P.F. Strawson at 100
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P.F. Strawson (1919-2006) was one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth-century. His career centred around Oxford – first as Tutor and Fellow at University College, then as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Magdalen College. His careful, thoughtful, and characteristically elegant written work was influential in moving Oxford philosophy from the anti-metaphysical leanings of A.J. Ayer and J.L. Austin to a renewed and rejuvenated era of traditional philosophy theorising, albeit domesticated in a distinctively Strawsonian fashion. His influence on British philosophy persists through a generation of students who were brought up on his writings.

Peter Frederick Strawson was born in London on November 23, 1919. He arrived in Oxford in 1937 on scholarship to study English at St. John's College, Oxford, but decided to change to Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE), in part because of the international political climate. Philosophy, he found, 'congenial and absorbing' from the start. His main philosophy tutor was J.D. Mabbott, a respected political philosopher and later head of the college. And he also had one term's tuition with H. P. Grice, whom Strawson later described as 'one of the cleverest and most ingenious thinkers of our time'.

St John's were initially reluctant to allow Strawson to change to PPE on the grounds that he would not get a first-class mark. This prediction was proved correct, but rumour had it that Strawson's second-class mark was a result, in part, of the younger of his two examiners leaving Strawson's exam scripts in the back of a taxi, and thus not being able to argue the case for a higher mark against the view of the older, more conservative, examiner. He was called up to military service, attaining the rank of captain, and when he left the military in 1946, took up a post in Philosophy at the University College of North Wales, Bangor.

It was his award of the prestigious John Locke prize – awarded on the basis of a written examination to philosophy graduates in Oxford – which enabled his return to Oxford, his answers sufficiently impressing Gilbert Ryle that he recommended Strawson to University College, Oxford, where he was appointed first as a lecturer, and then as a Fellow in 1948. He had thus achieved what, at the age of 21 was his ambition: to be a Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy in Oxford.

Strawon's name was made almost immediately through two articles published in 1950: 'On Referring', published in *MIND*, and a debate with J.L. Austin about truth, published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. In both cases, Strawson was up against a big-name philosopher: Bertrand Russell, in the case of his paper in *MIND*, and J.L. Austin, the current dominant figure in Oxford philosophy, in the debate about truth. In both cases Strawson was judged by many to have won the battle. The debate with Austin was particularly important, since it was unheard of for someone to take Austin on at his own game: with a careful, almost forensic, analysis of the ordinary ways in which we talk.

'On Referring' is, in part, a criticism of Russell's famous article 'On Denoting'. The topic of both papers is reference – and, in particular, the ways in which we refer to things by use of the definite description 'the'. (It is a mark of philosophy that so much can turn on so little a word.) Consider the statement 'The Prime Minister is tired'. And contrast it with the statement 'A Prime Minister is tired'. How does the former differ from the latter? According to Russell, the latter statement tells you that there exists a Prime Minister, and it (she) is tired. The former statement, the one which uses a definite description, works exactly the same way except that it also adds that there are no other Prime Ministers. That is, 'The Prime Minister is tired' says 'There is one and only one Prime Minister and it is tired'. Perhaps this sounds strange – and Strawson's insight in his reply is based in part on the observation that it *should* sound strange – but Russell's theory had achieved orthodoxy by the time of Strawson's writing, and was thought to be a philosophically illuminating account of one small but important aspect of ordinary language.

Strawson raised a range of objections to Russell's proposal. One of his points is that Russell's view implies that statements of the form 'The F is G' are *false* when there is no F in question. For Russell, this was a merit of the view. If I say to you 'The King of France is bald', my statement is false, precisely because there is no King of France. But Strawson pointed out that we do not always treat such statements as false. In some cases, perhaps in many cases, we would not say that the statement is false, but that it does not make sense – that it is not *even* false. For Strawson, sentences can be neither true nor false, and some of Russell's cases fall into that category. This showed, he thought, that Russell's analysis cannot be the whole story about reference.

If it was these early papers which made Strawson's name, it was his books *Individuals* (1959) and *The Bounds of Sense* (1966) which cemented his reputation and helped move British philosophy in a new direction. In the first half of the twentieth-century, British philosophy was going through one of its regular periods of metaphysical hostility. For the logical positivists, such as A.J. Ayer, and for the careful, language-focused philosophers, such as J.L. Austin, metaphysics was a domain of wild speculation, where philosophical claims went beyond the limits of sense and significance. Strawson's writings allowed a return to metaphysical theorising, albeit theorising which was constrained by a lingering respect for the anti-metaphysical arguments of his predecessors.

The return to a form of metaphysics is announced in the subtitle to *Individuals:* 'An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics'. The contrast, as Strawson outlines it in his Introduction, is with 'revisionary metaphysics'. 'Descriptive metaphysics', he tells us, 'is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure'. Descriptive metaphysics takes there to be ways of thinking about the world which are common across time and space, and the role of the descriptive metaphysician is to outline these universal forms of thought. Revisionary metaphysics, in contrast, wants to emend or reject these ways of thinking. This contrast has entered the philosophical lexicon, and many philosophers have used it as part of their self-image. But one way to see the perhaps problematic nature of the contrast is to consider the five philosophers whom Strawson classes within his schema: Descartes, Leibniz,

Berkeley, Aristotle, and Kant. Without looking, could one predict which category each is said to belong to? (Strawson gives the first three as examples of revisionary metaphysicians, and the latter two as descriptive.)

