react by saying 'That is false' but would rather say something like 'What do you mean?' or 'You must be under a misapprehension'. He suggested that in such circumstances the use amounts neither to saying something true nor to saying something false. It exhibits what came to be called a 'truth-value gap'. In discussion it became clear, not that this criticism is definitely mistaken, but that it is difficult to determine what the truth value of sentences involving referential failure actually is. Strawson's main objection to Russell's account is, though, that it is simply obvious that sometimes we use 'The F' to refer to or pick out an object, and we do not then use it to *say* that there is an F.

Strawson's attitude is well presented in a later important paper where he says:

The distinction between identifying reference and uniquely existential assertion is something quite undeniable. The sense in which the existence of something answering to a definite description used for the purpose of identifying reference, and its distinguishability by an audience from anything else, is presupposed and not asserted in an utterance containing such an expression, so used, stands absolutely firm, whether or not one opts for the view that radical failure of the presupposition would deprive the statement of a truth-value. It remains a decisive objection to the theory of Descriptions . . . That . . . it amounts to a denial of these undeniable distinctions.⁷

This passage reveals three important aspects of Strawson's approach to definite descriptions. The first is that his fundamental objection to Russell is that it is simply obvious to him (as it should be to us), as a sensitive and self-reflective user of language, that the use of the word 'the' does not conform to the theory. Whatever puzzles there may be about language and reference, their solution cannot require us to deny such obvious facts. It is a recurring theme in, or perhaps a recurring part of the method of, Strawson's philosophical discussion of language that some aspects of language are more or less obvious to us. Second, one central concept in Strawson's developed description of the role of such an expression as 'The F' is that it can be a device for what he calls identifying reference. Roughly, Strawson's idea is that the definite description is sometimes chosen to enable the audience to fix on or pick out as the subject matter of the claim an item of which they already know. In this role it cannot be that 'The F' tells them of the existence of such an F, since its role rests on the prior existence of such knowledge. Strawson provides a detailed analysis of this function in the first chapter of *Individuals*, as well as in the article from which the quotation above comes. Third, a notion that Strawson introduced in his own description of the nature of definite descriptions and which surfaces in the quotation is that of *presupposition*. Strawson said that the use of a definite description standardly presupposes the existence of an object fitting the description even though it does not say, nor therefore entail, that there is such an object. This concept met with considerable resistance amongst philosophers but has had a colossal influence on linguists, who have tended to see it as a useful concept in the description of language. This paradox encourages us to ask whether it is more likely that linguists or philosophers have the better insight into language.

⁷ P. F. Strawson, 'Identifying Reference and Truth-Values' in *Logico-Linguistic Papers*, p. 85.

(ii) Truth

Just as Strawson's target in the theory of reference was Russell, when discussing truth he developed his views with Austin as the target. Austin was perhaps a target in two ways. First, through his critical brilliance, vehement personality and an apparently revolutionary conception of philosophy, which gave its believers a sense that they were for the first time approaching philosophy correctly, Austin had become the intellectual leader of an outstandingly strong group of philosophers that gathered in Oxford after the Second World War. Strawson himself was part of that group and he attended Austin's Saturday morning meetings where discussion was carried on in line with the recipe approved by Austin's conception. It would not be strictly accurate to say so, but it would convey something close to the truth, if one were to remark that Austin had begun to seem almost infallible. It was therefore important to reveal the non-divinity of the leader. So, Austin himself was a target. Second, Strawson took exception to Austin's attempt to formulate a reconstructed version of the correspondence theory of truth. His theory of truth was also the target. Austin's account is complex, but, roughly, he held that in saying that a statement is true one is saying that the state of affairs which the referential conventions target the statement on to satisfy the conditions which the descriptive conventions target the rest of the sentence on to. To illustrate this with an example. The sentence 'The television is broken' conforms to certain referential conventions which target it on to some state of affairs in the world involving a particular television set and there are also certain descriptive conventions built into the sentence linking it to a type of state of affairs (the containing-a-broken-television type) and the former state of affairs conforms to, or falls under, the descriptively correlated type. Strawson, in criticism, principally alleges that Austin had no clear conception of what the supposed referential conventions link sentences with. Is it objects—say the television? But if it is an object then that is not a state of affairs, and certainly not a fact. Having very thoroughly shaken the ontology of Austin's account, Strawson, somewhat surprisingly seems prepared to allow that the conditions that Austin's account incorporates do, in effect, correlate with when a sentence is true, but, he says, the fulfilment of these conditions is not what we are *claiming* to obtain when we say that it is true. It is simply obvious that remarks about truth are not remarks *about* linguistic conventions. This criticism, I believe, has a similar status to the central criticism of Russell. Strawson's point against Austin is that it is simply obvious that the theory cannot be

correct because it is obvious to us as language users that when we speak of truth we are not speaking of such things as referential (or descriptive) conventions. Finally, Strawson pointed out that Austin's account could only apply to a limited range of statements. If I say 'There are no unicorns' what are the referential targets of my remark?

