

# UNITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN STRAWSON AND CASSAM

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Some comments on Quassim Cassam's *Self and World* written for a conference at the *Institute of Philosophy* in 2017. I consider the objection that Cassam raises to Strawson's argument from unity to objectivity in *The Bounds of Sense* and raise some general questions about Cassam's problem of misconception and its application to transcendental arguments.

## 1. Introduction

*Self and World* is concerned with what looks, on the face of it, like a very Kantian question: what is the connection between self-consciousness and objectivity? In particular, Cassam is interested in the connection between self-consciousness and our awareness of ourselves as physical objects. He considers three arguments: the *Objectivity* and *Unity* arguments, which are really two parts of one bigger argument for the claim that there is a connection between self-consciousness and our awareness of ourselves as physical objects, and the *Identity* argument, which argues for that claim directly.

These arguments are centred around a distinction between the conceptual awareness we have of ourselves as physical objects—the kind of awareness

which typically consists in knowing that we are physical objects amongst others in the world—and an intuitive awareness of ourselves as physical objects which is involved, for example, in some forms of bodily awareness. And one animating thought of the book is that P.F. Strawson and the Kantian tradition place too much weight on our conceptual awareness of objectivity and too little weight on our intuitive awareness of ourselves as physical objects. *Self and World* aims to rectify that discrepancy.

Cassam's book is sometimes described as falling within the Oxford neo-Kantian tradition in philosophy, but it can be viewed more perspicuously as falling with a tradition we might call *British* philosophy of mind—a tradition comprising a distinctive set of questions and concerns which are characteristic of the way in which the subject was pursued in the UK in the latter part of the twentieth century. That tradition has a number of tributaries, but prime amongst them are Strawson's discussions in *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense*. It is the way in which Strawson approaches his questions which sets the frame for the way in which a whole generation of British philosophers engage with their subject.

It's not particularly revelatory to note that Strawson's influence can be felt in *Self and World*. I'm somewhat mischievously inclined to say that *Self and World* stands to *The Bounds of Sense* as *The Bounds of Sense* stands to the first *Critique*. The other great influence on *Self and World* is Michael Ayers, and one way to think about *Self and World* is as what happens with the Oxford Kantian tradition meets Michael Ayers. More generally—and pulling back slightly—*Self and World* is the beginning of a shift in Oxford philosophy of mind which can be thought of as the influence of Ayers upon the Strawsonian tradition. (Another example would be John Campbell's *Reference and Consciousness*.) The influence of Strawson on British philosophy is well-recognised. The influence of Ayers ought to be likewise.<sup>1</sup>

I first read *The Bounds of Sense* as a BPhil student in preparation for supervisions on Kant with Quassim. I learned a huge amount from those

<sup>1</sup> There's a route to the conclusions of *Self and World* which results from applying the lessons of the chapter on primary and secondary knowledge in Ayers's book on Locke (1991) to the arguments of *The Bounds of Sense*.

supervisions. Quassim was more historically sensitive than Strawson was in *The Bounds of Sense*—though one might think that's not a particularly high bar to clear—but he followed Strawson in treating Kant as philosopher first and foremost, someone who had arguments and ideas one could engage with in order to find what was valuable and discard the rest.

The heart of *The Bounds of Sense* is the section 'Unity and Objectivity' in which Strawson gives his take on Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories, itself the heart of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Strawson argues in that section that self-consciousness requires the experience of an objective world and it is this section that Cassam draws on in setting out his own Unity Argument (p.91). Cassam criticises the Unity Argument and my somewhat circumscribed intent is to consider how Cassam's criticisms of his Unity Argument bear on the unity argument that Strawson sets out in *The Bounds of Sense*. This will put us in a position to evaluate some of the more general criticisms that Cassam makes of Strawson's methodology.

My comments will proceed as follows. I'll first give a sketch of Strawson's unity argument as I understand it. Then I'll look at one criticism that Cassam makes of his Unity Argument and consider how it applies to my reconstruction of Strawson. The result will raise some questions about how to understand Strawson. Once that's in place, I'll move to one of Cassam's more general criticisms of transcendental arguments and consider how it applies to my reconstruction of Strawson. The hope is that we may get a bit clearer on the options available to someone sympathetic to Strawson's methodology.

## 2. Strawson on Unity and Objectivity

Strawson argues, in the section 'Unity and Objectivity', for the thesis that 'for a series of diverse experiences to belong to a single consciousness it is necessary that they should be so connected as to constitute a temporally extended experience of a unified objective world' (p.97). Or—as it is

sometimes put—that unity entails objective experience. This is the material in Strawson which forms the basis for Cassam’s Unity Argument.<sup>2</sup>

Cassam’s Unity Argument claims that ‘being in a position to think of one’s experience as experience of ‘weighty’ objects is a necessary condition of self-consciousness in the most basic sense’ (1997, p.91). That is, it is a condition on being self-conscious that one be able to think of one’s perceptions as perceptions of an objective world. Strawson’s unity to objectivity argument claims that is a condition on experiences belonging to a single consciousness that they should constitute experience of an objective world. Whether these claims match up depends, in large part, on how we understand the terms of Strawson’s thesis.

