

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# On Galen Strawson's central approach to the self

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Email: [manhalhamadu@gmail.com](mailto:manhalhamadu@gmail.com)**Abstract**

The crux of this paper is to provide a concentrated critical evaluation of Galen Strawson's innovative approach to the self. To that end, I will first attempt to concisely introduce his general thesis, which seems appropriate to be broken up into two major pieces: the phenomenology (experience) of the self, what the self would have to be; and the metaphysics of the self (i.e., a query refers to its metaphysics [its existence and nature]: whether there is any). Explaining and discussing Strawson's twofold account of the self is my first target in this paper. And it is with these two parts that I take issues. Accordingly, I shall determinedly try to develop a counter-argument according to which Strawson's establishment of his entire enterprise of the self is based merely on unjustified intuitive generalisation. Next, I will put more effort into making some more argumentative points, mainly to show how his metaphysics does not give much thought to some vital matters of the self in comparison with the systems of metaphysics of his forebears of Western philosophers. What all this means is that Strawsonian metaphysical analysis of the self so conceived and so described appears philosophically to drive itself to justly be placed in an ahistorical context.

**KEYWORDS**

ahistorical, diachronic, intuition, living moments, mental presence, minimal selves, self-experience, sesmets, synchronic

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Over several centuries, it has been widely documented that the concept of “the self” has been one of the central ideas in Western philosophy. Whether it is with reference to the Socratic well-known phrase “Know thyself”, or the Cartesian most famous cogito “I think, therefore I am”, or David Hume's sharp criticism in his treatise of the idea of a self as an entity or so on, the

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issue has never wholly receded from the Western tradition of philosophical discourses. In fact, the self was often addressed under different and influential philosophical perspectives. This was always the case. This can be easily shown with reference to phenomenology, psychoanalysis, metaphysics, and so on and so forth. The main focus has been directed to issues about knowledge of the self, and significant debates have taken place over the question of personal identity.

In recent times, however, the question of the self has regained new prominence across great philosophical debates and various related branches of knowledge such as neurophilosophy, philosophy of the mind, cognitive sciences, psychology, and so forth. Among many recently established philosophical approaches to the self, it is said that Galen Strawson's proposal argues for a thin conception of the self or subject of experience. With Strawson, the topic lends itself all too easily to speculation and intellectual extravaganzas. The idea contributes substantially to the current philosophical discussion of the issue. This account is commonly referred to as the "minimal self", according to which the self lacks temporal continuation. Under this principle of minimal conception, the sense of the self is not related to the overlap of temporal parts. Rather, the Strawsonian position rests on another sort of terminology: that of synchronicity and episodicity. The self keeps changing over time and must involve a synchronic or episodic form but need not involve any genuine form of long-term diachronic continuity. But is this argument convincing?

In this paper, I shall initially introduce my summarised understanding of Strawson's view of the issue at hand.<sup>1</sup> Having outlined Strawson's main argument, I will go further and show that it seems appropriate to divide it up into two major parts: phenomenology and the metaphysics of the self. Next, I will argue that the whole phenomenological argument is based merely on a misleading starting point, that is, the assumption of a generalisation about ordinary human beings' sense of the self. I will show that this notion is not accurate, and since the background to his thinking about the metaphysics of the self is given by a commitment to the phenomenological investigation of the sense of self, accordingly Strawson's general argument, its two parts included, is underminable. In some more points devoted only to the second part of his argument, I will also argue that Strawson's metaphysics of *sesmets* (i.e., subjects of experience that are single mental things) fails to take a carefully measured approach to the topic in comparison with past western philosophers' systems of metaphysics. This explicates why such a view can fairly be criticised as ahistorical.

## 2 | STRAWSON'S CENTRAL ARGUMENT ABOUT THE SELF

To anticipate the story this approach will yield, it is illuminating to make a heuristic but succinct demarcation that separates the phenomenology and the metaphysics of the self. On the one hand, there is the phenomenology of the self, according to which the self seems to us to be a certain way. On the other hand, there is the metaphysics of the self, according to which the self, the inner subject of experience, does indeed exist. However, Strawson claims that the former must certainly precede the latter and that a phenomenology of the self imposes limitations or restrictions upon a metaphysics of it.<sup>2</sup> Despite this twofold structure, I emphasise that, due to my understanding, both parts are interlinked systematically and methodologically, combining to create a coherent whole. Nevertheless, Strawson first addresses the phenomenological question of the self, assuming that answering it, in turn, paves the way for answering the metaphysical query of the issue at hand.