Strawson's criticisms effectively buried Austin's account. The subsequent discussion occasioned by their debate primarily concerned some issues about the degree to which Strawson's criticisms as a whole were fair to Austin, and also whether the approach to truth that Strawson himself favoured was adequate. Strawson's, rather than Austin's account, became the focus of debate. Strawson himself returned to the former question in later articles, arguing persuasively that even on the most charitable interpretation Austin's idea of two sorts of conventions cannot be made sense of. Strawson himself favoured a view which took as the central insight about truth (deriving from F. P. Ramsey) that to say that P is true is equivalent to saying that P. Strawson's own main contribution to working out this idea was to stress, even though changing his mind about how strongly to stress, the linguistic acts that the word 'true' enables us to perform. This leaves Strawson free to point out that even if Ramsey's equivalence is the fundamental core of the notion of truth, it would not follow that the expression 'true' is a redundant expression. The presence in our language of the term 'true' might be of great, indeed, indispensable, utility.

(iii) Logical Theory

Strawson published his first book *An Introduction to Logical Theory* in 1952. In it he attempted to explain the nature, and the scope and limits, of formal logic. The eminence he had already achieved was reflected in the fact that it received a review by Quine in *Mind*. Strawson's aim, generated, in part, by his reflections on the correct treatment of definite descriptions, is to say what formal logic is. Strawson tries to explain or elucidate the central concepts of formal logic. One of these is the notion of entailment. Strawson favours explaining 'P entails Q' as "'P and not Q" is self contradictory', and explains or elucidates the notion of self contradiction in terms of sentences saying nothing; in effect, they give and then take back simultaneously. Strawson then looks at the notion of form and of proof systems. He applies his ideas to traditional syllogistic logic as well as to modern propositional and predicate logic. It can be wondered how far his elucidation of the central notions is adequate, and it can also be wondered whether he attends to all the notions that need

explanation in relation to formal logic (e.g., consistency and completeness). The main part of his book did not have a large influence on philosophers or logicians. However, three elements in his discussion had and continue to have considerable influence. He gave a fuller explanation of the notion of presupposition than he had previously provided. Second, Strawson asked how far the meaning of ordinary language connectives, such as 'and', 'or' and 'if . . . then . . .', can be equated with those of the truth functional connectives, such as '&', 'V', and '→', that logicians employ. Strawson argued that there are significant differences. His conclusion is that these expressions do not have what might be called a precise logic. The question that Strawson asked has continued to be central in the philosophy of language, and there has been no resolution of it. Grice took an opposite view to Strawson and part of the point of his account of implicature, as opposed to meaning or saying, was to generate an explanation for the data that Strawson appealed to in arguing for a semantic difference between ordinary language and formal logic, without having to postulate a semantic difference. Strawson himself later criticised Grice's theory, at least in relation to conditionals. This debate is still very active. The third element was the approach to the problem of induction that Strawson proposed in the final chapter. I shall describe that later when looking at Strawson's contribution to epistemology.

(iv) *Individuals*

In 1959 Strawson published his second book *Individuals*.⁸ It was ambitious, abstract, wide-ranging and original, and it attracted immediate attention. It has continued to be read and discussed, especially the first half. Strawson classified his task as 'descriptive metaphysics', as opposed to 'revisionary metaphysics'. By calling it 'metaphysics' Strawson was primarily emphasising the abstractness and generality of the questions. A consequence of this generality, Strawson suggests, is that the methods needed for settling the questions are different in kind from those employed in debating less abstract conceptual or philosophical questions. One such method, employed in chapter 2, involves imagining creatures with quite different experiences to our own, and trying to determine their capacities for thinking about objects. By calling it 'descriptive' Strawson means, in part, that he is not recommending revisions or additions to how we think, but I think the term also signals Strawson's conviction that

⁸ P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, 1959).

there is a shared and universal conceptual scheme which we human beings have, and know that we have, and which cannot be given, and which requires no such thing as a justification in terms of more fundamental concepts or claims. All, or almost all, we can do, therefore, is to describe and analyse it (or parts of it). As Strawson notes, his aim is to engage with *one* part of that total structure, namely our ability to direct our thoughts, and speech, on to items in the world. It is possible therefore to see *Individuals* as, in part, a development of Strawson's interest in reference.

Individuals is very much a book of two halves. In the first four chapters Strawson's focus is on our ability to refer to and think about items in our environment, including ourselves. In the second part, again of four chapters, the aim is to elucidate the distinction between subject expressions and predicate expressions. This latter task belongs more to philosophical logic than metaphysics, but the link is, according to Strawson, that the central cases of subject expressions are those picking out the entities to which we basically refer, the character of which it has been the task of the first half to determine. Since, in fact, the book's colossal and immediate impact was due primarily to the brilliance and originality of its first three chapters, I shall describe them in somewhat more detail than the rest of the book. The truth is that reading the argument developed in those chapters generates a continuous intellectual excitement, which the later chapters do not quite match. It is also true that issues to do with the subject–predicate distinction appeal to fewer people than do the issues focused on in the early part.