I’ll take Strawson’s starting point to be self-consciousness, understood, as Cassam understands it, as the capacity to self-ascribe one’s experiences (Cassam 1997, p.21, p.91). Strawson sometimes seems to want an even more minimal starting point—something like the very idea of a unified consciousness—but he takes that more minimal starting point to entail a capacity to self-ascribe one’s experiences and by starting with this capacity we bring his discussion into line with Cassam’s.<sup>3</sup> Given this, how should we understand Strawson’s notion of experience of an objective world?

Start with the objective. We can distinguish two broad ways of drawing a distinction between the objective and the subjective. The first is ontological. On this way of thinking, something is objective when it doesn’t depend for its existence on minds and subjective otherwise. The second is perspectival. On this way of thinking, whether or not something is objective turns on the extent to which it is tied to our point of view; things are objective when they are independent of a subject’s point of view and subjective otherwise.

These notions are distinct. The ontological notion of objectivity applies in the first instance to *things*. It involves an existential notion of dependence and since it cannot be a matter of degrees whether existential dependence

<sup>2</sup> The material in this section derives from my discussion of Strawson’s argument in (Gomes 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See (Gomes 2016, p.947) for discussion.

obtains, the resulting notion of objectivity is all or nothing. An objective world, in this sense, is a world which doesn't depend for its existence on minds. The perspectival notion, in contrast, applies in the first instance to *ways of representing*. Ways of representing are objective to the extent that they are accessible from more than one point of view or perspective. Maximally objective representations are those which are maximally independent of our point of view: representations of a world which is there anyway (to use Bernard Williams's phrase). An objective world, in this sense, is that which shows up in representations which are maximally independent of our point of view.

There are various ways of finessing these distinctions and it is better to think of them as picking out two broad ways of thinking about the objective/ subjective distinction. They each figure in Strawson's discussion and he doesn't distinguish them as carefully as one might like. Nevertheless his main concern in this section is with a version of the ontological notion. On Strawson's construal, something is objective iff it doesn't constitutively depend for its existence on a subject's act of awareness; and subjective otherwise (1966, pp.98, 99, 100-101). This seems to be the notion which is operative in *Self and World*. Cassam glosses 'objects in the weighty sense' as 'particular items which are capable of being perceived and of existing unperceived' (1997, p.91, cf. p.28). Objects which are capable of existing unperceived are objects whose existence is not dependent on our awareness of them. We thus have a shared understanding of what it is for something to be objective.

So much for unity and objectivity. But what about the notion of 'experience' which features in Strawson's characterisation of his argument? This is more complicated. Simplifying slightly (see Gomes 2016, pp.948-9 for a fuller discussion), we might distinguish three different notions of experience: first and second, we need to distinguish experience which is of an objective world from experience which is merely *as of* an objective world. I take the former, and not the latter, to entail that there is an objective world. And third, Strawson sometimes explicates his notion of experience of an objective world in terms of the possibility of making certain kinds of judgement, which is to say, in terms of possessing a *conception of objectivity*, a way of thinking about things as objective (see

1966, p.98). Once we distinguish these, we can see that Strawson's argument from unity to objectivity may be attempting to establish a connection between self-consciousness and our experience of an objective world; or between self-consciousness and experience which merely seems to present us with an objective world; or, finally, between self-consciousness and our capacity to make judgements using a conception of objectivity. These are three very different connections.

Cassam's Unity Argument has as its conclusion that we are able to think about our perceptions as perceptions of objects which are capable of existing unperceived. That's slightly more specific than the third option here, but it at least entails it—so I'll focus only on that part of Strawson's argument which holds that self-consciousness requires us to possess a way of thinking about objects as objective, what I'll call a *conception of objectivity*. This part of Strawson's argument provides the basis for Cassam's Unity Argument.<sup>4</sup>

With all of this in mind, how does Strawson's argument go? In very broad terms, we can think of Strawson as undertaking what I will call a *Concept Possession Strategy*. According to the *Concept Possession Strategy*, self-consciousness requires the possession of certain concepts; and possession of those concepts requires the possession of a conception of objectivity. On this way of arguing, the possession of certain concepts is the mediating link between self-consciousness and objectivity. If this strategy is going to convince, it needs to do three things. First, it will have to say something about what is involved in the capacity to self-ascribe one's experiences. Second, it will need to identify those concepts which must be possessed if subjects are to self-ascribe their experiences. And third, it will have to explain why the possession of those concepts requires the possession of a conception of objectivity.

