Strawson's Descriptive Metaphysics - Its Scope and Limits

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Abstract: This paper examines some aspects of Strawson's conception of descriptive metaphysics, as it is developed in *Individuals*. Descriptive metaphysics sets out to describe "the actual structure of our thought about the world". Three specific problems for this project are discussed. First, isn't the description of our actual thought about the world mainly an empirical task? Second, how determinate and consistent is the stuff we find, how determinate and consistent is our conceptual scheme? Third, who are "we" here? Answers to these sets of questions are mainly negative in spirit. But all this will probably not mean that there will be no place for metaphysics, descriptive or revisionary, as a subject. The whole enterprise is perhaps more fraught with difficulties than Strawson thought, however.

Keywords: Strawson, metaphysics, descriptive, revisionary, conceptual schemes.

Individuals (Strawson 1959) has the subtitle *An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. Such a subtitle invites questions. What is descriptive metaphysics? What would it be a description of? If we think of metaphysics as an attempt to sort out how things in the broadest sense of the word are connected (echoing Sellars), then it would lie close to hand to think of descriptive metaphysics as a description of what the world is like, in the broadest possible sense of the word. Would such a project then be something else than a scientific, empirical, study of what the world is like? But it turns out that the intent of Strawsonian descriptive metaphysics is not description of the world. It is something else.

In the Introduction to *Individuals*, Strawson writes: "Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about

the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure" (1959, 9). As Strawson readily admits, this distinction is not perfectly clear-cut for all cases (Hume is for instance said to be hard to place), but it is held that we at least in many cases can tell the two apart. That quotation was at the very beginning of *Individuals*, and the book's closing words are: "So if metaphysics is the finding of reasons, good, bad or indifferent, for what we believe on instinct, then this [study] has been metaphysics" (ibid., 247). And this interest in the structure of our thought about the world was not a passing fancy. In his Intellectual Autobiography, he wrote: "Our essential, if not our only, business is to get a clear view on our concepts and their place in our lives" (Strawson 1999). The aim is to establish the connections between the major structural features of elements of our conceptual scheme.

Strawson's notion of conceptual scheme appears to have a double ancestry. Strawson's search for and employment of our conceptual scheme is usually interpreted in Kantian terms. This is a natural interpretation, given Strawson's interest in Kant. But we should also see that there is a lot of Moore and his "truths of common sense" here. It is clear that Strawson drew inspiration from both these sources, the Kantian and the Moorean. The Kantian source is philosophically more ambitious, more high-powered, striving to give an account of the very roots of our possibility to have knowledge about the world. The Moorean source is by intent more pedestrian. It serves to remind us of the things we in some sense knew all along, but may have forgotten as the result of an ill-balanced diet of philosophical questioning. Moore's ambitions may be large, but the method is modest. He is not set to discover something deep about us and our cognitive apparatus; the depth we do find in Moore concerns what we are supposed to be doing with the things we are held to have known all along.

Moore's "A Defence of Common Sense" sets out to disarm (not disprove) the sceptic, by pointing to things we all know. His "list of truisms" includes things like:

> There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body.… the earth has existed also for many years before my body was born,… I have often perceived both my own body and other things which formed part of its environment, including other human bodies,… I have had expectations with regard to the future,… very many… human beings… have frequently *known*,… everything which I was claiming to know about *my*self.   (1925, pp. 31ff)

Virtually everyone knows all the things in Moore's (long) list of things he knows, and virtually everyone knows that virtually everyone else knows all those things. These are not the deep Kantian categories, these are just things we knew all along. They are game-changers, in a sense: the sceptic doesn't have a firmer ground for her beliefs than common sense, so many of the sceptic's doubts are misguided, they don't even get off the ground, if we remind ourselves of what we actually know, before the sceptic's game has begun. And in Chapter 2 of *Individuals*, we find a view of what is found in our conceptual scheme that is quite similar to Moore's list of truisms:

> We think of the world as containing particular things some of which are independent of ourselves; we think of the world's history as made up of particular episodes in which we may or may not have a part; and we think of these particular things and events as included in the topics of our common discourse, as things about which we can talk to each other. These are remarks about the way we think of the world, about our conceptual scheme. (1959, 15)

