

'Persons' and Persons

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Abstract: In chapter 3 of *Individuals*, entitled 'Persons', Strawson argues against dualism and the no-ownership theory, and proposes instead that our concept of a person is a primitive concept. In this paper, it is argued that the basic questions that frame Strawson's discussion, and some of his main arguments and claims, are dubious. A general diagnosis of the source of these problems is proposed. It is argued that despite these problems Strawson gives an accurate and very insightful description of the way we think about ourselves, which should form the starting point for more speculative accounts of ourselves.

Keywords: P. F. Strawson, Dualism, No-ownership theory, the concept of a person, primitive concepts, the generality of predicates.

Individuals was published fifty years ago, and immediately exerted a major influence, but it is a work that still attracts close attention, and it is a work that we, the community of philosophers, remain engaged in trying to assess properly. As my contribution to this assessment I want to look at what is perhaps the most discussed single chapter in *Individuals*, namely chapter 3, entitled 'Persons'. Of course, the extent to which this chapter on persons has been read and discussed probably means that nothing new can be said about it, (by 'it' I mean Strawson's actual discussion, and not the issues he deals with). However, my excuse for writing about it is that it is a brilliant, fecund and fascinating piece of philosophy, which still engages the attention of philosophers grappling with the nature of persons and subjects.¹

¹ For example, Hacker (2002) has recently discussed it in an interesting way, and at the conference in Prague at which this paper was presented at least four other papers were devoted to it.

The view of the chapter for which I shall argue is that the questions that guide it and constitute the framework of the discussion, and most of the arguments, plus some of the major proposals in it, are, not to put too fine a point on it, unsatisfactory in various ways. I shall make a case for this assessment by considering most of the major sections in turn.² However, these (according to me) errors are deviations from what is a central and basic truth that Strawson perceived and laid before us. This (again, according to me) central truth is not a complicated or unobvious truth, but it is the sort of truth that needed to be articulated to be appreciated, and Strawson provided that needed articulation. I hope this praise means that, despite the somewhat negative tenor of the initial part of my proposed assessment, I am not doing what Strawson once said to me was the favourite occupation of philosophers – namely stabbing their benefactors in the back.

1 The Questions

Strawson opens chapter 3 with these remarks:

Each of us distinguishes between himself and states of himself on the one hand, and what is not himself or a state of himself on the other. What are the conditions of our making this distinction, and how are they fulfilled? In what way do we make it, and why do we make it in the way that we do?³

By the end of section [1] he has focussed the issues more sharply thus:

Why are one's states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all? We have also the question: why are they ascribed to the very same thing as certain corporeal characteristics, a certain physical situation, etc.?⁴

² I shall not, for reasons of space, be able to provide a close complete textual analysis of the chapter, nor look at every interesting aspect of Strawson's discussion. I shall try, rather, to highlight some problems which are not simply the standard ones, and also to offer a general diagnosis of where, as it now seems to me, the chapter primarily goes wrong. There is, however, a more major restriction; in this paper I shall look mainly and only at the discussion in sections [1] to [4]; I hope to write about the last three sections of the chapter elsewhere. This means that I shall not consider Strawson's notorious epistemological claims, nor his attempt to draw a precise distinction between P- and M-predicates, nor the features that in section [6] he picks out as explaining (or grounding) the primitive concept of a person.

³ Strawson (1959, 87).

⁴ Strawson (1959, 90).

I shall call these the *initial questions*. Now, these two questions are the ones to which Strawson alludes throughout the first four sections of the chapter. By section [5] they are replaced by new questions, namely: "How are P-predicates possible? Or: 'How is the concept of a person possible?'"⁵ I shall call these the *second questions*. Strawson's reason for this change is presented in these words:

... the answer to these two initial questions is to be found nowhere else but in the admission of the primitiveness of the concept of a person, and hence of the unique character of P-predicates. So, residual perplexities have to frame themselves in this new way.⁶

In response to the second questions Strawson develops two main thoughts: first that persons are agents, and notions of agency (such as that of walking) exemplify in an especially clear way the structure of P-predicates: and second the highly eccentric observation that individual persons are distinct and independent. We are fortunate, Strawson is saying, in not being components in a group person.

Even before considering, in detail, the character of these questions, especially the initial ones, two things are worth remarking about them and what Strawson says about them. First, the very opening questions and the two which I am calling the initial questions are really questions which concern *first person thinking*. Roughly, they amount to these problems; how do we pick out ourselves? Why do we ascribe our states of consciousness to ourselves? Why do we ascribe corporeal characteristics to the same thing, namely ourselves? This apparent focus would lead us to expect that Strawson would closely analyse the general nature of first person thought and awareness. As it turns out there is little *analysis* of first person thought provided. The focus is primarily on *refuting* something like the *denial* that there is such thought (an idea in the No-ownership view), and then on exploring how psychological ascriptions to *others* are possible. Second, there is something hard to understand in the way that Strawson replaces his initial questions with the second ones. Since it is really built into the initial questions that we have the conceptual practice of self ascribing mental and physical attributes, and since, further, it is arguable that when Strawson talks of the concept of a

⁵ Strawson (1959, 110).

⁶ Strawson (1959, 111).

person being a primitive one he primarily means that it amounts to the idea of a thing to which both mental and physical characteristics can be applied, it is hard to understand how the initial questions can receive an answer in terms of the concept of a person being primitive. To say that amounts basically to saying something that was built into the specification of what was to be explained!

It would be fair to respond to this last comment by pointing out that it is a little blunt. In so far as the second questions are concerned the main bit of *progress* is, perhaps, Strawson's account of the distinctive epistemological properties of P-predicates. It should be conceded that that characterisation does go beyond the idea of a person as a single two-sided thing. It needs noting, though, that this characterisation hardly explains how P-predicates are *possible*; it seems, rather, to offer an epistemological description of what is simply taken *as possible* (because actual).

However, the overall structure of the chapter is one in which for the first four sections it is organised around an engagement with the two *initial questions*, and then in the last three with the *second questions*. Further the structure of the argument, in which in sec. [3] Strawson opposes what he calls the No-Ownership theory, and in sec. [4] Cartesian dualism, arises from his understanding of the relation of these two approaches to the initial questions. The relation is, according to Strawson, that both of these theories reject central assumptions in the initial questions. So on Strawson's picture, unless these two theories are wrong, the questions do not arise. Crudely, the no-ownership theory denies that we ascribe states of consciousness to *anything at all*. It therefore rejects the first, as well as the second, of the initial questions. Cartesian dualism denies that we ascribe states of consciousness to the *same thing* to which we ascribe corporeal characteristics. It therefore rejects the second of the two initial questions. So in posing those questions Strawson takes himself to be committed to denying and disproving these two views, which is what, on a straightforward reading at least, sections [3] and [4] are attempting to do. On this reading sections [3] and [4] do not so much answer the questions as defend the idea that the questions arise.