The question to which chapter 1 is devoted is whether there is a category of entities which we can think about without depending on thought about entities of other categories. The focus initially is not so much on thought as on talking to an audience, and Strawson clarifies the relevant idea of talking about an item by invoking the notion of identifying reference which emerged in his theory of reference. Strawson proposes the following model of latching on to an identifying reference. One case is where the referent is picked out as a currently perceived item—say, *this* page. The other is where it is picked out as falling under a description. Strawson's idea is that ultimately such descriptions need to relate the item in some way to currently perceived items—say, as the painter of *this* picture. (Such a two-fold structure of thought was also accepted by Russell, but arguments in the theory of perception persuaded him that the perceived scene was private rather than, as Strawson holds, public.) Strawson's further idea is that the descriptive relations are fundamentally spatio-

temporal. Thus my ability to think of James I rests on thinking of him as the person ascending the throne in 1603, the present time being 2007. Ultimately I fix on him via his place in a spatio-temporal framework related to my currently perceived environment. Strawson further points out that since we need to update this relational framework over time as we move around, we need to be able to re-identify objects and also places encountered at different times. Strawson draws an important epistemological conclusion from this. Since our ability to maintain a grasp on the spatio-temporal framework depends on acceptance of such identifications, it is incoherent to be sceptical about the procedures we rely on to confirm them while still thinking in terms of the spatio-temporal framework itself. Strawson is then in a position to answer his fundamental question as to whether there is a basic category of items of reference. Obviously reference to theoretical entities is dependent, as is reference to experiences, which rests on reference to their subjects—for example, the pain in *Mary's leg*. Strawson's assumption seems to be that that leaves two candidates; material bodies (in a broad sense) and occurrences. Occurrences, however, cannot be basic since, standardly, they are picked out dependently—e.g., the fire in *that house*—and, moreover, they do not form a structured framework allowing the spatio-temporal framework to be grounded. Bodies emerge as referentially basic.

Strawson next asks, in chapter 2, whether it is possible to think of objective entities in a conceptual scheme in which the basic entities are not bodies. Since, according to the initial argument, if referential thought rests on a spatio-temporal framework then it rests on thought about bodies, this question becomes: can there be thought about objective entities which is non-spatial? Strawson introduces the idea of a creature with only auditory experience, the assumption being that auditory experience on its own is non-spatial. Just what objective notions would be available to such a creature? He imaginatively enters into the sound world to see how far ideas analogous to those that space makes available can be found. The best option relies on relating individual sounds to a continuous 'master sound' which, as it were, defines something analogous to space. Strawson himself appears to think this might work.⁹ Strawson's view seems to be

⁹ This brilliant chapter, quite unlike anything anyone else was thinking about, eventually occasioned an equally brilliant commentary by Gareth Evans, Strawson's most talented pupil and a successor of his as a Fellow at University College. Evans's paper is 'Things Without the Mind' in Z. Van Straaten (ed.), *Philosophical Subjects* (Oxford, 1980.) The volume also contains a subtle and illuminating response to Evans by Strawson himself.

that although spatio-temporal thinking rests on bodies, objective thinking cannot be shown to require spatio-temporal thinking.

In the next chapter, entitled 'Persons', Strawson leaves behind speculation about concepts based on attenuated experiences, and focuses on our rich thought about ourselves. His argument involves a comparison between three conceptions of such thought. The first is what he calls the no-ownership view. It is the idea that we do not really refer to ourselves when we use the first person pronoun, even though we seem to. There is nothing that owns or has the experiences to which to refer. Strawson's response is to argue that once this view is developed genuine self reference emerges as involved in its explanation of the illusion of ownership of experiences. The second conception is that deriving from Descartes, according to which, the item that 'I' picks out is something distinct from the physical body. Strawson argues that this conception collides with a basic principle about psychological thought; it says that one can ascribe experiences to oneself only if one is prepared to ascribe them to others. To fulfil this one must be able to pick out other subjects, and that means they cannot be, as Descartes claimed, non-spatial. Strawson concludes that when we self-refer we refer to an entity which has two sides or aspects, the physical and the mental, and not to a thing which possesses only the mental sort of feature, something else having the physical features. He famously describes this as the idea that the concept of a person is a *primitive concept*. Second, since we can self-ascribe we must be able to other-ascribe, and that means that our methods for doing so must be adequate. As Strawson puts it, the criteria we employ for psychological ascription to others must be 'logically adequate'. There cannot, therefore, be a *genuine* problem of other minds. Again, as in the first chapter, Strawson derives a significant epistemological consequence from his conceptual investigations. This famous chapter has exercised a fascination on philosophers thinking about ourselves and has been, perhaps, as much discussed as any piece of philosophical argument that Strawson wrote.

Finally, Strawson takes Leibniz as an opponent of some of his major theses and considers whether Leibniz might be able to avoid his conclusions. He argues, displaying considerable ingenuity in suggesting different interpretations of Leibniz, that Leibniz does not escape the problems.