Start with the first of these. How should we think about the self-ascription of experiences? A simple way is as follows: when I self-ascribe an experience of a certain sort, I make a judgement in which I ascribe to myself an experience with a certain content. So, for example, if I'm having

<sup>4</sup> (Gomes 2016) contains a reconstruction and discussion of the rest of Strawson's argument; see also the discussion of Strawson in (Gomes 2017, pp.132-4, pp.139-145).

a visual experience which seems to present me with a red apple, I can self-ascribe the experience by making a judgement of the form: I'm having a visual experience as of a red apple. There's much that could be said about this, but put it to one side. Given this way of thinking about the nature of self-ascription, are there any concepts whose possession is a necessary condition on the self-ascription of experiences, so understood?

There look to be three different families of concepts which might plausibly be conditions on self-ascribing one's experiences:

1. Concepts of The Self: *I'm* experiencing a red apple
2. Concepts of Experience: I'm *experiencing* a red chair
3. Concepts of Empirical Objects: I'm experiencing *a red apple*

And that looks to give us three different ways of filling out the Concept Possession strategy. We might argue that it is a condition on self-ascribing experiences that subjects possess a concept of the self; that it is a condition on self-ascribing experiences that subjects possess a concept of experience; or that it is a condition on self-ascribing experiences that subjects possess concepts of empirical objects. These are three different ways of drawing a connection between unity and objectivity.

Put the last of these to one side. You might find a version of it in Strawson's 'Perception and its Objects', but it plays no role in *The Bounds of Sense*.<sup>5</sup> Instead we can focus on the concepts of the self and the concepts of experience. Each of these is centrally implicated in Strawson's discussion.

Start with concepts of the self. Can you run a concept possession strategy which goes via that idea that subjects who self-ascribe their experiences must possess concepts of the self? I think there are difficulties.<sup>6</sup> Here's the shape of the worry. We need to distinguish two distinct concepts of the self whose possession might be a condition on self-ascribing one's experiences. First, one might hold that self-ascription requires possession of the concept

<sup>5</sup> See (Gomes 2016, p.951) for discussion of this option.

<sup>6</sup> See (Gomes 2016, pp.951-953) for the full discussion.

of the *empirical subject*. This is what Strawson calls personal self-consciousness, one which involves ‘the full conditions for ordinary empirical self-ascription of experiences’ (p.107), including ‘the existence of the subject as an intuitable object in the world’ (p.106). Or one might hold that self-ascription requires possession of the concept of the *transcendental self*. Strawson calls this transcendental self-consciousness, ‘the necessary self-reflexiveness of a possible experience in general’ (p.107). Let us take each in turn.

Consider first the concept of the transcendental subject. This is the ‘I’ of Kant’s ‘I think’, and he tells us that it ‘has no content’ (A381), that it ‘contains no manifold in itself and is always one and the same in every judgement, because it is merely the formal element of consciousness’ (*Anthropology* 4:141-2).<sup>7</sup> It is hard to see how such a purely formal content could require the possession of a conception of objectivity: the content of the concept of the transcendental subject is too empty to place any conditions on how things must be in order for subjects to possess the concept. This is part of Kant’s point in his discussions of Descartes’s rational psychology in the Paralogisms of Pure Reason. The ‘I’ of the ‘I think’ is a necessary feature of our self-conscious thought, but it carries no substantive commitments. It is a point which Strawson recognises in his discussion of the Paralogisms (pp.162-174).

In contrast, the concept of the empirical subject looks much more suitable to feature in an argument from unity to objectivity, since, Strawson claims, ascribing an experience to the empirical self requires ‘empirically applicable criteria of identity for subjects of experience’ (p.102), and ‘these criteria, though not the same as bodily identity, involve an essential reference to the human body’ (p.164). If this is right, then grasp of the concept of the empirical self involves understanding that it is ‘a corporeal object among corporeal objects’ (p.112), which is to say, possession of a conception of objectivity.

<sup>7</sup> Kant texts are cited by the volume and page number in the Academy Edition of Immanuel Kant with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* which is cited in the standard A/B format. Translations are taken from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant.



The problem with this argument is, first, that it is unclear why we should think that the capacity to self-ascribe our experience requires possession of the concept of the empirical subject specifically, rather than, as Kant thinks, the more formal concept of the transcendental subject. And second, even if one allowed that self-consciousness required possession of the concept of the empirical subject, we would still need further argument to show that possession of this concept required thinking of subjects as one corporeal object among other corporeal objects in the world. Strawson endorses this latter claim because he holds that ‘there can be no legitimate, or even meaningful employment of ideas or concepts which does not relate them to empirical or experiential conditions of application’ (p.16). But without this verificationist assumption, the move from possession of the concept of the empirical subject to the possession of a conception of objectivity does not go through.