2 Some Comments on the Framing Questions

I want, now, to make some comments about these questions which structure the chapter. Often, in discussions of Strawson, the focus is (al-

most) exclusively on Strawson's positive claims and arguments, but this neglects what seem to me to be some of the puzzling aspects of the chapter.

(a) Relation to the Notion of Descriptive Metaphysics

In the introduction to *Individuals* Strawson himself introduces the notion of descriptive metaphysics, which is a form of metaphysics, as Strawson puts it, 'content to describe the actual structure of our thought', in contrast to revisionary metaphysics which is concerned to 'produce a better structure'.⁷ The idea of this contrast between styles of metaphysics has certainly influenced philosophical taxonomy. I want to suggest, however, that Strawson's practice in chapter 3 puts the idea that he is doing *descriptive* metaphysics in some doubt. Thus, as we have seen, chapter 3 is dedicated to answering certain 'why' questions, which I am calling the initial questions, and this seems to mean that it is not *solely* descriptive. Surely in certain contexts 'descriptive' does contrast with 'explanatory'; we talk of just describing how something is, and explaining *why* it is that way is to do *something else*. But although Strawson does not explicitly warn us of this, he cannot be using 'descriptive' in that way, at least, not if chapter 3 as a whole is to count as *descriptive*.⁸ This means that we lack any very clear understanding of what descriptive metaphysics is, *if Strawson is to count as solely doing it*. This is just one reason, and not perhaps, the most important one, for thinking that there is something unsatisfactory with Strawson's twofold division of metaphysics, a conclusion I am not going to develop here.⁹

Although some strain is placed on Strawson's notion of descriptive metaphysics by his practice in chapter 3, assuming that he is solely en-

⁷ Strawson (1959, 9) (both quotes).

⁸ The idea that Strawson's approach to philosophical questions is a descriptive one is also under strain in the light of the discussion in chapter 2 on sounds. There he is attempting to determine whether a subject who lacks spatial experience and spatial concepts can grasp objective concepts (objective in one sense of objective). He argues that such a subject can do so. Now, it is hard to count this enquiry as simply describing our conceptual scheme. Strawson maybe should have said that he was doing descriptive metaphysics, but also other things as well, amongst them the highly speculative discussion in chapter 2.

⁹ In Snowdon (2008, sec. 3) I try to present other reasons for drawing the same conclusion, and also, in a tentative way, to hint at possible repairs.

gaged in descriptive metaphysics, there is also illumination to be derived from Strawson's practice in this chapter. I have in mind Strawson's attitude, revealed in section [7], to the idea of life after death. Strawson says 'Thus, from within our actual conceptual scheme, each of us can quite intelligibly conceive of his or her individual survival of bodily death.'¹⁰ The question this claim bears on is: what is it to *describe* a conceptual scheme? Now, since we would ascribe to many people the belief that they will survive bodily death, that is a thought that must be accessible to people with our conceptual scheme. Strawson is, therefore, right to count it as conceptually available to us (with our conceptual scheme). This has, though, two important implications. The first is that describing the conceptual scheme and the thoughts it makes available cannot imply that the thoughts in question represent genuine possibilities. Thus, the thought that thirteen is the square root of forty four is available to us, but it does not represent a possibility. Similarly, the availability to us of the thought of life after death does not mean that we should count it as really possible, nor even take it seriously. Second, there are, surely, thoughts available to us that Strawson seems to think are not available. Thus it seems available to us to think that there are (and that we are) cartesian subjects that have never been embodied. Strawson seems to think that this is not really available. But it seems no less available than a belief in life after death for us. The upshot is that Strawson's notion of describing a conceptual scheme remains obscure.

(b) Conceptual Explanations in *Individuals*

I want to note a contrast within the conceptual explanations that Strawson presents in *Individuals*. In the previous chapter 'Sounds', Strawson, I think, is concerned to show that a subject who does not have spatial experience and who lacks spatial concepts can still possess and apply concepts of objective things. By this Strawson means that he can make and understand identity judgements relating objects encountered at one time to items encountered at a later time. The subject can think: this sound is the same as that (remembered) sound. This amounts to objective thinking because it involves the idea of the item remaining in existence over time. In this case Strawson's explanation works by assign-

¹⁰ Strawson (1959, 115).

ing to the subject a complex content to his experience, namely, the experience of the master sound, and arguing that these complex experiences contain grounds or evidence that the subject can appreciate as bearing on the truth of the identity judgements. Although I am not sure that Strawson himself would have put it this way, this seems to be a model for explaining how a sort of concept is possible by locating in the experience of the subject applying the concept evidence which enables the subject to distinguish, or perhaps have some degree of evidence for distinguishing, between cases where the proffered conceptual application applies and where it does not.

Now, in chapter 3, on the face of it, Strawson is not after the same thing at all. First, in chapter 3 Strawson is, initially at least, asking *why* our conceptual practices contain certain basic elements, and although it may be part of an answer to that to point to evidence which makes the practice possible that could not be a complete answer to the question. It does not say *why* we actually have those conceptual practices. Second, although in chapter 3 Strawson does investigate epistemological and evidential matters when it comes to the ascription of P-predicates to others, it is, surely, clear, that the conceptual practices in question are far too complex to be explained simply in virtue of that evidence. This means that we do not have, when we hear the initial questions and become immersed in the discussion with the earlier chapters of *Individuals* as our background, any very clear understanding of what is envisaged as a possible answer to them. We have not, it seems to me, been prepared for such questions.

(c) Conceptual Practices as the Explananda

I have indicated that perhaps we have no very clear understanding of what sort of explanation Strawson is asking for, nor providing, but we also need to ask – what exactly is it that Strawson is trying to explain? There are two aspects to this issue. The first issue is what *type of fact* is being explained. The second is what particular *examples* of the right type of fact are being focussed on. I want to begin by considering the first problem.

One way to understand the questions is that they are asking why we have certain conceptual practices. Why do we make the ascriptions that according to the questions we do make? I shall call this the *conceptual practice question*.