<sup>1</sup>Here, it is worth noticing that my understanding of his account of the self is based only on my reading of some of his works and not on his complete oeuvre regarded collectively.

<sup>2</sup>The word *precede* here is best understood as coming before (in order or position, not time or importance), paving the way for, or making something possible. Applied to Strawson's given statement, it follows that a phenomenology of the self comes before or paves the way for a metaphysics of the self and makes it possible. But it does not entail any kind of hierarchy in which a phenomenology of the self is ranked above a metaphysics of the self according to status or authority.

There are several possible ways to list Strawson's thesis on the self. Here is one: consider, for example, the following as a concise report of his hypotheses of the self.

- The answer to the local phenomenological question is as follows: the self is ordinarily conceived as a synchronic and diachronic, single, mental thing that is a distinct subject of experience and experienced as an agent and personality.
- The answer to the general phenomenological question is as follows: the self is ordinarily conceived as a single mental thing that is a subject of experience.
- The answer to the factual/metaphysical question is as follows: *sesmets* do indeed exist.

In the following sections, I am going to make a rough drawing of Strawson's central line of argument about the self. In essential respects, therefore, this line of thought can be divided into two main parts: phenomenology and the metaphysics of the self. Let me address each in turn, starting with the former.

## 2.1 | The phenomenology of the self

This suggests something like the following:

- It is intuitive that there are eight epigraphs that frame the ordinary human sense of the self.
- It is possible for one to minimise the eight properties of the sense that ordinary people have of themselves to four.
- One can begin to engage oneself in asking the metaphysical question about the self.

The self is, first and foremost, a phenomenological phenomenon, as Strawson posits it. He commits himself, however, from the outset to a version of a phenomenology of the self. More precisely, the self is disclosed as the set of distinctive phenomenological features we all sense.<sup>3</sup> He emphasises that the ordinary human beings' sense of the self "is the source in experience of the philosophical problem of the self" (Strawson, 1997, p. 406). This self-experience (i.e., the experience of oneself experiencing a swift inner life) or ordinary account of the self is simply Strawson's target. He sets up a system of features that, in his view, articulate every ordinary human being's sense of the self. In particular, he stresses the point that these features are typically said to be part of self-experience. These features are:

- “(1) a thing, in some robust sense
- (2) a mental thing, in some sense
- (3,4) a single thing that is single both synchronically considered and diachronically considered
- (5) ontically distinct from all other things
- (6) a subject of experience, a conscious feeler and thinker
- (7) an agent
- (8) a thing that has a certain character or personality” (Strawson, 1997, pp. 407–408).

We, ordinary human beings, set up the system of these certain features to better understand lived experience and ourselves. It is by means of such features we can comprehend what it

<sup>3</sup>One needs to be a bit more specific. Unless I have badly misunderstood, the below list of features gives an account in words of the self, not the sense of it. The sense must be of an object (the self) with some or all of the listed features. But it seems that Strawson wrongly, I think, speaks of the list of eight features as if it stands for the sense of the self.

means to be a self. Nevertheless, he argues that although this list applies to most forms of ordinary human beings' sense of the self, it is still not fit to characterise the distinctive nature or features of their self-experience in general adequately. This list is still not minimal, says Strawson. Accordingly, he poses what he calls the *Whittling Argument* to engrave his minimal form of self-experience, arguing that this minimal concept of self-experience does not leave out any feature of ordinary human beings' sense of the self. His subsequent definition of the phenomenological analysis of self-experience reads as follows: "self-experience is experience of the self, apprehended as it is in the present moment, as a subject of experience that is a single mental thing" (Strawson, 2009, p. 61).

Let us pursue this a little further. As this quote suggests, the so-called phenomenologically mental (has a beating inner life) self is a minimal thing (mentally established only) unified to the extent that it can be called single (non-multiple). This single thing is an undoubtful subject of experience and has mental features.