Individuals then shifts focus onto the subject–predicate distinction. Strawson's initial aim is, in effect, to show that a novel theory is so much needed here. The reason is two-sided. First, we lack a proper explanation as to why absolutely anything can be the reference of a subject expression but only universals can be what predicates express. Second, he

classifies the different accounts on offer and argues that they are either open to objection, or open to the demand for further explanation. The contrast between subjects and predicates that Strawson himself proposes for the central cases is that understanding a subject expression depends on the possession of empirical information whereas the understanding of predicates does not. For example, to understand the name 'James I' I need to know something like: there was a king who ascended the throne in 1603. But to understand the predicate '. . . is triangular' there is no empirical information about the world that I need to grasp. There need not be, or have been, any triangles at all. I have, rather, to grasp the principle of classification linked to the term. Strawson then attempts to explain some other elucidations of the subject–predicate distinction as deriving from his own suggestion, and to develop a more general criterion on the basis of his own account having captured the core cases. In the next chapter Strawson asks the very interesting and novel question whether, just as the employment of (the core type of) subject expressions presupposes empirical information, there is a type of proposition the truth of which is presupposed by subject–predicate propositions in general. He picks out what he calls *feature-placing sentences*, such as 'It is raining'. Such a sentence does not designate an object and describe it, rather the sentence affirms the presence of a feature. Strawson argues that where there are true subject–predicate propositions there must also be true feature-placing sentences. That answers his question.

Individuals is far richer in argument than I have been able to convey. It occasioned, more or less immediately, considerable debate, and has continued to do so ever since. The epistemological conclusions that Strawson advanced, both about bodies and about other minds, were closely scrutinised. The overall arguments of the chapter on persons and the chapter on bodies were endlessly analysed. The contrast between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, although briefly presented by Strawson, entered into the folk taxonomy of philosophy. As well as occasioning disagreement, Strawson's book stimulated, over time, a series of books all of which could be described as essays in descriptive metaphysics with a similar focus to, though not with identical conclusions to, *Individuals*. These include Gareth Evans's *The Varieties of Reference*, John Campbell's *Past, Space and Self*, and David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*. Within a year of its publication, Strawson was elected to the British Academy.

(v) *The Bounds of Sense*¹⁰

In 1966, seven years after the publication of *Individuals*, Strawson published his third book, *The Bounds of Sense*.¹¹ The theme is his attempt to sort the valuable and worth preserving from what he saw as the dubious in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Strawson abandons Kant's description of his task as the explanation of the possibility of synthetic a priori judgements, the notions that Kant uses not being properly explained, and substitutes for it the idea of determining what modifications of and combinations within conceptual schemes we can make sense of. He abandons too Kant's Transcendental Idealism, though he explores its interpretation with great care and considers why Kant might have adopted it. Any account true to Kant must at least credit his view with acceptance of the thesis that real objects are unknowable and beyond our experience. But there seems no coherent way to fit ourselves into such a picture. If we do receive appearances, as Kant claims, is that not actually a truth about ourselves that we know? Or is it only an appearance that we receive appearances? That is barely intelligible. The rejection of Transcendental Idealism requires Strawson to scrutinise Kant's arguments for it, and he very carefully and sympathetically analyses, and of course rejects, Kant's views on space and time, and geometry, and also the argument, presented in the Antinomies, that transcendental realism generates contradictions. Strawson also abandons much of Kant's talk of mechanisms of synthesis in the generation of proper experience. There seems no coherent way to explain what the materials are that such mechanisms work on, nor really how they work.

This leaves Strawson free to explore and evaluate the constructive and the destructive elements of the *Critique*. In his constructive phase Kant argues that our experience must be of recognisably independent objective items, which are spatial, temporal, and must satisfy some strong principles of permanence and causation. Strawson argues, with both care and brilliance, that Kant's arguments are, in various ways, weak, but that somewhat weaker, but nonetheless important, conclusions along similar lines can be defended. The most interesting part of Strawson's own argument is his defence of the claim that the experience of a self-conscious creature must involve and be recognised as involving perception of objects. Strawson's reconstruction of the argument relies on the idea that

¹⁰ P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London, 1966).

¹¹ As Michael Woods once pointed out to me, Strawson's title, with its deliberate and rich ambiguities, fits perfectly the complexities of his reading of Kant.

the experiences of a self-conscious creature must provide room for the thought of experience itself. But one can apply that notion only in the context of the application of categories of things which are *not* experiences. However, such categories can be available to a subject only if its experiences provide it with the grounds for applying them, which involves the idea that its experiences relate it to non-experiences, that is to say, independent things. Strawson then develops further requirements analogous to, but weaker than, those Kant advances in the Analogies. Kant's Dialectic also supplies Strawson with elements to develop as well as elements to reject. Strawson brings out the insights in the Paralogisms which undermine arguments for dualistic theories of the self. The chief problem for Kant is, according to Strawson, that his transcendental idealism prevents him from proposing a plausible and realistic account of ourselves.