Let us assume for the moment that this is what is meant. One problem then arises. Although Strawson would seem to be right in taking the no-ownership theory as inconsistent with the assumptions in the question – at least on a certain interpretation of that view – there is no obvious reason to regard Cartesian dualism as inconsistent with the assumptions in the question. A dualist need not say that we do not engage in such conceptual practices, but can allow that we do, and hence he can allow there is a genuine question *why* we do so? His attitude is, rather, that this conceptual practice is an *error*. Although we ascribe consciousness etc., to the same thing to which we ascribe corporeal characteristics we are in fact *wrong* to do so. I do not see why that would be a misreading of dualism; in which case, if we do treat the question as one solely about the existence of conceptual practices then Strawson has dualism wrongly located in relation to it. Second, I think it is hard to escape a feeling that if the issue is simply – why do we have these conceptual practices? – then we do not really know what kind of answer would be appropriate. Is such a question really a philosophical question? Or is it a question for developmental psychologists? Or is it a question for evolutionary theorists? Or is it a question for someone else? Despite the familiarity of these questions to people reading *Individuals* they have to be acknowledged to be rather puzzling.

However, I think that it is clear that Strawson did not regard his question as solely about the presence of certain conceptual practices. He seems to interpret the questions in a way that makes Cartesian dualism inconsistent with what the second question assumes. I think that this means that he reads into the question an assumption that the conceptual practices in question are actually *correct*. That is to say, the practices generate judgements which are true (or which have a real chance of being true). In particular this amounts to assuming that it is correct to ascribe corporeal characteristics to the same thing to which mental characteristics are ascribed. It is the presence of this correctness assumption that makes it necessary to refute dualism (the task of sec. [4]). But this has the consequence that the full force of Strawson's questions is remarkably complex. Roughly they are asking why we have certain conceptual practices which are correct, and, perhaps, why they are correct? The inclusion of a correctness assumption means that it is even harder to know what sort of answer the question merits, and who, or which discipline, is to answer it. It is, I believe, pretty remarkable to hang a philosophical discussion on these issues.

Before moving on to say a little about what precise facts are the targets for explanation, a further point can be made about these questions, and that is that Strawson does not seem to be asking a familiar constitutive question about the conceptual practices. It is standard nowadays to ask about a conceptual practice, described, say, as the deployment of concept *C*, what cognitive, causal and behavioural components constitute the presence of the concept *C*. Evans and Peacocke (and others) has strenuously investigated such questions. Whatever one's ultimate attitude to such a programme it is not a mysterious sort of question, nor is it mysterious that philosophers try to answer it. However, it does not seem that Strawson treated his questions as constitutive in this way.

(d) The Precise Facts (of the right kind)

I have argued that Strawson cannot be interpreted as explaining merely the existence of certain conceptual practices, because a correctness assumption is built into the question. This, I suggested, makes the questions very hard ones. However, I want also to suggest that there is some unclarity over precisely which (correct) conceptual practices the initial questions are being raised. Roughly, the emphasis sometimes seems to be on the essentially first person practices; each of us refers to him- or her-self, and each of us ascribes to themselves both states of consciousness and corporeal attributes. The question then is why we engage in that (correct) conceptual practice. At other times the emphasis seems to be that we pick out persons as a kind of thing, and ascribe to the members of that group both states of consciousness and corporeal attributes. Then the question is why that *general practice* exists (and is correct). I want to suggest that at various stages in Strawson's discussion it is hard to tell which of these practices he is focussing on, and that it is also important to keep both aspects in mind when reading the chapter.

3 The Role of the Body

In section [2] of the chapter Strawson's aim is to investigate the suggestion that the answer to his initial questions lies in the 'role which each person's body plays in his experience'.¹¹ Strawson's view is that there is

¹¹ Strawson (1959, 90).

such a dependence, but he argues, to begin with, that it is contingent that the dependence has the form that it does. He claims that it is imaginable and so possible that a subject's experiences might causally depend in various ways on the state of various bodies, rather than on the state of a single body in the way they actually do. Let us suppose that Strawson's imaginative thought experiment does establish the contingency of the dependency. We can then ask; what exactly has the admission of contingency shown? Since the answer to the initial questions that Strawson is considering does not seem to commit itself to the non-contingency of the form of dependence of experience on a single body, but merely to its actuality, Strawson's intermediate conclusion does not affect the legitimacy of the explanation.

Strawson's argument is, however, not without its problems. He in effect envisages that a certain subject's visual experiences are dependent in a certain respect on one body A, and in another respect on body B, and so on. There indeed seems to be no real difficulty in imagining that the experiences of the subject will alter in one way if body A's states are changed, but will alter in another way if body B's states are changed. But we have at least to ask whether we properly understand such causal dependence unless we have some understanding of *how* the states of A and B independently contribute to the process generating the subject's experience, and in Strawson's imagined story no such understanding is provided. What is especially striking about Strawson's story is that the experiences he is concerned with are visual perceptual ones, and the causal story for such experiences must, presumably, involve a route for the seen objects to the subject. We do not really understand how such an experience depends on a body unless its states contribute to that causal route. Strawson's story gives no such understanding. It seems, therefore, somewhat premature to concede Strawson's contingency claim.

Having argued for the contingency of the dependence Strawson does not appear to derive any consequences from it, rather he simply claims that it is obvious that the causal dependence claim does not provide an answer to the initial questions. I think that it is obvious that it does not provide a complete explanation. A reason for saying that this is obvious is, in the first place, that the causal dependency of a set of experiences on a body does not, in itself, seem to mean that such experiences belong to a subject, nor that they belong to a subject which has physical attributes. If causal dependence on a body does not mean either thing, it cannot be

the total explanation for the correctness of our practices. Moreover, even if the causal data had ensured that the correctness of our practices it would still not explain why we have such conceptual practices. Indeed, this is so obvious that it should strike us as puzzling that Strawson devotes a whole section to its discussion. It cannot, of course, be said that it is completely obvious that the causal dependence truth is not a *part* of an answer to the questions. Strawson, though, interprets it as a suggested (more or less) complete explanation, and he is surely right to reject it as that.

4 The No-Ownership Theory

The no-ownership theory is a philosophical category that Strawson invented and which, as a name, has caught on. It has entered into philosophical vocabulary. But the crucial and immediate question is: what view exactly is it that has been assigned that name?

There is a degree of vibrato in the presentation of the theory, corresponding to the two centres of focus of the whole chapter, already pointed out in section 2, part (d). One centre of focus is first person thought, what we might call self-consciousness. The other centre of focus is the person or the subject in general.