So descriptive metaphysics is the attempt to describe our actual thought about the world, the things we believe "on instinct". This project is, I think, problematic in at least three ways. First, can we settle for describing only the structure of our thought about the world – and if we can, isn't this mainly an empirical task? Second, how determinate is the stuff we find, how determinate is our conceptual scheme? And why should we think that it is consistent – if it is only a matter of describing what our actual thought about the world is, then it may turn out to contain many gaps and inconsistencies. Third, who are "we" here? Who are the creatures having a conceptual scheme, and how is it determined who "we" are – could there for instance be other groups, with other conceptual schemes?[1] My answers to these three sets of questions will be "no", "not very", and "hard to tell", respectively. But all this will probably not mean that there will be no place for metaphysics, descriptive or revisionary, as a subject. The whole enterprise is perhaps more fraught with difficulties than Strawson thought, however. We can begin with the third set of questions, though I will be very brief here. How is the de-

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[1]   This last problem has some echoes in Moore's thinking as well. He explicitly refrains from holding that everyone subscribes to the truisms he lists, and settles for holding that most of the people accept them most of the time. Even if there is a crushing majority accepting all the Moorean truisms, the existence of a minority opinion might cause troubles: sceptics are usually not concerned about being in the minority.

scriptive metaphysician to handle dissenters? If someone disagrees about what is to be found in their conceptual scheme, do we just say "well, that is their different conceptual scheme, *our scheme* is like this", or do we say that they are wrong, either wrong about what is to be found in their conceptual schemes, or wrong about the way the world is? I will not do more than raise this particular issue, since Strawson doesn't really discuss it. It should be clear, however, that neither alternative is very attractive for Strawson's position. Holding on to *our* scheme in the face of dissenters risks trivializing the project, while saying that some other group is wrong about a conceptual scheme will blur the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, and will also make it necessary to bring a study of the world into the metaphysical project.

The Possibility of Describing a Pure Level of Actual Thought about the World

A quick reading of Strawson may give the impression that the descriptive/revisionary distinction carves up the whole of metaphysics. But this is not the case. There is clearly a lot of metaphysics that doesn't care much about our thought, either describing or revising it. The philosophical study of properties or of time are but two examples. They study what properties are, what time is, not what we think of time or properties. The structure of our thought about such things may not be irrelevant, but it still isn't what the subject sets out to be about.

In *Individuals*, the enterprise of descriptive metaphysics is focused exclusively on describing what our thought about the world is like. This is not always the case in Strawson's work. *Analysis and Metaphysics* (1992) paints a different picture, in the chapter "Moore and Quine", where the conception of metaphysics is much more oriented to saying what the world is like, or what the world must be like. Strawson does not see this as a substantial change in doctrine, however. There, Strawson gives several reasons why a focus on our thought about the world still is of central importance. One is that we, in order to find out how we are to develop and revise our conceptual scheme as the result of pressures coming from ideas about how the world is, still would have to find out what our thought about the world is like. Another reason is that even the philosopher who thinks that we ought to revise our conception of the world extensively must start somewhere, with some set of

thoughts about the world. Our assessment of that critique of our conceptual scheme will require us to lean on some aspects of the thought about the world being taken for granted:

> the challenging philosopher must start somewhere; he must start from some point inside our existing equipment of ideas… we shall be better able to evaluate his reasons if we have a clear picture of how those concepts which form this starting-point actually work in relation to the rest of our conceptual equipment. (1992, 34 – 35)

So no matter how intensely the philosopher challenges some aspects of our conceptual scheme, something will always be taken for granted, and it is at least worthwhile for us to try to find out what it is that is being taken for granted. It is not just worthwhile, it is an integral part of coming to understand the nature of the world.

We can also find already in *Individuals* a kind of subterranean acknowledgement of the need for considering what the world is like: the task of *revisionary* metaphysics is said to be to produce a *better* structure for our thought about the world. But what could make such a structure better, unless we took the nature of the world into account? Without the world as a player or judge here, it seems that just about any system would be as good as any other, as long as it is consistent. But the demand for consistency would appear to be a kind of minimal requirement – no one interested in descriptive metaphysics would rest content with describing an inconsistent system of thought about the world.[2] We might also think that a conceptual scheme should be replaced by another, because the new conceptual scheme is *simpler* than the other. But if we don't introduce the world into our considerations here, the appeal to simplicity will not really work. Scientists can appeal to simplicity because they think that the world on some deep level really is simple. If we were to leave out considerations of what the world was like, appeals to simplicity in choice of conceptual scheme would just be like appeals to simplicity in judging works of art. Here, simplicity may be a virtue, but

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[2] This requires some modification. It could very well turn out that we had inconsistent thoughts about the world (see next section), but in that case, I guess there would be pressure on the descriptive metaphysicist to try to do something about it, or else explain why nothing could be done about it. The dialetheist could for instance take the existence of such inconsistencies as a sign that reality deep down *is* inconsistent. Would this then be an example of descriptive or revisionary metaphysics?

it is a matter of choice, not of a better picture of an independent reality. It could not be the case that our *only* reason for preferring one conceptual scheme before another was that it was simpler – some appeal to the nature of the world would be required.