Strawson's position then rests on the idea, which takes the self as a mental presence that is not identical to the same thing that was there in the past. Nor will it be the same entity in the future. This very conception of self-experience forms Strawson's main purpose of his discussion about the topic of the self. And this experience is best understood in its being opposite to or distinct from other experiences. In fact, it is "the experience that people have of themselves as being an 'inner' locus of consciousness, something that is essentially not the same thing as a human being considered as a whole; a specifically mental presence, a mental someone, a mental something that is a conscious subject". This basically means that self-experience is "the experience of oneself as experiencing, as having a palpitating inward life" (Strawson, 2009, p. 36). It also does follow that the self as a single mental thing (i.e., mental presence) is completely different from the self, taken as a whole.

If we have followed Strawson up to this point, we have reason to raise the question about the relation between self-experience as a mental presence on the one hand and consciousness and self-consciousness on the other hand. In argument form, Strawson's response might look like this. Self-experience is not attached to reflexive self-consciousness. For example, "cats and dogs have some sort of self-experience even though they're plainly not self-conscious in the way we are" (Strawson, 2009, p. 101). In other words, self-experience does not necessarily entail self-consciousness.

What is more, Strawson, at least at this point, wants to stress only the phenomenological concept of the self without any ontological implication. For that reason, he states that self-experience does not contain any immaterial entity. He writes that "it's wrong to think that self-experience automatically incorporates some sort of belief in an immaterial soul, or in life after bodily death" (Strawson, 2009, p. 37). By revision, it is true that the self is an inner mental entity; but it, the self or self-experience, is not a soul-like substance. Strawson's justification might be the accessibility of the self. We need to flesh out this idea with more details.

In order to give emphasis to self-experience as an anti-personhood phenomenological thesis, Strawson also stresses that it is essentially a mental activity or, as Buddha puts it, "a matter of non-sensory mental activity" (Strawson, 2009, p. 43). This implies that it is a type of experience that is accessible solely to the respective subject of it. Thus, there is no phenomenological ground that can help to decide whether others, humans or animals, do have self-experience. Here, Strawson attempts to avoid any confusion between the concept of self in a sense that has been explained and the concept of person that "is understood to be something like a human being (or other animal) considered as a living physical whole" (Strawson, 1999a, p. 99). This conviction is based upon a central philosophical intuition: there are two different philosophical concepts, "person" and "self", that cannot be used interchangeably or considered as identical. Further, he asserts that it is not the case that the self is either a whole or a mythical entity.

However, to complete the Whittling Argument, Strawson calls the aforementioned minimal selves, with their four base elements, as *sesmets*. This hints that with this argument, he starts

leaving out the phenomenological question: “can we describe the minimal case of genuine possession of a sense of the self?” (Strawson, 1997, p. 406). And he begins trying to answer the metaphysical question: “is there such a thing as the mental self?” (Strawson, 1997, p. 409). The following section is dedicated to proceeding deeper into Strawson’s metaphysical concept of the self, that is, the metaphysical questions of whether *sesmets* could be stated to exist and what their major distinguishing traits are. Here is the thesis.

## 2.2 | The metaphysics of the self

Let us state the argument as follows:

- One can begin to engage oneself in answering the metaphysical question about the self.
- *Sesmets* do indeed exist.
- They bear distinct motifs of the self.

All the pieces are now in place to lay out Strawson’s metaphysical argument in which he has various things to say. As I mentioned above, the central factual or metaphysical question to which Strawson tries to provide an answer is “Does anything like the sort of thing that is figured in Self-experience exist?” (Strawson, 1999a, p. 102). He believes that the source of an answer to this question consists mainly of self-experience in a sense that has been figured in answer to the phenomenological question in the sense of multiple selves’ experience, which was in turn based on the answer to the local phenomenological question in the sense of ordinary human beings’ self-experience.

His subtle and intriguing chapter 5.10 of his brilliant and provocative book *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics* can be considered as a key point for Strawson’s metaphysical general notion of *sesmets*. Here, he makes considerable analogies between *sesmets* on the one hand and “living moments of experience” on the other based on their construction and for illustration or explanation. Ludwig Gierstl and Ludwig J. Jaskolla put the point very clearly when they explain how Strawson drew these proposed analogies. They say: “surely, living moments of experience are mentally propertied and have a subjective center. In addition, they can be said to be single things, because they expose a genuine kind of strong unity during the shortest portion of time possible. Whereas the ontological question about the existence of selves remains to be answered, we can suppose the existence of living moments of experience with Cartesian certainty” (Gierst & Jaskolla, 2012, p. 92).