There is a temptation to present the view as claiming that when we make judgements expressible in such words as 'I am in pain' or 'I have a headache' we are not ascribing a state of consciousness to ourselves because the term 'I' is not a device for referring to oneself, or at least, it is not so in sentences with this sort of content. The word 'I' might be a referring term in other contexts and might in those context enable self-ascription of other sorts of states, but in contexts where the apparent predicative content is mental or psychological (and, perhaps, present tensed) it is not. I shall call this the no-reference interpretation of the no-ownership view.

This interpretation fits the fact that Strawson ascribes it the view to the Wittgenstein of the early 1930's on the basis that Moore reported him as saying at that time that 'the 'I' does not denote a possessor' in such sentences as 'I am in pain'.¹² It also fits the way that Strawson states the

¹² See the footnote on p. 95 in Strawson (1959).

thesis at times. He represents it as saying 'that it is only a linguistic illusion that one ascribes one's states of consciousness at all ...'¹³

However, this interpretation does not fit the name particularly well. The thesis that in certain contexts 'I' does not refer to a subject does not imply that there is no subject, nor does it imply that the states of consciousness do not belong to that subject. Indeed, maybe in non-first person sentences we are referring to such subjects and assigning them, possibly with truth, states of consciousness. So the thesis assigned by the first person interpretation is consistent with many of the claims that Strawson himself makes about subjects, and it is also consistent with some of the assumptions that Strawson is making in asking the initial questions.

These remarks point us to a second interpretation, according to which the no-ownership thesis says that *there are no subjects of mental states*. Such states are not owned or possessed by anything. A full understanding of this negative thesis depends on understanding the positive notion of a subject and of ownership, the application of which the no-ownership theory is denying. Strawson has interesting things to say about these notions, but I want to assume that these notions are sufficiently understood for us to get the point of this thesis so interpreted. I shall call this the No-subject interpretation.

In favour of this interpretation is that it fits the name, and it also fits some of Strawson's ways of expressing the thesis. As he puts it at one point, 'for on this view it is only a linguistic illusion... that... states of consciousness belong to, or are states of, anything'.¹⁴ Now, I suspect that it is the no-subject interpretation which the name 'no-ownership theory' has usually been regarded as naming, and that, moreover, it is the view that Strawson primarily had in mind.¹⁵ I shall assume that it is what is meant.

¹³ Strawson (1959, 94). This formulation, containing as it does the repetition of the word 'one', can only be read as talking about apparent first person attributions, and not about psychological attributions in general.

¹⁴ Strawson (1959, 94).

¹⁵ Part of the problem about interpreting what the no-ownership view is springs from Strawson's restricted ascription to Wittgenstein and Schlick of the view that he has in mind. This gives the strong impression that it is a rather unusual view – and so makes one wonder what it is. It is odd and regrettable that he did not mention Hume as a possible no-ownership theorist. Some discussion of that would have helped to fix better the view he had in mind.

Now, Strawson's main criticism of the No-ownership theorist is that his position is incoherent.¹⁶ The core of Strawson's argument is given in these words.

It is not coherent, in that one who holds it is forced to make use of that sense of possession of which he denies the existence, in presenting his case for the denial. When he tries to state the contingent fact, which he thinks gives rise to the illusion of the 'ego' he has to state it in some such term as 'All my experiences are had₁ by (i.e. uniquely dependent on the state of) body B'. For any attempt to eliminate the 'my' or any expression with the similar possessive force, would yield something that was not a contingent fact at all. The proposition that all experiences are causally dependent on the state of a single body B, for example, is just false.¹⁷

This is a very ingenious objection, but it hardly seems conclusive. The first problem with it as a criticism is that it has simply not been shown that the no-ownership theorist cannot come up with a way of saying which experiences are dependent on my body B without using the notion of it being those that are mine. Maybe he can pick out certain experiences at a time in some demonstrative way and then designate the rest using some relational description which starts from the designated ones. We simply do not know what possibilities are available here. However, a more serious problem is that Strawson's objection seems to start at the wrong point. He is considering the no-ownership theorist at the point where that theorist is *explaining the illusion of the ego*. He alleges that in providing his explanation the supposedly inadmissible notion of 'mine' re-enters. But even if this is correct in relation to the explanation that Strawson provides for the No-ownership theorist it merely removes an explanation of what is, according to the No-ownership theory, an illusion, and it does not show there cannot be another explanation of the illusion.¹⁸ (In fact one would have thought that they would cite the structure of the language as a source for the illusion.) Crucially, the no-

¹⁶ See Strawson (1959, 96).

¹⁷ Strawson (1959, 96 – 97).

¹⁸ In fact the explanation that Strawson provides is not itself especially convincing leaving aside questions about its conceptual propriety. If it is noticed that a collection of experiences depend on a certain body why should that make them even seem to belong to a subject? Why suppose that such an explanation is what one should be considering?

ownership view itself does not depend on having an explanation for the existence of the ego illusion. Providing this explanation is a supplementary task if one accepts the no-ownership view, but any such explanation itself is not the no-ownership theory. Strawson's objection, therefore, starts at too late a point in the debate.

There is another question to raise about Strawson's discussion. The No-ownership theory is his invented target, invented to fill a slot in Strawson's dialectic. That slot seems fundamentally to be for the idea that states of consciousness are not owned or possessed by any subject. However, if that is the slot should any such theory be committed to the claims about the non-reference of 'I' in the type of sentences that Wittgenstein talked about? It is not obvious that it is so committed. It seems clear that the theory must hold that we do not properly self-ascribe mental features in those sentences, and that we do not refer to a subject, there being no such things. But, to maintain this one need not suppose that the 'I' does not refer to the speaker. It seems possible to hold that in such claims although we refer to ourselves the rest of the sentence does not ascribe a mental property to the item referred to. Maybe, for example, the sentence might be represented in these words: 'Unlucky me, here is a pain.' In these words I refer to myself, but do not ascribe the mental feature to myself. It seems to me therefore that it restricts the possible nature of a no-ownership view to see it as involving the no-reference thesis.

5 Subjects and Predicates

Having, as he thinks, disposed of the no-ownership view, Strawson focuses on cartesian dualism. His discussion of dualism is perhaps the most scrutinised part of the chapter. Roughly Strawson moves from a principle about predicates to the conclusion that subjects of mental or psychological predicates must also have corporeal attributes (or, being slightly more cautious in the light of something that Strawson later says, must *have or have had* such attributes). Before I start filling out and scrutinising this argument it seems to me that it should strike us as a somewhat unlikely thought that reflection on a principle about predicates could convince us of the falsity of cartesian dualism. Premise and conclusion seem remarkably far apart. And so, I shall argue, it proves.