The Bounds of Sense had an immediate impact and continues to be extremely influential. It altered the face of Kantian scholarship by suggesting novel and very well-supported interpretations and criticisms of Kant. It represents a sympathetic reading of Kant that any account of him must now come to terms with. But it also, as Putnam remarks, 'opened the way to a reception of Kant's philosophy by analytic philosophers'.¹² In one way *The Bounds of Sense* represents a general and continuous essay in epistemology. Strawson's idea is that a traditional form of philosophical scepticism can be opposed by a style of argument that Kant himself developed, in which the claims about which the sceptic is sceptical can be shown to be involved in the sceptics' own understanding of his position and view. Thus, the sceptics say that their experiences afford no knowledge of the objective world, but the ascription to themselves of experiences rests on and requires acceptance of the judgements they are sceptical of. The arguments which reveal the dependence are called Transcendental Arguments. As we saw, Strawson presented this same (or a related) style of argument in *Individuals*. In the years following its publication this anti-sceptical response was closely investigated, a large literature on it was generated, including notably a number of powerful contributions by the American philosopher Barry Stroud. One problem is that it is extraordinarily difficult to show that there are the conceptual dependencies which such transcendental arguments rely on. Interestingly, Strawson himself soon devised a different response to scepticism, but it

¹² H. Putnam, 'Strawson and Scepticism', in L. E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson* (Chicago and Lasalle, Illinois, 1998), p. 273.

is also true that the anti-sceptical approach that Strawson developed here remains appealing to a range of epistemologists, and this debate continues.

(vi) Later Books

Strawson published three more books (other than collections of essays) in English (plus another in French which overlaps with one of those in English). In 1974 *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* appeared.¹³ Strawson himself described this book as ‘probably the most ambitious and certainly the one that has received the least attention’.¹⁴ He is right about the second point but not, I suspect, about the first. It is an ambitious book, but can hardly be ranked above either *Individuals* or *The Bounds of Sense* in that respect! In the first part of it Strawson presents a revised version of his account of the normal subject–predicate distinction, and also presents a partial theory of one particular case of subject expressions, namely proper names. In this he was responding to the emergence of direct referential accounts of the kind that Kripke had made popular. The discussion of the subject–predicate distinction is clearer and more direct than the one achieved in *Individuals*. What Strawson particularly brings out is that in ordinary language predicates have a complex role, involving the indication of universals, the expression of exemplification, plus expression also of temporal aspects. This functional complexity explains the correctness of certain other accounts of the distinction. No consensus about the assessment of Strawson’s proposal has emerged, the reason being that there has still been no very general interest in the subject–predicate distinction. In the second part, Strawson develops an approach to the understanding of grammar in which he attempts to relate grammar, in the sense of syntax, to much more basic functional specifications of the elements of a language. It becomes possible to see actual grammars as different ways to achieve these functional roles. Again, no consensus has emerged about this highly original way to think about grammar.

In 1985 Strawson published *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*.¹⁵ The book grew out of Strawson’s Woodbridge Lectures at Columbia University in 1983. It is a book of philosophy *about* philoso-

¹³ P. F. Strawson, *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (London, 1974).

¹⁴ From p. ix of Strawson’s Introduction to a reprint of the book in 2004 by Ashgate Press.

¹⁵ P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London, 1985).

phy. In each chapter Strawson focuses on a philosophical dispute in which there is a strong tendency to deny the reality or existence of an aspect which common sense affirms. One case is that of knowledge itself, denied by the philosophical sceptic. Another case is the denial by scientifically inspired philosophers of the reality of, for example, colour. A third example is the denial of the reality of thought and experience by a certain sort of materialist. In each case, Strawson's aim is to deny the denial, and to explain, as one might say, how philosophers can have their cake and eat it. The book is about philosophy in another sense, namely it employs and illuminates some ideas from earlier philosophers, especially Hume and Wittgenstein, and reveals Strawson's very deep understanding of them. The book marks, also, a further development in Strawson's engagement with scepticism. Strawson confesses to a lack of enchantment with transcendental arguments as anti-sceptical devices, and suggests instead that scepticism can be set aside because no one is persuaded by sceptical arguments. Philosophical sceptical doubts are not *serious* doubts, and so are not to be taken *seriously*. This further twist in Strawson's epistemology has, again, inspired considerable debate, and no consensus has yet emerged. As well as being an original contribution to epistemology the book presents what I am inclined to think of as an especially Oxonian approach to ontology. The idea is that there is no good reason not to be realists about most aspects of the world, including colour, mentality, and meaning (and perhaps value) but that does not require the defence of a reduction of such features to some fundamental realm. It is, therefore, the defence of the idea of *relaxed pluralism*. As subsequent debate has revealed, such relaxation is not to everyone's taste.