For Strawson, a subject has a synchronic identity. It is considered as if it existed at one point in time. As a subject of the living moment of total experience, it exists in time  $t_1 - t_2$ , and it is different from  $t_2$  to  $t_3$ , or from  $t_5$  to  $t_6$ , and so forth. This means that Strawson does not believe in any claim that can amount to any account of the conclusive or final metaphysical identity of the subject of experience. Being different in every living moment of experience does not mean that the subject lacks unity. Otherwise, it cannot be considered necessarily single. This singleness also extends to cover the entire experiential field at a given moment.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Strawson sets another key to his metaphysics of the self, which is what he calls *Real Materialism*. I am going to portray the distinctive features of this thesis. The main claim is just “that objects are processes, wholly constituted out of time-matter, process-stuff ... and that all human thin subjects are entirely constituted out of process-stuff ... and furthermore that they qualify as ‘strong’ unities mentally considered, and hence as actual physical objects”

<sup>4</sup>It is worth noticing that being a single unity means that its two different aspects—mental and physical—are unified as a whole. Yet, being different in every single moment means the self needs to have nothing to do with time-related plans and emotions—long-term forward- or backward-looking psychological phenomena. Perhaps this burden of his argument is the greatest area of my disagreement with Strawson’s idea of the self. Anyway, I will not attempt to enter it here.

(Strawson, 2009, pp. 327–328). We have seen before how a subject, which is a mental, single thing, also has synchronic unity. And, when the processes make this synchronic unity, energy-stuff constitutes objects as singles and things. This shows that Strawson unifies the self as a thing or object and its being a process. In doing so, he puts into question the metaphysical claim that for an object or substance, in order for it to happen, the process requires it to be different from itself in which to take place.

Over and above, he insists that mental and physical aspects of the world are equiprimordial. They, as two different phenomena, exist together as equally fundamental (equally original or co-original). They belong to the same phenomenon and underline different sides of it but are not reducible to it. This immediately separates his position from panpsychism (the thesis that the mental being is an essential and omnipresent feature of the universe). To my mind, this firmly held belief is based on phenomenological intuition: there is no phenomenon as reliably well-known to us as our own experiential status. What is more, Strawson expresses the sense of this intuition in a metaphysical hypothesis: there is nothing as fundamental as these experiential statuses. Taking these considerations into account, Strawson now addresses the issue of the ontological status of the object itself. In his words: “we simply have to accept that finite human subjects of experience—selves—like ourselves are not in the final ontological analysis individual objects but rather features—‘modes’ or ‘modifications’—of the only object there is, the universe” (Strawson, 2009, pp. 421–422). This is a topic that needs a lot more discussion.

What this idea indeed entails is that Strawson denies both of the two ontological theories about objecthood: the bare substrata approach, the view that substance and its properties are distinguishable; and the Humean bundle theory, the view that the object is nothing but a set or bundle of properties which have no substance to be inherent in. But what is Strawson's own theory? To my mind, one can describe his view as a form of so-called nuclear trope theory, the view that the world is nothing but ontologically unstructured abstract particulars or tropes that are not universal and not concrete. Accordingly, this theory, in the terminology of present analytic metaphysics, used to be described as a version of nominalism. This means that if *sesmets* or selves exist, then they are as basically individual unities of energy-stuff bearing two different but equiprimordial aspects, that is, mental and physical aspects. With these considerations in mind, Strawson characterises himself as a materialist and formulates a clear definition of the thin subject which “is a synergy subject: the goings on that wholly constitute its existence and experience consist entirely of activity in the brain. The fundamental property of a thin subject of experience is simply that it can't exist without experiencing” (Strawson, 2009, p. 324). According to this conviction, whenever there is experience, there is also a subject having this experience. This is where his ontological preliminaries leave us.