The aim of *Individuals* is to outline the concepts used in thinking about particular things in the world. One of the most discussed chapters – and one which most readily illustrates the way in which the rarefied world of philosophical analysis can interact with the wildest science-fiction – is the second chapter in which Strawson attempts to determine how important our idea of space is for our thinking about an objective world. Strawson imagines in this chapter a sound world – one in which a person has only auditory experience – in order to see how much sense can be made of the idea of objectivity without the idea of space. The chapter is intellectually fascinating, and showcases a certain sort of British temperament and style which can be found in many writings from the period.

Strawson wrote primarily on a range of issues in the philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology, but his work on all of these topics was informed by a close engagement with people and ideas from the history of philosophy. Prime amongst these was Immanuel Kant. Strawson's introduction to Kant arose out of the historical peculiarities of the PPE degree. This was structured, in Strawson's day, such that there were two special subjects which those who wished to specialise in philosophy were obliged to take: Logic and Kant. The latter was to be studied through the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and when studying the first *Critique*, Strawson tells us, he found 'a depth, a range, a boldness, and a power unlike anything I had previously encountered'.

The influence of Strawson's engagement with Kant can be seen in *Individuals*. But it was his ground-breaking and influential commentary on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), which demonstrated the importance of Kantian ideas for contemporary philosophical discussions and, in the words of one philosopher, 'opened the way to a reception of Kant's philosophy by analytic philosophers'. Strawson's aim was to detach and defend what he saw as valuable in the first *Critique* from that which was dodgy and downright dubious, what Strawson called the 'imaginary subject of transcendental psychology'. The result was a fascinating and insightful account, not perhaps of what Kant said, but of what Kant ought to have said, had he had the good fortune to have read some recent Oxford philosophy.

I have mentioned Strawson's work in language, mind, and metaphysics. And he always joked that he would turn to moral philosophy only when his powers were waning. Nevertheless, his most famous article, and the one which may persist the longest, is perhaps 'Freedom and Resentment', a small and suggestive paper which aims to dissolve the problem of determinism and responsibility. In this paper Strawson draws attention to our 'reactive attitudes': attitudes such as gratitude, anger, sympathy and resentment. These attitudes are part of our human life, we cannot imagine what it would be like to be human without them. They thus are not subject to justification or entitlement

from grand metaphysical theses. The conflict, then, between determinism and responsibility is largely illusory.

This paper captures one of the central themes of Strawson's work: a relaxed sympathy for our ordinary ways of thinking about ourselves and our role in the world. In his discussion with Russell, Strawson brought us back to the way in which *we* use definite descriptions, in our conversations with each other, in our talk about the world. In *Individuals*, it is *our* ways of thinking which are under consideration, not the ways of thinking of some purified, logical creatures which might be related to us, and which we might become. And in 'Freedom and Resentment', it is the ways in which we react to each other and hold each other to account which are the focus, ways which are insulated from philosophical theorising about grand metaphysics. Across these philosophical debates, Strawson never loses sight of our humanity.

Strawson's commitment to our ordinary ways of thinking comes out in a certain sort of relaxed realism which became characteristic of a strand of Oxford philosophy. This relaxed realism – Strawson sometimes called it a *liberal naturalism* – stands in opposition to two pulls in philosophy. The first is that of *scepticism* or *eliminativism* which cannot find a way to make sense of some aspect of our ordinary life – say, the colours of objects, or moral values, or our capacity to make free decisions. The sceptic cannot find room for these items in the natural world, and thus recommends that we *eliminate* them from our ways of thinking. Objects are not *really* coloured, there are *really* no moral values, we are not *really* free. The sceptic is a revisionary metaphysician who charges our ordinary ways of thinking with confusion and error.

The second pull is that of *reductionism*. The reductionist disagrees with the sceptic as to the existence of these ordinary items. But she agrees that if these things are to exist, it must be because space can be found for them in the natural world. She concludes, then, that these ordinary things can be *reduced* to something whose status as naturalistically respectable is not in doubt. Objects really are coloured – but that is because colours are nothing more than the microphysical reflectance properties of surfaces. There really are moral values – but that is because moral values are nothing more, say, than that which is beneficial to us. And we are really free – but that is because freedom requires nothing more than that we act in accordance with our desires, however those desires were formed.

Strawson's instinctive tendencies lie opposed to each of these extremes, and one can see his work, in different ways across a wide variety of debates, as showing how ordinary thought can be defended against both of these tendencies. The mistake each makes is the mistake of thinking that justification for our ordinary ways of thinking can only be found by making those ways of thinking accord with some etiolated scientific conception of how things are. The sceptic cannot see a way of making an accord, and thus finds our ordinary ways of thinking to be wanting. The reductionist defends our ordinary ways of thinking, but only by reducing them to something more scientifically respectable. Strawson's relaxed realism has no truck with the idea that our natural metaphysics is beholden to the physical sciences for its legitimacy, and thus finds no need to eliminate or reduce.

Indeed, not only is there no conflict between our ordinary ways of thinking and a scientific story about how the world works, Strawson argued that the former must itself take precedence. We are *humans* before we are scientists and philosophers, and it is to our human ways of thinking that our scientific and metaphysical stories must ultimately defer. Scientific ways of thinking are important to our lives, but they are only one way in which we can think about the world, and they neither show the falsity of nor take precedence over our ordinary forms of thought.

Strawson often said that had he been able to choose his gifts, he would have chosen to be a poet. And there is something of the poet's careful attention to the ordinary and the words with which to express it in Strawson's measured prose. His original and important contributions shaped British philosophy in the twentieth-century, and continue to repay careful study.

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