Finally, there was, in 1992, *Analysis and Metaphysics: an Introduction to Philosophy*.¹⁶ Strawson had given introductory lectures once he became a professor, and so he published them. It is, again, a book about philosophy, contrasting different conceptions of the subject, and defending Strawson's own conception of analysis. Strawson's attitude is that the aim of analysis is to reveal conceptual links and connections, thereby illuminating some features, but that there is no favoured basic level of thought to which it is the goal to reduce everything else. One might call that a conception of *relaxed analysis*. Strawson in fact repeatedly wrote about the nature of philosophy, and the views in this book are his final conclusions. It is also a book in which he practises what he preaches in relation to certain chosen areas, including, for example, the topics of

¹⁶ P. F. Strawson, *Analysis and Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1992).

causation and explanation, experience, meaning, and freedom. Whether it is a good introductory book or not, it is certainly a deep and interesting book for the non-beginner! Strawson himself prepares the reader by remarking that the book ‘though introductory . . . is not elementary. There is no such thing as elementary philosophy. There is no shallow end to the philosophical pool.’

(vii) Some Themes

I have devoted most of this memoir to a description of Strawson’s books and of some of the debates to which he made a major contribution. But the picture is still very incomplete, and I wish to describe in a brief way some other aspects of his writings.

Strawson made a major contribution to the theory of perception. His conception is articulated to some extent in *The Bounds of Sense*, but also in a series of articles, of which the most famous (and most reprinted) is ‘Perception and Its Objects’ (1979). He suggests that the concept of perception should be analysed as a causal concept but that Grice, who famously argued for the same claim, went wrong when saying what sort of causal chain perception requires. But more important, he emphasised that there is no way to describe perceptual experience in terms which are not physical-object concept involving. The attempt to do so he takes to be the crucial mistake of the traditional empiricist model, as represented, for example, in the thought of A. J. Ayer. We are not reading in or interpreting our experiences when we make objective judgements. We are simply endorsing their content. Strawson therefore holds that it is myth to suppose that we can locate a level of claim on the basis of which we can defend the validity of our application of physical-object concepts. Rather, our experience is ‘saturated’ by those concepts themselves. Although he does not use the same terminology as some who endorse it, this model, in part under his influence, has become the main one in current philosophy.

Strawson’s contribution to the philosophy of language is also far more extensive and important than so far indicated. He developed his views in relation to the leading ideas of others about language. One conception that he opposed is that of Quine. Writing with Grice, he argued that Quine’s criticisms of the idea of analyticity rest on a commitment to a kind of reduction that itself is simply a dogma.¹⁷ Moreover, repeatedly

¹⁷ H. P. Grice and P. F. Strawson, ‘In Defense of a Dogma’, *Philosophical Review*, 65 (1956), 141–58.

over the next twenty years he argued that Quine's frankly sceptical approach to meaning, and related notions, is both unfounded and also wrong in that it deprives us of notions that we cannot do without in the study of logic and language. Strawson also engaged with Davidson's account of meaning, famously in his inaugural lecture 'Meaning and Truth' (1969), but also elsewhere. Strawson argued that truth is itself a notion secondary to saying (and communication) and cannot play the role in an account of meaning that Davidson proposed. His other reaction to the Davidsonian programme, which accepted a notion of logical form for natural language sentences specified in the complex formulae of predicate logic, was that there is no requirement to map ordinary language on to artificial logical structures, nor does that capture ordinary meaning anyway. This attitude of Strawson's placed him in opposition to a movement of thought that swept through Oxford's younger philosophers during the time he was a professor, and on this issue he struck many as behind the times. From the present perspective, however, it looks as if he may have been before the times. Strawson also made important contributions, on a number of occasions, to the assessment of Austin's theory of speech acts, and also in relation to Grice's own model of meaning. Finally, he responded to the anti-realist approach developed by Dummett, which also gained its adherents, in 'Scruton and Wright on Anti-Realism' (1976), a brief but brilliant critique which exposed, or so it seems to me, the fact that there are no obvious reasons to adopt the anti-realist account of truth, and moreover that it is hard to make it consistent with what appear to be obvious facts about the knowability (or unknowability) of our psychological lives and also the past.

Another theme that needs stressing is Strawson's engagement with the history of philosophy. *The Bounds of Sense* deals with Kant, but Strawson also wrote many articles about him. In other places he wrote about Descartes, Hume, Leibniz, Spinoza, and, from the last century, Wittgenstein and Moore. These writings reveal both a deep knowledge and a deep understanding of these thinkers, never unsympathetic and always able to see the wood as well as the trees. Strawson had a sense of the age of philosophical problems and of the insights from the great dead philosophers that need preserving and renewing.

I have plotted to some extent the development of Strawson's epistemological views, but have not described his earliest proposal in relation to the problem of induction. In *An Introduction to Logical Theory* he pioneered what came to be called the 'analytical solution', according to which there cannot be any question as to the rationality of the employment

of induction, since by being rational we *mean*, amongst other things, using induction. The question whether induction is rational resembles the question whether the law is legal. This remains a discussed approach. The unity amongst Strawson's proposals is that the response to scepticism is never the production of a proof or demonstration based on a level of thought external and prior to the discourse in question. Each solution aims to turn aside scepticism in some other way. Strawson's ingenuity in devising such responses is very impressive and he is the source of at least three major currently investigated anti-sceptical approaches.