Further, Strawson discusses the internal ontological structure of thin subjects. For that purpose, he produces what he calls the *experience-subject-content-identity thesis*, according to which he identifies between being a thin subject or *sesmets* and having some sort of content. To defend this idea, he claims that “whenever there is experience ... there's an object that is a subject of experience” (Strawson, 2009, p. 414). Actually, this line of thought is sketched in the preceding paragraph. In addition, he supposes that a kind of specific identification between the respective concepts is possible. He applies this claim to the concepts of experience, subject, and content. Consequently, he concludes that doing so gives rise to the experience-subject-content-identity thesis.

Probably one of the most astonishing deductions Strawson defended is that the self is best understood when we think carefully about its phenomenology (experience) before we consider its metaphysics (its existence and nature). The idea that Strawson describes in his thesis of the self is initially very attractive, but does it eventually work? However, having explained Strawson's prominent positions on the self, I will try, in what follows, to articulate unlike-minded comments that any adequate account of the self must respect.

### 3 | DISPUTATIOUS REMARKS

While it may seem evident that Strawson's approach is a genuinely significant attempt to model the philosophical problem of the self, it is less obvious why such an attempt is, in the end, unsatisfactory. There are several ways of trying to show why it is so. In this section, I will consider Strawson's attempt to characterise the self. I am going to initiate disputatious remarks on the two previously mentioned aspects of Strawson's proposal of the self. I have come across these remarks when reflecting on his account of the self. I do not intend to attack Strawson directly himself; rather, I will attack the deficiency of particular Strawsonian desiderata per se. The rejection of some points of the Strawsonian account is purely tangential to my overall goal. I think that these remarks give rise to the idea that further work has to be done in order to enrich his story of the self and go beyond its already rich range. Let us, for the sake of simplicity, look at the first part of Strawson's line of argument.

#### 3.1 | Disputatious remarks on Strawson's phenomenology of the self

Before making constructive criticisms of Strawson's putative phenomenological approach to the problem of the self, it will be instructive to briefly remind the reader of the general line of argument that encloses or indicates the shape of his thorough theory of the self. As we have seen, in argument form, Strawson's central rationalisation about the self goes like this:

- We can answer the metaphysical question if, and only if, we can answer the general phenomenological question, which in turn is answerable if, and only if, the local phenomenological question is answerable.
- The local phenomenological question is answerable in the sense of ordinary human beings' sense of the self, self-experience.
- Therefore, both metaphysical and phenomenological questions are answerable.

While Strawson's argument has become clear enough now, it is important to point out that it is not clear to me whether there is a good reason for the general claim that all ordinary human beings' sense of the self can be treated similarly. This, therefore, is not compelling evidence for a sound and motivating argument. The weak link in the argument is premise 2. Let us see why. On the surface, the main pillar of his argument is the claim that there is a generalisation of ordinary human beings' sense of the self. This is exactly what I am very sceptical about. And, if my doubt is correct, then Strawson's central argument about the self is shakeable. The direct argument against Strawson's phenomenological grounding of the sense of self goes as follows.

- Strawson's phenomenological grounding of the sense of self is just an intuition about the ordinary human beings' sense of the self.
- As argued by experimental philosophers, people's intuitions about any topic, the phenomenology of the self-included, are so unstable and thereby unreliable.
- Therefore, Strawson's intuitions are an unreliable basis for the phenomenology of the self.

Remember that Strawson's thesis of the phenomenology of the self holds that the self seems to us to be a certain way. This is precisely how some philosophers like George Bealer, for example, define intuition. The cornerstone of Bealer's account of intuition is his understanding of intuition in phenomenological terms. That is, intuition is a form of phenomenal seeming or appearing. In this sense, intuition is just what seems true to the subject or what she feels to be true. He writes: "for you to have an intuition A is just for it to seem to you that

A" (Bealer, 1998, p. 271). Applied to Strawson's phenomenological thesis of the self, we have one intuition: the self is just what seems to the subject to be a certain way.

But it is not exactly clear what precisely both Strawson and Bealer make reference to when they talk about phenomenology? Neither attempts ever to provide us with any clear and precise definition of the term in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather, they seem to understand the term *phenomenology* as a kind of felt seeming-ness that intuitively points us to how things seem to be introspective glimpse. In fact, they implicitly recognise phenomenology as a common-sense matter of *folk psychology*.<sup>5</sup> Or so I claim. In my view, the lack of an account of phenomenology creates difficulties both in Bealer's further elaboration of the appeal to intuition in philosophy and Strawson's theory of greater defence of the characteristics of the self.