How, then does Strawson propose to make the link? His first formulation of the basic premise about predication is this:

[that] it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness, experiences, to oneself, in the way one does, that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself.¹⁹

We should not, surely, rush to believe this as it stands. There is no general reason for denying the possibility of a self-ascriber of states of consciousness in a world which does not contain other subjects, hence in which there is no actual (and no temptation for the making of) other-ascriptions of psychological states. Whether the weaker version which talks of being prepared to other ascribe is reasonable turns in part on what 'being prepared to' means. Nothing though has been offered to rule out the possibility of a self-ascriber who is convinced for whatever reason that there cannot be others as lucky as he (or she) is in possessing mental states. There is a sense in which such a misguided thinker is not prepared to other-ascribe, but we have no reasons to doubt that he or she understands the ascriptions in question.

However, in a footnote Strawson reformulates the basic principle in an even more restricted form:

The idea of a predicate is correlative with that of a range of distinguishable individuals of which the predicates can be significantly, though not necessarily truly, affirmed.²⁰

Now, there may be elements in this formulation which a properly cautious person would not accept, but the crucial notion in it is, it seems to me, that of *significance*. Strawson's idea is that if an ascriber understands their own self-ascriptions of mental features then it is a necessary condition that they understand ascriptions of such features to other things. In effect, this principle denies the possibility that there is a type of priority to first person judgements; first person judgements are not intelligible prior to other-person ascriptions being intelligible. (It is clear, of course, that Strawson would deny the possibility of the reverse priority.) I am prepared to grant Strawson this basic claim about significance.²¹ The question is what follows from it.

¹⁹ Strawson (1959, 99).

²⁰ Strawson (1959, 99).

²¹ This minimal content view of the principle is, of course, closely related to Evans' Generality Constraint. Two elements in the weaker principle that I am prepared to accept but about which questions can certainly be raised are these. 1) A predicate might be introduced in a theory which is ascribed to a range of unobservable entities. There is a

Strawson's first way of explaining what follows is presented in these words.

But how is it that one can ascribe them [i.e. states of consciousness] to others? Now one thing here is certain: that if the things one ascribes states of consciousness to, in ascribing them to others, are thought of as a set of Cartesian egos to which only private experiences can, in correct logical grammar, be ascribed, then this question is unanswerable and this problem insoluble.²²

For all its resonance and fame this attempt to derive something from the principle about predicate significance is not easy to follow. One problem is the way that Strawson characterises the cartesian conception. He talks, in this passage, of egos being things 'to which only private experiences can, in correct logical grammar, be ascribed.'²³ Now, even if according to the cartesian conception egos can actually possess no other properties than private experiences (a supposition which is extremely dubious), it would hardly follow that it was somehow contrary to something called logical grammar to ascribe other properties to them. So Strawson's way of speaking is curious. However, let us assume that no other properties than private experiences can be ascribed *salva veritate* to egos. Given this it would hardly follow that the subject could not refer to them and make such ascriptions. Suppose that there is exactly one cartesian ego having a P* type pain at t and it is also having an I type itch. There is nothing to prevent me thinking at t 'the ego having the P* type pain is having the I type itch'. If I happen to entertain this thought it would be true, I would have thought about a cartesian ego and understood a predication of it. This seems to mean that I have done what according to the principle about predicates has to be possible for me (in order to be a self-ascriber), and I have done it in relation to a cartesian ego. Indeed, if all subjects were cartesian egos there is nothing preventing me doing this of any of them.

sense in which the individuals in question are not distinguishable – at least by us. We simply postulate a group of them. 2) Strawson gets entangled in the idea of a range of individuals of which the predicates can be significantly affirmed. It is not clear though that there are limitations of this sort on predicate intelligibility. Maybe predicates are intelligibly ascribed to any entity. These worries I shall ignore.

²² Strawson (1959, 100).

²³ Strawson (1959, 100).

In response to this very simple reply how might the Strawsonian argument be kept going? It might be said that the reply begs the question against Strawson. The reply simply assumes that cartesian egos are possible and surely Strawson would not allow that assumption. This comment, though, misunderstands that dialectical position. Strawson needs to show that what the predicate principle requires cannot be fulfilled if other subjects are cartesian egos; it seems to show that he has not demonstrated this if, assuming that other subjects are egos, we can propose a way to fulfil the requirement. The second response that I can envisage would start from the reflection that in the proposed example the subject, himself or herself, has no reason to think that another subject has been picked out, nor that the claim in question is true. Now, in the example as presented these two negative epistemological features are present. However, if this is in any way to favour Strawson's argument it means, for one thing, that the predicate principle requires as a condition of understanding a predication to another that the subject in question should have reason to think that they have made a reference. And it seems sufficient to comment that Strawson has offered no reason to build this positive epistemological property into the condition for *understanding* the predicate as applied to another. This, then hardly keeps the argument going.

At this point an important feature of Strawson's basic strategy stands out. Strawson is attempting to show that within a model in which subjects are cartesian egos the requirement on self-ascription cannot be fulfilled because ascriptions to others are not significant. However, in the way the argument is developed in section [4] Strawson has nothing of any substance to say about what it is for a predication to genuinely be significant. Lacking any such idea the focus of his argument has to, therefore, be on the supposed impossibility of making the *appropriate references* to which to attach the (other-ascribed) predicates. At this point it is hard not to feel that too little is, in any dependable way, built into the idea of reference to make a proper case to show that such reference is impossible. It is also hard not to feel that an assumption has crept into the argument without proper consideration. That assumption is that the non-first personal ascriptions that must be significant if first-person ascriptions are significant have to be subject-predicate in form. But why could they not be quantificational judgements? Why should not the judgement be of the form; there is a subject other than myself who is in pain? No problem can be generated for this on the grounds of problems to do with reference. It is hard to see why this would not be adequate.

Let us suppose, though, that we agree that the judgements must be subject-predicate, and that we add something like a positive epistemological condition as part of what understanding the subject part requires, and we keep the over restrictive conception of egos that is being assumed, there is still no case for holding that the requirement cannot be fulfilled. Some people take themselves to be mediums who can detect what I might call existence and presence in the realm of spirits. Has Strawson demonstrated that if other subjects were cartesian egos we might not have a capacity along the lines of mediums to know what the spirit realm contains and so knowingly make predications of others? This does not enter into his discussion and so cannot be said to have been ruled out.