Strawson always joked that he would turn to moral philosophy only when his powers were waning. He wrote very little about that, but his main contribution 'Freedom and Resentment' is perhaps now his most famous and widely discussed paper. It is quite staggering, and a quite unique achievement, that on the more or less only occasion he wrote about morals he should have produced a classic. Strawson's aim is to dissolve the so-called problem of determinism and responsibility. His argument is that our 'reactive attitudes' towards others and ourselves, such attitudes as gratitude, anger, sympathy and resentment, are natural and irrevocable. Their presence, therefore, needs no abstract entitlement from philosophy, which is simply irrelevant to their existence. There cannot be abstract a priori principles locating general metaphysical conditions for such attitudes. Between determinism and responsibility there can be no conflict. One might see in this an application of some ideas of a Humean character to a domain to which Hume himself was not inclined to apply them.

There are many more topics about which Strawson wrote. The most outstanding quality of his writing is that in relation to every problem he wrote about he made a significant contribution.

(viii) Teacher, Writer and Person

I have charted Strawson's life primarily in terms of his writings and the development of his philosophical ideas. This has left out many aspects and I want to make the picture fuller by describing both him and some of his other achievements.¹⁸

¹⁸ In the introduction I cited some of the outstanding honours that Strawson received. Amongst other honours, he was a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1971, an honorary Fellow of three Oxford colleges, (St John's, University, and Magdalen), the Woodbridge Lecturer at Columbia University, 1983, and a Member of the Academia Europaea, 1992. Strawson was invited to deliver the prestigious William James Lectures

Much of Strawson's time as a philosopher was spent as a teacher, of both undergraduates and graduates. I was lucky enough to be taught by him at both levels in the 1960s and I can, therefore, testify to his unrivalled quality in both roles. Strawson was amazingly quick at understanding what he read and heard, and so throughout his career maintained contact with the developments in the subject. As a consequence his reading lists were helpful, up to date, and balanced. When he heard an undergraduate essay the same speed of comprehension enabled him to analyse it without apparent effort. He then pointed out the important lacunas or mistakes in the argument, suggested ways that it could be improved, and indicated approaches to the difficult problems that always struck me as persuasive and profound. In this way he encouraged us to think more effectively and self-critically, and I always left with an uplifting sense that if only I had thought harder even the most difficult problems could be cracked. Sometimes we managed to ask a question that caused him to think, and then before our very eyes after some moments of intense concentration he answered it.

Professor John Searle brilliantly conveys the character of the experience of a Strawson tutorial, though in his case from ten years earlier than mine.

After the usual greetings we would sit down and he would begin, typically with something like the following.

'Now it does seem to me, Searle, (we were not yet upon first name terms) that you are essentially arguing as follows.' Whereupon he would present an elegant, lucidly clear and powerful expression of what I had, in my fumbling way, been trying to say. 'Yes. Yes!' I would cry out. 'That is exactly it. Those are exactly my points.' 'Well, if that is so, it does seem to me that the argument is subject to the following four objections.' Whereupon he would proceed to demolish the entire argument step by elegant step. And the odd thing was, that though none of my points was left standing, I did not feel in any way diminished or defeated. On the contrary, I was positively elated because it seemed to me then, as it does now, that Peter and I were engaged in a common intellectual enterprise, the most wonderful enterprise of all: philosophical analysis . . .'¹⁹

at Harvard, but declined, feeling when he received the invitation that he did not have quite enough to say. Another mark of his recognition is the number of books and journal volumes devoted to him, usually including replies by Strawson to the discussion. Amongst the best known are Zak Van Straaten (ed.), *Philosophical Subjects* (Oxford, 1980), the journal *Philosophia*, 10 (1981), Carlos E. Caorsi, *Ensayos sobre Strawson* (Montevideo: Universidad de la Republica, 1992), P. K. Sen and R. R. Verma (eds.), *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson* (New Delhi, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1995), and H.-J. Glock (ed.), *Strawson and Kant* (Oxford, 2003).

¹⁹ This quotation comes from Searle's address at Strawson's memorial service, referred to earlier.

The awe that Strawson inspired in us is accurately conveyed by our description of such encounters as ‘interviews with God’. I have absolutely no doubt that having Strawson as a tutor was the best possible introduction to philosophy. He was, of course, similarly effective as a graduate tutor, and he took enormous care to analyse our papers in detail. My sense, though, is that he enjoyed undergraduate teaching more. I conjecture that since his own views were those that graduates frequently wanted to write about, and, in the nature of graduates, to be critical about, in many graduate supervisions he had to spend time warding off attacks on himself, which is hardly an enjoyable occupation. Strawson himself mentions undergraduate tutorials as one group activity in philosophy which he found especially helpful. As he puts it, in such encounters ‘one finds oneself obliged to clarify one’s own half-formed thoughts in order to make things clear to one’s pupils. Seeking a way past, or through, his or her mistakes and confusions, one may find a path past, or through, one’s own.’²⁰ Strawson was, I believe, the outstanding teacher of philosophy of his generation in Oxford.