Let us take a look at the way in which Strawson responds to the local phenomenological question. He simply answered it through the list mentioned above of eight points that he considers to represent the nature of ordinary human beings' sense of the self. Subsequently, he moves on to justify his answer and raises the question: "can one generalize about the human sense of the self?" (Strawson, 1997, p. 407). Yes. He answers.<sup>6</sup> But he does not provide any argument to show that this is the case, nor does he cite any quotation from any respective paper or research in which he can support this statement. It might, for him, be true based on a sort of Cartesian certainty. If it is so, then the criticisms that were addressed against Cartesian certainty are also applicable to it. Or, and this is what I see more probable, it seems to him intuitively true. Since Strawson does not provide us with a definition of phenomenology, an argument that supports his alleged generalisation regarding the human sense of the self, and a citation that boosts such a general statement, we are left with an intuition of the phenomenal self. The term *intuition* is understood in the sense that something is self-evident or a "proposition whose justification depends on nothing other than itself" (Hales, 2000, p. 135). In other words, intuitive evidence could function as the foundation of a sense of self, as the guaranteed supplier of truths about the self. This is the primary intuition.

A proponent of Strawson might say that he, Strawson, has given an argument in favour of his statement when he says that the aspects of the sense of the self "are situated below any level of plausible cultural variation ... [they come] to every normal human being, in some form, in childhood ... [they are] perhaps most often vivid when one is alone and thinking, but [they] can be equally vivid in a room full of people" (Strawson, 1997, p. 407). In reply, I would say that it is hard to see the argumentative rigour here. By the word *argument*, I understand a reason or a set of reasons given in order to persuade others that an idea or claim is right or wrong. What Strawson attempts to say is just the opposite: this is very intuitive. It happens to everyone regardless of one's culture, whether one is thinking alone or he is with others. In short, Strawson tries to tell us how much his claim of the ordinary human beings' sense of the self is intuitive. It is similar to the saying that  $1 + 1$  intuitively = 2. It is self-evident, and everybody knows it regardless of one's culture, educational background, and so forth. As a further matter, Strawson also tries to tell us that what he calls the human sense of the self is just a *natural intuition*. That is why it comes to people in childhood regardless of their culture or other factors. It comes to one whether one is alone or with others. One has privileged access to oneself, as one may understand. One emerges with a quiet, intuited certainty that one's self is a mental presence, a single mental thing. For this reason, Strawson's generalisation of the nature of the ordinary

<sup>5</sup>Phenomenologically speaking, most people call this *folk psychology*. That makes it sound too simple and naive, too "folksy". Phenomenology is not concerned with naive commonsensical notions but with the nonphysical realm of subjectivity. It requires a disciplined phenomenological approach and cannot merely be given to folk psychology (i.e., our ability to explain others' mental states we attributed to them).

<sup>6</sup>It is worth mentioning that I have never had such a sense of myself. I have also asked many people who similarly confirmed that they do not share such a sense of themselves. Instead, they individually and I have different and unique senses of ourselves. Accordingly, we do, of course, have other senses of self when we conceive ourselves. These other senses of self, however, seem to lie outside of the scope of Strawson's phenomenological analysis of the self. Even if there is so much agreement on how we understand the self, we may still all be wrong in our ordinary views. Agreement and truth are two different things.



human beings' sense of the self is not only intuition but rather intuition about intuitions. It is an intuition about the humans' intuitions of the sense of the self. He thinks that humans have common intuitions about the self or self-experience, which consists in the eight points mentioned above in his answering to the local phenomenological question, which in turn, he engraves into the four points as mentioned earlier in his answer to the general phenomenological question. And based on these intuitions, he comes up with his intuition that a generalisation about the human beings' sense of the self is possible.