Let us move on to concepts of experience. This is where the centre of Strawson’s discussion resides. The heart of the argument is contained in one epigrammatic sentence:

‘This is how things are (have been) experienced *by me* as being’ presupposes ‘This is how things are (have been) *experienced* as being’; and the latter in turn presupposes a distinction, though not (usually) an opposition between ‘This is how things are experienced as being’ and ‘Thus and so is how things are’. (p.108).

Richard Rorty summarises this move as follows: ‘The point Strawson is making here is that you don’t know what “experience” means if you don’t know what “seems to me...” means, [and] that you don’t know what *that* means unless you know that something can seem to me to be X and not be X’ (Rorty 1970, p.213). That is: self-consciousness requires that subjects possess the concept of experience; possession of this concept requires that subjects grasp the distinction between how things are and how things appear; and this distinction comprises a conception of things as objective.

Strawson’s argument continues beyond these claims but restriction to this first part gives us a Unity Argument with two premises:

1. The self-ascription of experiences requires possession of the concept experience
2. Possession of the concept of experience requires possession of a conception of objectivity

The argument is tantalisingly elusive and has inspired a range of powerful and productive engagements.<sup>8</sup> Its conclusion holds that subjects must possess a way of thinking about things as objective, a form of conceptual awareness in Cassam's framing. It thus stands as an exemplar of the overly intellectual way of drawing a connection between self-consciousness and objectivity which *Self and World* can be seen as aiming to replace. Cassam criticises his Unity Argument in chapter 3 of *Self and World*. Our next task is to determine how Cassam's criticisms bear on Strawson's argument as reconstructed above.

### 3. Cassam on Unity and Objectivity

Cassam's Unity Argument holds that 'being in a position to think of one's experience as experience of 'weighty' objects is a necessary condition on self-consciousness in its most basic sense' (p.91). His discussion exacts this idea to intense scrutiny with enlightening results. I'll focus in on one of the central criticisms of the argument which turns on a distinction Cassam makes between *transcendental self-consciousness* and *personal self-consciousness*. Transcendental self-consciousness involves the necessary self-reflexiveness of experience' (p.93), whereas 'to be *personally self-conscious* is to be capable of thinking of experiences not just as experiences but as one's own experiences. In personal self-consciousness, the subject of one's experiences must be thought of not just as a 'formal' or 'logical' subject but as an object among others in the world' (p.107).

Here's how I understand the distinction. A subject who is transcendently self-conscious can self-ascribe her experiences using only the concept of experience whereas a subject who is personally self-conscious can self-ascribe her experiences only by thinking of them as belonging to an

<sup>8</sup> Important discussions include Bennett (1968), Cassam (1997), Harrison (1970), Hurley (1994), Rorty (1970), Stevenson (1982), Van Cleve (1999: pp.98-104) and Walker (1978, p.116-21).

empirical subject in the world. To put them in my terms: transcendental self-consciousness is self-consciousness which requires the possession of (only) the concept of experience whereas personal self-consciousness requires the possession of the concept of the empirical self. Note that this way of characterising the distinction makes it seem like there is an option which Cassam misses out and which I wanted to allow, namely that of ascribing experiences using only the concept of the *transcendental self*. But I take it that Cassam takes this to be equivalent to self-ascribing experiences using only the concept of experience given the emptiness of the concept of the transcendental subject. Let us grant that. We now have two different ways of thinking about self-consciousness, one which involves nothing more than the notion of the transcendental subject and the notion of experience, one which requires something stronger, namely the notion of an empirical subject.

Cassam's objection to the Unity Argument turns on the relation between these two different ways of thinking about self-consciousness:

To suppose that transcendental self-consciousness can be abstracted from personal self-consciousness is therefore to suppose that the thought of experiences as experiences is intelligible independently of the thought that they belong to a subject who is an object among others in the world. [But this is what is called] into question. If experiences owe their identity as particulars to the person whose states or experiences they are, and persons must be conceived of as elements in the objective order, then it is difficult to see how the 'independent intelligibility' thesis can be correct. If the concept of transcendental self-consciousness cannot ultimately be detached from that of personal self-consciousness, then the TSC [transcendental self-consciousness] version of the Unity Argument is in danger of collapsing into the PSC [personal self-consciousness] version. (p.107)

The central thought in this passage, and using Cassam's abbreviations, is that TSC cannot be separated from PSC. We can think of this as an entailment claim: TSC entails PSC. Call this the *Entailment Claim*. One question is why we should think that the Entailment Claim is true. I'll come back to that in a moment. But first, why should the Entailment Claim pose a problem for Strawson's argument?