Strawson was also excellent in the role of Waynflete Professor. He worked hard with graduates and continued the tradition of professors offering informal instructions in which he led class discussion of selected papers. For a number of years he held what became rather famous graduate classes on Kant, in which graduates presented papers. The readers of the papers were invited to Magdalen before the class and over tea there Strawson would forewarn them of the objections he had to their claims. This double courtesy no doubt helped them bear the gentle but inescapable execution they were about to endure. He performed the many administrative duties tied to the chair with wisdom and patience, and without any manifest desire for power or an overwhelming desire to stamp his own image on the university. He valued Oxford’s variety and its tolerance of different philosophical programmes. Above all, he saw his role as being, first and foremost, to produce, and to contribute to the production of, philosophical work of high quality.

Strawson, as I have said, had no wish to play the role of famous philosopher. However, in the 1950s and 1960s his voice was a central one in the discussions and talks about philosophy that were broadcast on the Third Programme. His role tended to be that of the profound and

²⁰ P. F. Strawson, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, p. 22 in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson*, p. 22. The way Strawson puts it makes one hope that one contributed to the development of his thinking by offering the confusions he needed to remove!

infallible metaphysician, just as Mary Warnock's tended to be that of the female looking for illumination from the men. She has recently revealed that the discussions were completely scripted and unspontaneous, written beforehand at hilarious preparatory meetings.²¹ Despite that, these series led on the whole to publications invariably containing very good contributions from Strawson.

I have described the central writings of Strawson, but it needs to be stressed that Strawson wrote much else besides. An outstanding feature of his career was the quantity, breadth and quality of his publications. Three of his books are collections of his papers, and they by no means contain most of his papers.²² Although he was not alone in thinking this, he realised that it was not enough for Oxford philosophers simply to talk amongst themselves. They needed to publish, which he did, and he also encouraged others to do so. He was helped by the fact that he wrote with facility and ease. He wrote in a style which is manifestly elegant, his vocabulary being rich and untechnical, and his sentences and paragraphs having a rhythm and structure that makes them a pleasure to read. I cannot *describe* the style but, I believe, it would be easy to recognise any extended passage by him as his. His writings are a contribution to English letters. Strawson used to say that he did not mind people criticising his opinions but resented any criticism of his style.

The elegance of his literary style leads me to remark on what one might call the general elegance of the surface he revealed to the world. His conversation, manners, appearance and behaviour were also elegant, imperturbable, urbane and such as are only possible in someone of exquisite intelligence.²³ Strawson himself describes the special pleasures of his life at the end of his 'Intellectual Autobiography'. 'Philosophy, friends, and family apart, my life has been enriched by the enjoyment of literature, landscape, architecture, and the company of clever and beautiful women.'

²¹ In Mary Warnock, *A Memoir: People and Places* (London, 2000).

²² They are: *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London, 1971), *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London, 1974), and *Entity and Identity* (Oxford, 1997). Strawson once said to me that the title he would have preferred for the first collection was *Language, Truth and Logic*, but it was no longer available!

²³ Strawson's imperturbability can be illustrated by a story that I owe to Galen Strawson. Strawson and his friend John Carswell were engaged in conversation with others in Paris. The conversation was animated and in the course of it Carswell stubbed out his cigarette on Strawson's head who responded by simply carrying on speaking! It was also with John Carswell that Strawson would play, in their respective gardens, a military game they had invented, which involved lead soldiers and artillery, and extraordinarily complicated rules. It is rumoured that Strawson never lost! His brother John refrained from challenging Strawson in case he, a man of considerable military distinction, should lose!

Strawson's knowledge of literature was extensive, and his very accurate memory of it was phenomenal. He particularly enjoyed poetry and wished, or said that he wished, he had had the talent to be a poet. He did have the talent to produce mock verse in many styles. I feel that I cannot do better to convey the character of Strawson than to quote the description of him by his brother John.

When today I contemplate Peter's character and achievements, I see a man of absolute integrity, brimming over with good nature and with magnanimity, with the gift of true friendship, a sense of humour spiced with benevolent wit, and I observe an intellect of prodigious power, a contribution to philosophy of enduring importance, indeed in the world of philosophy a legend in his own lifetime, a wholly likeable, clubbable man, full of the milk of human kindness, enriched by family ties and a host of friends and admirers, a well loved brother who commanded my whole-hearted admiration.

Conclusion

It is too early to say what enduring influence and importance Strawson will have, and about that I do not want to speculate. His life as a philosopher, though, resulted in an unequalled contribution to all the central areas of theoretical philosophy. The outstanding qualities of Strawson's thought are, it seems to me, its depth, originality, the very broad sweep of its subject matter, and its consistently level-headed rationality. If as Strawson suggested, the concept of a person merits being described as primitive, it can be said of Strawson himself that he merits being described as the least primitive of persons.

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