There is a further problem. For the purposes of his argument at this stage Strawson's requirement is that the self ascriber understands predications of states of consciousness to things other than him or her self to which they can intelligibly be ascribed. Strawson stresses the intelligibility rather than truth. But to what range of things other than oneself can such predicates *be intelligibly ascribed*? Strawson does not really discuss this important issue, but it can be seen that if one held that such predicates can be ascribed intelligibly, but we can say falsely, to ordinary objects like trees, then the predicate principle even building into it the requirement of grounds for thinking that reference has been made will be fulfilled by the self-ascriber understanding such sentences as 'that tree is feeling pain', since they can count as knowing that they are referring to the tree, and they understand the total claim. Since the intelligibility range for all Strawson says may include non-subjects, this seems to do the trick!

I have proposed a number of simple ways that the predicate condition can be fulfilled by a self-ascribing subject in a cartesian world, and Strawson does not seem to have assembled ground to reject them. However, he continues the argument by considering the suggestion that an opponent might make that there are ways to single out cartesian egos. As Strawson presents the suggestion it is this:

Can we not identify such a subject as, for example, 'the subject that stands to that body in the same special relation as I stand in to this one', or, in other words, 'the subject of those experiences which stand in the same unique causal relation to the body N as my experiences stand in to body M'?²⁴

²⁴ Strawson (1959, 101).

Against these suggestions Strawson objects that they involve an inadmissible regress. He says:

But this suggestion is useless. It requires me to have noted that my experiences stand in a special relation to a body M when it is just the right to speak of my experiences at all that is in question. That is to say, it requires me to have noted that my experiences stand in a special relation to body M; but it requires me to have noted this as a condition of being able to identify other subjects of experiences, i.e. as a condition of my having the idea of myself as a subject of experience, i.e. as condition of thinking of any experience as mine.²⁵

There are two significant difficulties with Strawson's response (that I wish to point out). The first is that it can only work as a difficulty for the general idea if the reference to the other subject(s) depends on reference to oneself or one's experiences. Strawson clearly assumes that this is the only way to pick out other subjects, if it is to be done via reference to their bodies. It is hard to see why we should agree to this. We could suggest as alternative designations 'the subject on whom certain changes in that body produces immediate effects', or 'the subject who immediately causes effects in that body', or 'the subject causally linked in a unique way to that body'. Such specifications avoid any regress problems, and, as far as I can see, Strawson does not rule them out. The second problem is harder to adjudicate. Strawson's idea is that the descriptions he considers in effect run foul of the no-priority claim about predicates. Strawson's objection to these suggested descriptions, then, presumably is that their employment involves assigning an inadmissible priority to first person psychological ascriptions. The crucial question is whether their employment does involve such a commitment. Once this question is asked it seems to me that it is not obvious at all that there is any such commitment. The reason for this scepticism briefly expressed starts from noting that the priority that is to be rejected is that of a stage at which first person ascriptions are understood but other person ascriptions are not significant. Why, though, is there any commitment to the existence of such a stage in employing referential descriptions which presuppose that first person ascriptions are significant? Someone who suggests this type of description to sustain reference to ego's simply needs to affirm

²⁵ Strawson (1959, 101).

that as soon as first person ascriptions are significant so are the third person ones. They are as people put it – coeval. I myself therefore fail to see why the no-priority thesis is contradicted by the employment of the descriptions that Strawson is considering.

My overall conclusion at this stage is that Strawson's argument in section [4] fails to show that there is a true principle about predicates which dualism runs foul of.²⁶ I want, though, to raise two other problems about the direction of Strawson's argument.

6 Primitiveness and Possibilities

The central claim in section [4] is Strawson's famous thesis that the concept of a person is a primitive concept, by which, as he puts it, he means that

the concept of a person is the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation &c. are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type.²⁷

What needs asking is how this general conclusion follows even if (contrary to fact, as I have argued) all that Strawson has so far said is true. We can suppose that Strawson has shown that if we self-ascribe psychological features then we must be able to understand such ascriptions to others *who have material features*. Only in this way can we satisfy the predicate requirement. So let us say that it follows that self-ascription requires a preparedness (in some sense) to ascribe mental properties to entities with material features. Why, though, does Strawson describe this notion as '*the concept of a person*'?²⁸ We could equally say, it seems to me, that there is the general concept of a person, which is the concept of a thing with mental properties (of a certain kind, we might add), and

²⁶ Barry Smith reminded me that Strawson advances another argument against the coherence of Cartesian dualism. It is sketched on p. 101, and then presented in a fuller form in chapter 4 pp. (131 – 133) of *Individuals*. Strawson repeats this argument in his famous article 'Self, Mind and Body' reprinted in Strawson (2008). This argument deserves close attention, but I do not have space to consider it here. I have said a little about it in my Foreword to Strawson (2008).

²⁷ Strawson (1959, 101 – 102).

²⁸ The italic in that quote is, of course, my own.

that we have the more restricted concept of a materially endowed person, which we must at least be prepared to employ to fulfil the predicate principle, but also we have a second more restricted concept of a person which is of something psychologically but not materially endowed, which no argument based simply on a principle about predicates has shown (or, perhaps, could show) we must be prepared to employ, but which remains an available concept. It is, moreover, available to us at the same point at which the other restricted concept of a person is available to us. Strawson relates his talk of the primitiveness of the concept of a person as a two-sided thing to a denial that it can be analysed in terms of an ego and a material body (in some sort of relation). But on the picture that I have just offered Strawson the second restricted concept of a person is itself not analysed in terms of the two-sided type of person (and something else). It is simply the concept of a thing with mental attributes which does not have material attributes. This seems no less conceptually basic than the other so called primitive concept.

My suggestion then is that Strawson's argument (even granting his principle about predicates and other person identification) does not show that there is anything bad or deficient about the cartesian ego concept, nor is he entitled to capture his own conclusion in talk of *the* primitive concept of a person. There is a possible response, which I wish to consider, that might be made to this criticism. It might be said that the conclusion that I have conceded to Strawson is in a way *anti-cartesian*. The reason for suggesting this is that Descartes presumably held that the concept of a mentally endowed thing with corporeal attributes represents an impossibility. According to him no such thing can exist. In what has been conceded to Strawson (allowing that his premises are correct) it seems that it yields the consequence that such a concept cannot represent an impossibility, since it amounts to a notion we must employ or at least which must have significance. But this comment returns us to an issue that has emerged before. Do Strawson's premises about predicates and reference really require that there are corporeal subjects or merely that the concept of corporeal subjects be one that is intelligible to us? Now, if Strawson's premise about predicates is, as he seems to claim in a footnote, one committing us to assigning significance to attributions to (corporeal) others, as opposed to truth, then the anti-cartesian consequence cannot fall out. The cartesian way to understand it would be that our conceptual practices involve understanding a type of

psychological attribution that on proper reflection is committed to an impossibility.