Even if there thus in *Individuals* is some kind of acknowledgement of the impact of the world on the choice of our conceptual scheme, I will stay with the more "official" conception, stressing the role of metaphysics as the study of our thought about the world. Part of the reason for this is that it does represent a common thread in history – philosophy as the study of thought, of concepts or meanings, where such things are viewed as cut off from the world, possible to examine independently of a study of what the world is like. There have of course been predecessors to this kind of project; Descartes and Husserl spring to mind. The attempts to turn philosophy into a pure science of pure thought have not been an unmitigated disaster, but neither have they been impressively successful.

Two things are problematic. First, how interesting would a study of the structure of our thought be? Second, and more importantly, is this project at all feasible? There are certainly examples of such studies, and they are often interesting, but one thing stands out here: such studies are often empirical. They consider how our actual thought about the world matches or mismatches an ideal, and this ideal is arrived at by way of knowing what the world is like. A typical case of this would be the work of Kahneman and Tversky, studying how we actually think about the world when we try to handle it in probabilistic terms, and they found many interesting things, as for instance that we tend to prefer saving 147 lives to 150, that we often are willing to pay the same amount to save 5 lives as to save 5.000, and we have all heard of Linda the feminist bank clerk.[3] What makes these studies interesting is that we, through studying the world, come to know how our thought falls short of correctness. And it is not only in the cases where we in our actual thinking get things wrong that the results are of empirical interest; it can often be of considerable interest to find out how we manage to *successfully* get a grip on the world. But this will, again, be an empirical subject. The actual structure of our thought about the world *is* a worthwhile subject, but it appears that it tends to boil down to some kind of empirical cognitive psychology. If we spend time trying to find out what the structure of our

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[3] See the papers collected in Gilovich et al. (2002).

thought about the world is like, there had better be some way to distinguish the empirical studies from the more metaphysical.

It is often said that the task of a particular kind of philosophy is the study of thought, not of thinking,[4] and if this formulation means anything at all, it should certainly exclude the empirical study of actual thinking. The study of thought is something else. Frege, one of the philosophers insisting on this kind of difference, clearly intended the study of thought to be something else than the study of how we actually think, but this distinction is harder to apply to Strawson, given the characterization of descriptive metaphysics as the description of the *actual* structure of our thought about the world. If this is to mean anything, it will get us into the area of empirical studies.

One example, where the impact of empirical studies on understanding the basic levels of our conceptual scheme, is our conception of objects, so central for Strawson's project. In *Individuals*, Chapter 1 ("Bodies") discusses what place our conceptions of objects have in our general conceptual scheme. Such discussions where once the exclusive purview of philosophers. Now, much of the most interesting work in this area is empirical, often carried out by developmental psychologists.[5] Such research shows that sortal concepts are less basic than the properties of what has been called "Spelke objects" (Maddy 2007, 253). A Spelke object is characterized by its cohesion, it maintains its boundaries when in motion.

It may not only be difficult to distinguish the study of the structure of thought from empirical cognitive psychology; it is controversial to what extent it will even be *possible* to study the structure of our thought about the world independently of a study of the world. There are externalist pressures, rendering the idea of an exclusive focus on the structure of our thought about the world problematic. The externalist holds that at least certain aspects of the structure of our thought are determined by factors out there, in the world. They may be natural kinds, objects of demonstrative reference, the social environment of the subject.[6] If some kind of ex-

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[4]   Dummett stresses this repeatedly as an interpretation of Frege, see for instance Dummett (1981, 39).

[5]   Maddy (2007, III.5.i, 245 – 258) gives a good overview of the current state of the subject.

[6]   Natural kind externalism is of the kind associated with Putnam's (1975); social externalism is to be found in Burge's work (see the papers collected in Burge 2007), and externalism inspired by the study of demonstrative reference is to be found in Evans' (1982).

ternalism is accepted, there will be limits to what we will find by focusing on a conceptual level, a level of our thought about the world, and such limits will serve to make the project of descriptive metaphysics less interesting. Questions concerning the relations between externalism and metaphysics demand a more large-scale treatment on some other occasion, so here, I will move on to two different kinds of case, sets and vagueness.