Here's a first pass at the objection. Let us say that the *Experiential Concept Strategy* argues from self-consciousness to objectivity via the concept of experience. And let us say that the *Personal Concept Strategy* argues from self-consciousness to objectivity via the concept of the empirical self. Then one way to understand Cassam's argument here is as motivating a collapse of the Experiential Concept Strategy into the Personal Concept Strategy. For one might take the Entailment Claim to show that any argument which aims to connect self-consciousness with objectivity by means of the concept of experience must be parasitic on an argument which aims to connect self-consciousness with objectivity by means of the concept of the empirical self. And if one thinks that the Personal Concept Strategy can't work—for the reasons sketched earlier, say—then Strawson's argument is in trouble.

Of course, one might have objections to pursuing the Experiential Concept Strategy at all. Our ordinary ways of thinking about ourselves presume that we are empirical subjects of a certain sort and to that extent you might think that any argument from unity to objectivity should start with personal self-consciousness. In Strawson's case, the starting point of transcendental self-consciousness is likely motivated by the anti-sceptical intent of his argument, an intent which might be thought to require a restriction to the forms of self-consciousness available to Descartes's meditator. But given this starting point, Cassam's objection is supposed to push Strawson from an argument which centres on the concept of experience to one which centres on the concept of the empirical subject.

If this is the right way to read Cassam's objection to the Unity Argument, then I don't think it will work. First, the Entailment Claim tells you only that anyone who is capable of self-ascribing their experience with the concept of experience must also possess the concept of the empirical subject. That's a claim about entailment alone. It says nothing about the ways in which one might connect possession of the concept of experience with objectivity. Perhaps it is the case that any subject who is self-conscious must possess both the concept of experience *and* the concept of the empirical self. This does not cause trouble for the Experiential Concept Strategy because it does not show that the concept of experience can be

possessed without possession of a conception of objectivity. An extra entailment relation here does not affect the argument.

The argument *would* be affected if there was reason to think that the only way to get a connection between the concept of experience and a conception of objectivity was via possession of the concept of the empirical subject. That really would give us a collapse of the Experiential Concept Strategy into the Personal Concept Strategy. So what Cassam needs here is that a subject who possess a concept of experience has to think of their experiences as belonging to an empirical subject *in order* for them to possess a conception of objectivity. But the Entailment Claim does not gets us that. The mere fact that subjects who possess the concept of experience must think of experience as belonging to an empirical subject does not show that a subject who possess a concept of experience has to think of their experiences as belonging to an empirical subject *in order to* possess a conception of objectivity.

Finally, note that the collapse objection only works if we have some independent reason to think that the Personal Concept Strategy won't work. But if the Entailment Claim is good, then one of the reasons I gave above for rejecting the Personal Concept Strategy is no longer effective. The objection was that it was hard to see why the capacity to self-ascribe experiences *requires* subjects to think about themselves as empirical subjects. But if the Entailment Claim is right, then the capacity to self-ascribe experiences requires subjects to think about themselves as empirical subjects because self-ascribing experiences requires subjects to think about those experiences as belonging to empirical subjects. So even if the Entailment Claim collapses the Experiential Concept Strategy into the Personal Concept Strategy, it does so at the expense of removing one of the obstacles to enacting the Personal Concept Strategy.

I've set out a first gloss on Cassam's criticism of the Unity Argument, and explained why I don't find it persuasive as yet. But it may be that I've misunderstood the point in the dialectic where the objection enters. So let us return to Strawson's argument. To set the context, we need to consider a

different objection to Strawson's argument.<sup>9</sup> Consider the first premise: in order to self-ascribe experiences, you have to possess the concept of experience. On the face of it, this is just false, most obviously because one can self-ascribe experiences using the concept of perception. Now that isn't a big problem for Strawson so long as the concept of perception also brings with it a conception of objectivity. But what about a broadly experiential concept which *doesn't* bring with it a conception of objectivity? Could we self-ascribe our experiences using such a concept?

In (Gomes 2016) I call such a form of experience *original intuition*, in recognition of Kant's description of original intuition as 'one through which the existence of the object of intuition is itself given...' (B72). Strawson sometimes refers to such a form of experience as *sense-datum experience* (p.99). The concepts of original intuition or sense-datum experience do not seem to have built into them a conception of objectivity: it is no requirement on possessing these concepts that one think of their objects as distinct from one's acts of awareness of them. And this raises the question: why can we not self-ascribe our experiences using *those* concepts?

It is in this context that we might read Cassam's objection. For we might read Cassam as offering a helping hand to Strawson before snatching it away. (Such behaviour is not uncharacteristic of philosophers.) The suggestion might be that the Entailment Claim explains why concepts such as the concept of an original intuition must also bring with them a conception of objectivity. On this reading, the Entailment Claim enters as a way to fix Strawson's argument. Cassam's discussion can be then read as showing that the Entailment Claim *also* collapses the Experiential Concept Strategy into the Personal Concept Strategy. Thus, although the Entailment Claim is needed to fix a gap in Strawson's argument, it ultimately indicates the problems of the argument.