We can, assuming that the assessment is on the right tracks, add a further observation about Strawson's talk of the primitiveness of the concept of a person. Many, including those who are sympathetic to Strawson, have felt uneasy about the notion of primitiveness that Strawson was employing, principally because it is hard to answer the question: what does it mean to say that a concept (of this sort) is primitive? I certainly share the sense that this is difficult. We can illustrate the difficulty here by asking: is such a concept as that of (say) a cup a primitive concept? It seems quite fair to suggest that it is. The reason for saying so is that it is the concept of a single thing with a cluster of attributes (and that makes it parallel to Strawson's account of the primitive concept of a person). However, if that is the right answer the question that next arises is: what concepts would *not* count as primitive? It has to be agreed that Strawson does not give a clear answer to this question. There seem, however, to be two contrasts that he has in mind. One is that of an entity conceived of as a compound of two (or more) other things. An example might be that of what we call – a ball and chain. That complex noun picks out a type of weapon explicitly captured as a compound of two things. But it is important to note two things if this is the (or a) contrasting non-primitive case. First, there is no commitment from the application of such nouns to the idea that statements about the designated objects can be analysed simply as conjunctions about the two elements. For example, the judgement 'That ball and chain is a clumsy weapon' does not look as if it is reducible to 'that ball is F and that chain is G', since it is a matter of how the complex thing handles as a single weapon. Second, it does not appear outrageous to suppose that lots of simple nouns carry implications about the objects they apply to being complex and having parts. Maybe the noun 'man' involves the idea of a complex object consisting of a trunk and a head (with certain shapes etc.). If so, one might wonder whether any realistic concept of a person or subject of the type that we standardly employ would not, in this vague sense, turn out to be compound, in which case relative to that contrast they turn out to be non-primitive after all. A second contrast that surfaces in Strawson's discussion, is the contrast with a noun where it stands for something that might be conceived of as a restricted case of a more general kind of thing. Thus, Strawson might think that 'chef' is 'person who

cooks'. The worry (or at least a worry) then is that Strawson's own so called primitive concept can be so represented – as a mentally endowed *body*. Strawson undoubtedly disagrees with this proposal, but as a number of philosophers have pointed out, it is hard to see precisely what Strawson offers to refute this suggestion.²⁹

There is a second response that might be made to the claims I endorsed at the beginning of this section. It might be said that Strawson's attitude to dualism is not as negative as I was assuming it was. Strawson does, at the end of section [4], make this remark:

This is not to say that the concept of a pure individual consciousness might not have a logically secondary existence, if thinks, or finds, it desirable. We speak of a dead person – a body – and in the same secondary way we might at least think of a disembodied person. A person is not an embodied ego, but an ego might be a disembodied person, retaining the logical benefit of individuality from having been a person.³⁰

Strawson adds some more details to this brief remark in section [7], saying, famously, that the effort of imagination needed to grasp this conception is 'not even great'.³¹ Now, this turn in Strawson's argument does indeed reveal an important aspect of his thinking. Basically, it seems to mean that he thinks that he has shown that there cannot be subjects of consciousness who were not initially corporeal, but that he holds it possible that such a subject could continue to exist as a subject while losing his or her corporeality. This also implies that he does not think that a fact of the form 'Subject S is in state F of consciousness' requires for its obtaining any contemporaneous physical fact.

Although this does need noting when considering the sense in which Strawson is anti-Cartesian, it represents, or so I shall suggest, two highly questionable elements in Strawson's argument. First, Strawson has presented us with no reason to doubt the intelligibility of the notion of a pure cartesian ego, that is to say, one which is a subject and incorporeal from the very beginning. That was a conclusion that I reached earlier. Second, if we do accept that subjects have to be corporeal initially (as Strawson does) then Strawson offers us virtually nothing to accept that

²⁹ I have in mind such philosophers as Don Locke, Bernard Williams, and David Wiggins.

³⁰ Strawson (1959, 103).

³¹ Strawson (1959, 115).

they need not remain so. There is no dispute that we can construct against that background the concept of a subject that loses its corporeality. That is easy to construct. One just says: here is a concept – a thing which is initially a subject and corporeal and which remains a subject but does not remain corporeal. It is quite another thing to agree that such a concept represents a genuine possibility, something that our metaphysics of consciousness should regard as possible. Does the fact that I can imagine myself feeling a pain and lacking a central nervous system reveal that feeling pains is clearly possible without a central nervous system? No properly cautious thinker would suppose so, yet Strawson's easy act of imagination amounts to nothing more than that sort of imagination. But a further question that Strawson faces in arguing this way is what proper sense can be made of the idea that it is the same subject without corporeality which previously possessed it. What sort of link over time is there? What kind of thing is this? Strawson simply assumes that imaginability entails possibility. Strawson's view concedes too much to his own earlier argument and then concedes too much to a metaphysically unserious type of thought experiment.

I have one last three-sided critical observation to make about Strawson's argument. Section [4] in effect starts with it as given that the subject self ascribes states of consciousness and tries to derive consequences from that based on the principle about predicates. The supposed consequence is that other subjects must be corporeal, on pain of not being identifiable. But there are three odd features of this starting point. The first is that Strawson's initial question in effect is asking why we self ascribe experiences, and there is really no hope of arriving at an answer to that question by simply starting with the assumption that we do and working out its consequences. So, the approach in section [4] does not seem appropriate to Strawson's own enquiry. Second, why focus on self ascription of experiences (or mental states)? One might think that, if we are to start with anything along these lines, we might start with self ascription more generally conceived. We self ascribe, say, our physical layout. Could a creature be capable of that, and be one that is having experiences, but not be a self ascriber of those experiences? This is not obviously a possibility. Within an enquiry into self consciousness there is no obvious reason to start where Strawson does. Third, Strawson's perspective on the matter is extremely artificial. The corporeality of subjects is, according to him, to be understood as a consequence of their re-

quirement for identifiability. It is as if the putative self ascriber needs to hook some mental predicates onto something else, and hence onto something physical, on pain of not being able, as one might say, to attain an understanding of him or her self. In reality, surely, we ascribe mental features to physical objects around us as part of understanding *them*. The behaviour and evident constitution of some of the physical things around us simply elicits such ascriptions from us. It is not really to do with requirements simply linked to predicate significance.