The study of our actual thought about sets is perhaps not all that fascinating. It can be of interest for cognitive science, but it is not of central philosophical importance. What we want to know here is what sets are like. The study of our actual thought about vagueness is also of some interest, and of some relevance for theories of what vagueness is and how it is to be handled. There are interesting, empirical, questions such as: How do people actually think of vague predicates? Do they withhold judgements on penumbral cases? Are there any people around who pretheoretically make the judgements epistemicists think we all *should* be making? And so on. They may also turn out to be relevant for the attempts to understand and handle vagueness. But they would still be secondary to the attempts to come up with a correct, or at least viable, theory of vagueness. A theory of vagueness will have to pave a way through our actual thought about vagueness, which almost certainly is inconsistent.

So the gist of the first set of questions I raised about Strawson's project of descriptive metaphysics would be that Strawson has set himself a task that is *unambitious* in a particular way, and this kind of lack of ambition makes the whole project problematic. The point here is not that Strawson somehow accomplishes less than he could, the point is that the self-blinkering approach from the very beginning threatens to make the whole project impossible to carry out. The threat is that there is no starting point to be found, if we expressly delimit ourselves to examining the structure of our thought about the world.

In all fairness, it should be said that Strawson is not entirely consistent in this self-blinkering approach. I have already mentioned that the discussion in *Analysis and Metaphysics* is much more concerned with the idea that at least *one* aspect of metaphysics is to find out what the world is like. In that work, we get an argument to show that the gap between thought about the world and thought about concepts is automatically bridged:

> In so far as there are concepts of kinds of thing, it is quite inconceivable that these concepts should have this pervasive or universal employment unless we took it for granted that there were, or existed, in the world things to which those concepts, or concepts of those concept-types, applied.   (1992, 33)

If we take this as a general argument for the correctness of our basic concepts, the argument doesn't prove much. We might have evolved in some peculiar way that provides each and every one of us with a specific conceptual makeup, without this makeup reflecting features of the world, as is arguably the case for at least some concepts we all seem to use; folk physics appears to be very firmly entrenched across the world without being a very good theory. A "pervasive or universal employment" of a concept need only reflect that it works sufficiently well, or that it fits well into our cognitive makeup, not that the concept necessarily exist things in the world that these concepts apply to. So an unfounded pervasive employment of a concept is certainly not inconceivable. Perhaps we could grant that there is a prima facie case for connecting universal employment of concepts to the existence of things in the world. This would, however, again partly be an empirical matter. Evolutionary epistemology would for instance give a partly empirical argument for thinking that at least some of our entrenched concepts do fit the nature of the world – if we had been massively wrong about the nature of the world, we would have been extinct by now.

But there are also several passages in *Individuals*, where it is not entirely clear what is going on, as in the following, about ontological primacy and dependence:

> Suppose, for instance, it should turn out that there is a type of particulars, β, such that particulars of type β cannot be identified without reference to particulars of another type, α, whereas particulars of type α can be identified without reference to particulars of type β. Then it would be a general characteristic of our scheme, that the ability to talk about β-particulars at all was dependent on the ability to talk about α-particulars, but not vice versa.
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> (1959, 17f)

What does "cannot be identified" mean here? Is it just a local inability of ours, or does it reflect some dependence relations out there, in the world? If the inability is on our part, then is it just a local shortcoming, which would, again, presumably be an empirical matter? Should we then pull ourselves together, and just try harder? Or are we unable to do this, because it really is impossible? In that case, we would have turned to doing metaphysics "out there", as a kind of theory about what the world was like, and not as a study of the actual workings of our mind, thus no longer being faithful to the letter of descriptive metaphysics.

Determinacy and Consistency

The next issue concerns determinacy. Large claims are at times made about our conceptual schemes (not only by Strawson), but I am not completely convinced that there is all that much of determinate nature to be found there. Certainly not in the man in the street, the one with a bank account and a drunken wife, as Russell put it. Perhaps more determinacy and content can be found among philosophers, spending time thinking about these things. My main worry is not that there is little to furnish our conceptual scheme – it's perhaps not empty, but the problem is that the furniture is bound to move around a bit as the result of conceptual pressures. When we strive for consistency among our beliefs, they will change, and when we find out more about the world, our concepts will change again. There is no guarantee that what we find is in order.