Why should we think that that the Entailment Claim helps deal with the problem of original intuition? To answer this we need to know why Cassam thinks that TSC entails PSC. The basic idea is something like this: in order to think of experiences, we have to think of them as *belonging* to a

<sup>9</sup> This objection, and others, is set out and developed in (Gomes 2016, pp.954ff.)

subject. So someone who possesses the concept of experience must possess some conception of a subject of experience to whom those experiences belong. There's a question here about why we should need to think of that subject as the *empirical subject* rather than the transcendental subject—a mere placeholder of a subject. But put that to one side. Say it's true that in order to think of experiences, you have to think of them as belonging to the empirical subject. The question is why this should help with the problem of original intuition?

I think the thought is something like this. Take the notion of an original intuition. In order to possess that concept, one has to think of original intuition as belonging to an empirical subject. And to think of an empirical subject is to think of something which is objective. So anyone who possess the concept of an original intuition possess a concept of objectivity. The possibility of self-ascribing experiences using only the concept of an original intuition no longer poses a threat, for even this form of self-consciousness requires subjects to possess a conception of objectivity.

If this is how to understand Cassam's objection, then we really do get a collapse of the Experiential Concept Strategy into the Personal Concept Strategy—because it turns out that the only way to deal with the problem of original intuition is to say that possessing this concept requires you to possess the concept of the empirical subject, and *that* concept brings with it a conception of objectivity. If this is the way to understand Cassam's objection, then it works by showing that the Experiential Concept Strategy is vulnerable to the problem of original intuition, and to the extent that it can deal with this problem, it collapses into the Personal Concept Strategy.

What should we say about Cassam's objection, understood in this way? It is an interesting and creative solution on Strawson's behalf. But I don't think it will work. It relies on the thought that in order to make sense of the concept of an original intuition, one has to think of it as belonging to the *empirical subject*. And it's hard to see why that's true. Someone who is tempted by the Experiential Concept Strategy is going to think that the purely formal, transcendental subject will do just fine, thank you very much.

Now, in a way this wouldn't matter if this was Strawson's best hope for dealing with the problem of original intuition. For if the Entailment Claim is needed to deal with the problem of original intuition, then the implausibility of the Entailment Claim is further evidence of the problem with the Experiential Concept Strategy. But I think this is *not* Strawson's solution to the problem. His solution is different. He claims that experiential concepts like that of an original intuition can only be possessed by someone who *already* possesses the concept of experience. Call this the *Dependency Claim*. And now the thought is that if possessing the concept of an original intuition requires possessing a concept of experience, then it doesn't matter if the concept of an original intuition doesn't have built into it a conception of objectivity—because it requires you to possess the concept of experience which does. This is a way of securing Strawson's argument which doesn't go via the notion of an empirical subject. It rests on the claim that concepts such as original intuition are dependent in some way on the concept of experience.

The question then is *why* does Strawson think the Dependency Claim is true? And what is striking about Strawson's discussion in *The Bounds of Sense* is that he offers no argument in support of this thesis. This is the reason that I think Strawson's argument ultimately fails, because he needs the Dependency Thesis for his argument to go through, but he offers us no reason to think that it's true. In (Gomes 2016) I speculated that part of the explanation for this absence is that Strawson was assuming the truth of something like Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument which he took to establish the Dependency Thesis. Cassam also suggests that there is a connection between Strawson's argument here and the Private Language Argument (p.105). But philosophical cultures change, and we can no longer be confident that confluence with the Private Language Argument is enough to secure the quality of an argument.

The discussion thus far has focused on issues of very local interest concerning the right way to understand Strawson's arguments in *The Bounds of Sense*, issues which may have appealed to the author of *Self and World*, but will likely be of less interest to the author of *Vices of the Mind*, never mind other readers. Let me summarise the results. I offered a reading of Strawson's unity argument in *The Bounds of Sense* which moves from



self-consciousness to the possession of a conception of objectivity via the possession of a concept of experience. I've suggested that you find in Cassam the suggestion that this argument does not work because it relies on the possession of the concept of the empirical subject. I think that the most illuminating way to see Cassam's objection is in the context of answering the question of how Strawson can rule out the possibility of a subject self-ascribing experiences using only the concept of an original intuition. Cassam's entailment thesis gives Strawson one way to avoid this problem, but it's not a way which I think is ultimately helpful. Strawson's own way of avoiding the problem rests on the Dependency Thesis, a thesis which is unsupported in the text. This seems to me the real problem with Strawson's unity argument.