7 Diagnosis and Insight

This critical engagement with Strawson's 'Persons' has stopped short of the final conclusions of his chapter. However, I want to offer a general account of where, as it seems to me, Strawson's discussion of persons goes wrong.

My diagnosis is that Strawson attempts to develop a conception of persons and subjects on the basis solely of rather thin logical and conceptual considerations, and that is impossible. This sort of mistake emerges in two ways. Strawson's grounds for directing the charge of incoherence against the no-ownership theory is the allegation that such a theorist has to employ the concepts he is criticising at some point in the development of his own theory. Strawson fails to show that this is true, and moreover, he directs the charge against a peripheral aspect of the theory. In the case of dualism he claims that there is a principle about predicates with which it is inconsistent. In fact, the principle is so distant from speculations about the mind and so abstract that it is hard to believe that there can be any inconsistency between it and dualism, and Strawson does not convince us that there is any such inconsistency. Strawson's own view also contains two positive ideas. The first is that persons are things which as such have both mental attributes and physical attributes. I shall engage with this shortly. The second positive element, implied by his endorsement of the possibility of disembodied ex-persons with mental states, is that mental states do not have a real nature which involves anything physical. Indeed, Strawson seems to think that it is possible for mental states to be present without anything physical being present at all. It becomes appropriate, I suggest, to ascribe to Strawson a view of the physical/mental relation which can be described as a strong version of the dual aspect theory; physical aspects are one sort of aspect, mental

aspects are another sort of aspect, to the extent that a things can possess the latter aspects without the former aspects at all. Strawson does not himself talk of a dual aspect theory, but it is a name that seems to fit. His reason for this feature of his view is simply that he can imagine, without difficulty, a disembodied but mentally active ex-person. It must strike anyone now that no serious claims about the genuine metaphysical status of mental features can be grounded in such a minor act of imagination. The two negative and the second positive ingredients of his view are all provided with too little in the way of support.

This last criticism links with a problem already raised in §2 (a). There would be nothing wrong in saying that a belief in disembodied subjects is available to us. But Strawson evidently sees it as a genuine possibility, established by a simple act of imagination. I am suggesting then that Strawson mistakes a sound observation about thoughts available to us with an unsupported claim about possibilities open to us.

We can see Strawson's discussion as a late attempt to do the philosophy of mind in a purely a priori, and conceptual, way. Ironically in the very same year that *Individuals* came out so did J. J. C. Smart's article 'Sensations and Brain Processes' in which a looser, more empirically informed, approach to the philosophy of mind was developed. That article represented, I am inclined to say, a decisive paradigm shift in the philosophy of mind.

There are though, I want to suggest, at least two central insights in Strawson's account that we must hold on to. These concern how we do think of ourselves. The most important one is that Strawson captures in a clear way what our normal conceptual practice is in relation to what I shall follow him in calling persons. Each of us thinks of him or herself as an enduring object that has physical attributes, say weighs 25 stone, has a certain shape, location, etc., and also has certain mental attributes, including states of consciousness. We think of ourselves as extended in space, as having a physical surface (as well as an interior), such that to encounter that surface is to encounter us. We are not inside, or merely in control of, this physical thing, we simply *are* such a physical thing. Many of the most fundamental ways we think about ourselves presuppose that idea (e.g. the very fundamental idea that we are either male or female). And we also unhesitatingly think of others around in exactly the same way. Our conceptual scheme, then, is not one according to which anything like dualism is true. Strawson articulates this conception and

makes it clear that it is our conceptual scheme. That it is our shared and agreed conception does not mean that it is not confused or mistaken, but what seems to follow is that the onus lies on those who regard it as an error to convince us that something so basic and fundamental contains mistakes, a task in which they will surely fail. Armed with Strawson's description we can see what an error theorist needs to overturn. Also, armed with his description we can see that the assumption often made by philosophers that we are commonsensically committed to dualism is itself a gross error. We are not so committed.³²

The second truth in Strawson is related to his odd attitude to dualism, to what I have called his dual aspect theory. It is that as we normally think, as we unreflectively operate with our folk psychology, in self description and other description, we have no commitment to the existence of a tight relation between the mental and the physical. It is not that we are dual aspect theorists, but it is not the case that we are *not*. We are, it seems to me, not committed either way. So, if philosophers wish to endorse some strong supervenience claim about the relation of the mental and the physical they are not thereby denying commonsense, but they are not articulating a commonsense commitment either. It seems to me that there is, arguably, a contrast here with the case of moral thinking. In that case it is not obvious that it is not a commitment of ordinary thinking that there is some supervenience relation between value and natural features. What seems clear, though, is that there is no such commitment in our thinking about the relation between the psychological and the physical.

³² We should, I believe, distance ourselves from two aspects of the way that Strawson describes our conceptual scheme, which I shall hint at here, though not properly develop. The first is his talk of persons as single two-sided things. To speak that way implies that there are two sorts of aspects that we possess. But there is no clear sense in such a two fold division. We do have physical features – such as shape, and weight, and colour – and we do have experiences (states of consciousness), but we have biological properties, social properties, legal properties etc. The two-fold division is not an appropriate one. The second aspect of Strawson's treatment that needs modification is his employment of the term 'person'. Ignoring the previous unhappiness, if there is a category that can be characterised as that of single two sided things, where the sides are physical and psychological, it is that of animals, since your pets and a large number of wild animals, would be so characterised. It would not be right to employ the term 'person' for such a group. Having noticed this it then becomes questionable that the category of persons is a basic category, rather than a subcategory in the broader one just mentioned.

These two insights both concern our actual conceptual scheme. In this area, as in many others, Strawson had a special talent for describing how our thought (and language) really is, and for that philosophers are forever indebted to him. Even if all is not well with Strawson's vocabulary of descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, we can employ it in saying that Strawson was a superb descriptive metaphysician.³³

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³³ My thinking about this chapter has been influenced by conversations with Hong Yu Wong, and some written responses by Craig French. I am also grateful to the audience in Prague – including Barry Smith, Katalin Farkas, Galen Strawson, and Minidipa Sen – for their comments and responses.