We can look at a few examples of this. If anything is part of our conceptual scheme, then the existence of change surely is. Most things around us change, in several respects. Few things remain completely unchanged. But for early Greek philosophy, this was hard to give an account of: how *could* there be change, given what for them appeared to be iron-clad reasoning, as in Zeno's paradoxes? So people thought there was no such thing as change. Then Aristotle helped change their minds. This is not news, just a recapitulation of History of Philosophy 101; my point is just that our intuitions about what is the case can and do change much of the time, and the intuitions we start with can very well turn out to be inconsistent, or at least hard to square with other things we want to believe.

Or consider sets. I guess most people, when starting to think about sets, come up with some version of naïve set theory, leading directly to the paradoxes. But this much we know: the road to paradox is paved with good intuitions. It will then take a considerable amount of work to come up with a theory that is recognizable as a theory of sets, yet doesn't get us entangled in the paradoxes. Our actual thought about sets, taken as something given, is a starting point, but not much more than that.

Another example here is vagueness. Most people probably have some assortment of beliefs regarding vague predicates that leads us directly to sorites cases. My very unsystematic surveys, asking non-philosophers, indicate that when presented with the sorites paradox, most people in one way or another decide not to think about these problems; they sweep them under the rug. But neglecting the problems is not solving them. Philosophers can make an attempt to solve the problems, by re-

shuffling and revising our existing beliefs about vagueness, trying to come up with a workable and stable set of beliefs – but this will always entail leaving the actual beliefs behind, in favour of a new set of beliefs.

A final example of this kind would be our beliefs about the mind-body problem. Empirical studies show that most people, over the world, among their actual beliefs have some version of mind-body dualism. It takes a certain amount of active thought, digging into the structure of the actual beliefs about body and mind, to find that there may be problems with such a theory. I guess very few are materialists from the outset, but some philosophers end up with a materialist position after a great deal of thought. So there may well be some actual beliefs about a subject, but before they have been subjected to scrutiny, and occasional revision, there is not much of a determinate content there, and there is certainly no guarantee that what we have from the start is consistent.

There may well be theories in metaphysics that are better than their competitors without being part of our actual thought about the world. Trope theory, as developed in for instance Campbell (1990), might be one example of this (even if there may be reasons to remain sceptical about trope theory; see Stjernberg 2003). Trope theory is developed as an alternative to traditional subject-predicate metaphysics, where the latter may lay claim to being well entrenched in our conceptual scheme, but is argued to harbour intractable problems. Trope theory discards that traditional approach, and while it may have its problems – which I will not be discussing – two things are clear. One is that it currently is a thriving metaphysical project, with possible applications in several areas, the other that it diverges significantly from our actual beliefs about the world. Perhaps Strawson's reaction to aspects of trope theory might be on a line with his reaction to "process-things" in *Individuals*, where he said that "It is [a category] we neither have nor need"(1959, 57).[7]

It can perhaps be granted that we actually don't *have* the category of process-things. This is, again, at least to some extent an empirical issue, but we can go along with Strawson's claim here.[8] Why is it a category we

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[7] This may actually be somewhat unfair, since Strawson on other occasions has been held to be one of the precursors of trope theory, see Bacon (2008). Such passages are, however, difficult to square with the intentions of the descriptive metaphysician.

[8] Empirical studies, as Nisbet (2003), indicate that there might be more room for process-things among people brought up in Asia, speaking Asian languages. This would again

don't need? Strawson's position is that process-things still are parasitic upon the (re-)identification of objects, so such process-things would at most amount to an unnecessary addition to our existing ontology.

Conclusion

Strawson's claims for descriptive metaphysics have proven hard to substantiate. It is hard to draw a clear line, separating empirical studies from purely philosophical (whatever that is supposed to mean). The focus on the structure of the subjects' thoughts, without taking much notice of what the world is like, seems to be unfounded, and perhaps even in the long run an impossible foundation for further studies. There is also reason to suspect that what we eventually find will be less determinate and less consistent than what we would have hoped.

So is the project of descriptive metaphysics a complete failure? It may certainly sound so from what I have said so far. But I think all I have managed to show, or even tried to show, is that metaphysics – descriptive or not – is something that will prove to be much more difficult than Strawson appears to have assumed. There is no clear starting point, and no end in sight.[9]

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take us back to the questions concerning who "we" are, when "the actual structure of our thought" is being studied.

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