#### 4. Conceptions and Misconceptions

In this final section I'll relate some of these thoughts to a wider issue on which Cassam has written: namely, the structure and viability of transcendental arguments. This is a topic which Cassam has discussed in a number of places, and which features in chapter 4 of *Self and World*.<sup>10</sup> In very broad terms, we can think of a transcendental argument as one which undertakes to identify necessary conditions on a certain sort of activity or state where, as Cassam puts it '[t]he necessary conditions . . . are non-empirical or a priori conditions rather than causally necessary conditions' (Cassam, 2007, p.52). Strawson's argument, as I have reconstructed it, is a transcendental argument: it claims that it is a necessary condition on being able to self-ascribe one's experiences, that one possess a conception of objectivity.

There are different ways of carving up transcendental arguments but one illuminating division is in terms of the kind of necessary conditions that they attempt to establish. So when focusing on unity arguments from self-consciousness to objectivity, we can distinguish three different necessary conditions:

<sup>10</sup> Cassam's contributions include his (1987, 1999), and some of the material in the first chapters of his (2007). Other notable contributions to the topic include (Harrison, 1982; Stroud, 1968) and the papers in (Stern, 1999). My own take on the question is in (Gomes 2017).

1. It is a condition on self-consciousness that subjects *believe* the world to be a particular way
2. It is a condition on self-consciousness that subjects possess a *way of thinking* about the world as being some way.
3. It is a condition on self-consciousness that subjects *experience* or *intuit* the world to be a particular way.

Let us call these *belief-dependent*, *conception-dependent*, and *experience-dependent* arguments in turn.

The main arguments which Cassam considers in *Self and World* are belief-dependent transcendental arguments, arguments which claim that it is a condition on being self-conscious that subjects *believe* that they are physical objects in the world. The conclusion of the Objectivity Argument, for instance, is that ‘one must conceive of oneself as a physical object’, and Cassam explains that ‘[i]t will be assumed in what follows that conceiving of oneself as a physical object is simply believing that the subject of one’s experiences is a physical object’ (p.30). And these contrast with his own *experience-dependent* transcendental argument which claims that it is a condition on being self-conscious that subjects *experience* themselves as physical objects in the world.

In Chapter 4 of *Self and World*, Cassam raises an argument against one form of the Identity Argument which he calls the Problem of Misconception. This is how he sets it out:

Consider, once again, the Cartesian dualist who regards the persisting subject of her thoughts as an immaterial substance. This belief may well be philosophically indefensible... but this surely has no bearing on her ability to think first-personally. In other words, even if it is true that self-conscious subjects or persons are physical objects among physical objects, it is not a necessary condition of their being self-conscious that they *believe* that this is so... This will be referred to as the *problem of misconception*. (p.127)

In very broad terms, the problem is that there are self-conscious subjects who *do not* believe that they are physical objects. So it cannot be a condition on self-consciousness that subjects believe that they are physical

objects. These recalcitrant hold-outs serve as a counter-example to the necessary condition in question. Hence the problem.

Cassam introduces the problem as one for a particular version of the Identity Argument, but it can quickly generalise into a problem for all belief-dependent transcendental arguments. Take a case in which it is claimed that belief P is a necessary condition being self-conscious. Find a case in which a self-conscious subject lacks the belief P. Counterexample done. The problem is particularly pressing given the dialectical context set by Barry Stroud's famous paper on transcendental arguments (1968). One of the lessons of that paper was supposed to be that transcendental arguments could only establish—or, at least, not without controversial assumptions—claims about what one must *believe* and not claims about the nature of the world. To the extent that belief-directed transcendental arguments were supposed to be the modest fall-back from more ambitious world-directed arguments, the problem of misconception appears even more damaging.

There is a passing awareness of the problem of misconception in Stroud's discussion when he's discussing the implications of Strawson's transcendental arguments for the conventionalism of Carnap. But he doesn't quite make it explicit and the point goes unmade. However, there is a nice recognition of the problem in Ayer's response to Strawson's 'Perception and Its Objects'. It is sometimes forgotten that 'Perception and Its Objects' starts life in a festschrift to Ayer. Say you take Strawson to be saying that paper that it is essential to our experience of objects that we think of them as existing unperceived. Ayer points out in response that someone convinced by Berkeley would disagree but there's no reason to think that their sense-experience would be different (Ayer 1979, p.292). That's an instance of the problem of misconception that Cassam later identifies.

The problem is thus serious, and Cassam's discussion contains a detailed and charitable account of the different ways in which someone who is attracted by belief-dependent transcendental arguments might reply. (Perhaps the Cartesian dualist is wrong about what she believes; perhaps she is not really self-conscious, and so on.) But although I presented the

problem as though it were a *general* problem for belief-directed transcendental arguments, there's a sense in which that overstates the issue. For whether any *particular* belief-directed transcendental argument is falsified is going to depend on the plausibility of the counter-example—and that's going to require us looking at the particular case and thinking about whether it really is plausible that the person in question is both self-conscious and lacking in the relevant belief. One might be able to lever the problem into a more general claim if one can find a group of people of whom it is true that for any possible belief there is at least one self-conscious person who believes it. Perhaps professional philosophers constitute one such set.<sup>11</sup>

How does Strawson's argument fare when faced with the Problem of Misconception? The important thing about Strawson's unity argument as I set it out is that it is *not* a belief-directed transcendental argument. It claims that in order to be self-conscious, you have to possess a certain way of *thinking* about the world as objective. It doesn't follow that you have to *believe* that things in the world are objective since you can be capable of thinking of the world as objective even if you don't actually do so. In this respect, Strawson's conception-dependent argument looks on a par with the experience-dependent argument that Cassam endorses and for the same reason. Neither are threatened by the existence of people with idiosyncratic beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

One might think that this just shows that we need to broaden our counterexample, for in the same way that we can find self-conscious subjects who lack the *belief* that things are objective, so too might we be able to find self-conscious subjects who lack a *conception* of objectivity. Well, perhaps. But the conception-dependent argument isn't alone here. One might also be able to find self-conscious subjects who lack the *experience* of an objective world—think of the way in which Anscombe's

<sup>11</sup> This way of extending the Problem of Misconception connects it to the argument against conceptual truth given in (Williamson 2007 ch.4).

<sup>12</sup> To say this is to avail Strawson's unity argument of the third response to the Problem of Misconception, discussed by Cassam at pp.134-5. Cassam's objections to this third response turn on dialectical features of the specific version of the Identity Argument that is his concern at the point in the text; they do not generalise to the use of this response in other contexts.

sensory deprivation tank poses problems for Cassam's argument. (In that case, Cassam denies the self-consciousness of the Anscombean subject.) Given that transcendental arguments set out necessary conditions, there is always the possibility of finding a counterexample. The question is always and only how plausible, and how damaging, we find the counterexample.

My suggestion, then, is that the Problem of Misconception does not straightforwardly engage Strawson's argument as I've set it out. Still, one might think this just shows that the conclusion of Strawson's argument as I have formulated it is too weak to be of interest. The interesting question is not whether we must be capable of thinking of things as objective but whether we must *believe* that things are objective. Conception-dependent arguments are too weak to be interesting. I don't want to say that this complaint is without merit. At the least, conception-dependent arguments look unsuited for refuting the sceptic about the external world—and if that's what Strawson was interested in, then the argument presented above can only ever be the first word on the issue.<sup>13</sup> But it is worth remembering the different uses to which transcendental arguments can be put. And given the manifold of ways, both good and bad, in which beliefs can be defeated or undermined, one might wonder why we should set such great store by whether someone happens to believe as opposed to their more general capacities for thought.

One could get the Problem of Misconception to bear on conception-dependent arguments if it were the case that any argument to the claim that a certain *way of thinking* was a condition on self-consciousness had to go via that claim that certain *beliefs* were a condition on self-consciousness. If that were true, then the Problem of Misconception would be relevant even to conception-dependent arguments. So if Cassam could engineer a collapse of conception-dependent arguments to belief-dependent arguments, then the Problem of Misconception would have bite. There are various ways in which you might try and make that move. And if it were successful, that would leave the experience-dependent arguments of *Self and World* looking like the only feasible form a transcendental argument can take. Still, an argument would be needed, and until then, we need to

<sup>13</sup> For the anti-sceptical part of Strawson's argument, which builds on the part presented here, see (Gomes 2016, pp.957-960), and for criticism (Gomes 2017).

distinguish conception-dependent arguments from their belief-directed counterparts.

Let me draw to a close. My focus in these comments has been spectacularly narrow and I haven't engaged at all with Cassam's rich and important suggestions about the connections between bodily awareness, self-consciousness, and our status as physical objects.<sup>14</sup> But I hope there is a way in which these final comments have centred on one of the central themes of the book. *Self and World* encourages us to distinguish between our conceptual awareness of things and our intuitive awareness of things. That's an important distinction and those who are tempted by these arguments will profit from being made to attend to it. In a similar way, thinking through the structure of Strawson's argument suggests to me that we need to distinguish between merely possessing the capacity to think in certain ways and the beliefs that things are a certain way. To put it in Kantian terminology, Cassam is right to insist that we must distinguish *concepts* from *intuitions*, but we must also take care to distinguish *concepts* from *judgements*. In the first *Critique* Kant puts forward transcendental arguments which aim at each of these—that we must intuit in certain ways, that we must make use of certain concepts, and that we must make certain judgements. The three forms must be distinguished when thinking about the viability of transcendental arguments.

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<sup>14</sup> I criticise this aspect of Cassam's arguments in forthcoming work.

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