Suppose that Strawson and his proponents agree with me for the sake of argument that Strawson's generalisation regarding the nature of the ordinary human beings' sense of the self is nothing but merely an intuition. So what? The issue here is that in contemporary philosophy, there is a massive debate on the variations in intuitions. Experimentalists make great efforts to show the instability of intuitions, and accordingly, they reject the evidential status philosophers habitually used to grant to them. To argue their case, they conduct studies and make use of empirical research, surveying people's intuitions of ordinary folk and the philosophical intuitions of professional philosophers about a subject matter or the other. Some examples can be shown here: in "The Instability of Philosophical Intuitions: Running Hot and Cold on Truetemp," Stacey Swain et al. contend that their researches assert that "intuitions vary according to factors irrelevant to the issues thought-experiments are designed to address" (Swain et al., 2008, p. 153). Also, in "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions", Jonathan Weinberg et al. emphasise that their research "elicited different intuitions in different cultures" (Weinberg et al., 2001, p. 454). Sometimes, in addition to culture, some experimentalists add some other irrelevant factors such as educational background, socio-economic situation, age, ethnicity, gender and native language. Accordingly, it is unsurprising to know that in "Analytic Epistemology and Experimental Philosophy", Joshua Alexander and Weinberg refuse "the suitability of intuitions to function in any evidentiary role" (Alexander & Weinberg, 2007, p. 63). With this in mind, the claim that intuition varies among people is well supported by extensive studies. And if this is so, then it follows that Strawson's central intuition is likely false.

To elaborate, we can put Strawson's generalisation described above into question. To that end, I will go conditional as follows: If experimentalists are right, Strawson's central phenomenological intuition, which he also translates into a metaphysical model, is unreliable. For according to them, people's intuitions about a subject matter, whatever it is, vary according to irrelevant factors such as culture, educational background, socio-economic situation, age, ethnicity, gender, native language, and so on. It is worth mentioning that my concern here is not with whether or not intuitions are reliable based on their alleged instability, but, rather, it is to suspect Strawson's phenomenal intuition that one can generalise about the human beings' sense of the self. If it is so, then one can suspect his entire argument, for Strawson himself mentioned that he constructed his whole idea or theory containing various conceptual elements based only on this generalisation.

Proponents of Strawson's putative phenomenological approach to the problem of the self may object that it might be true that, as argued for by experimental philosophers, intuitions, in general, vary in different people. However, these studies have not revealed whether intuitions about the phenomenology of the self actually differ in diverse folks. Only when I show that there are studies according to which people's intuitions about the self seem to vary can I claim that Strawson's intuitions are an unreliable basis for the phenomenology of the self. Clearly, however, these cases are within easy reach. I take it that there is no dispute that intuitions about the phenomenology of the self also differ depending on certain factors. In his influential essay, "The Self and the Future", Bernard Williams argues that those intuitions vary according to our presentation of the given thought experiments (Williams, 1970). In particular, he presents two formulations of a thought experiment designed to drive the reader to intuit two different intuitions on the nature of the self, regardless of the methodological resemblance of the two cases. The intuition evoked by the first scenario is that one identifies oneself with one's psychological

state and not one's body.<sup>7</sup> Williams concludes from this experiment that "the philosophical arguments designed to show that bodily continuity was at least a necessary condition of personal identity would seem to be just mistaken" (p. 167). Contrary to the first thought experiment, the intuition evoked by the second scenario is that bodily continuity is a necessary condition of self-identification.<sup>8</sup> Williams states that "the principle that one's fears can extend to future pain whatever psychological changes precede it seems positively straightforward" (p. 180). Upon Williams' close analysis of the two cases, he concludes that dissimilarities in their presentation significantly affect our intuition of the continuity of the self: they make it vary considerably.

The problem of what exerts the most influence on people's intuitions about the nature of the self also was recently addressed by Jesse Prinz and Shaun Nichols (2016). They present a series of empirical studies that yield multiple experimental findings according to which the retention of memory, capacity for agency, and narrative coherence are important determinants of ordinary folks' intuitions about the self; but moral continuity (i.e., moral attitudes and moral values) contributes to our sense of the self appreciably more. That is to say; admittedly, there are several factors that play a prepositional role in affecting our intuitions of the self. But, among those emphasised factors, moral continuity is the most important factor. Put another way, "variation in our intuitions about the self is fundamentally related to social attitudes and social behavior: our moral values" (p. 449).<sup>9</sup>

In the same vein, Maria Legerstee's empirical studies (1998) reveal that individuals' intuition about the self varies according to their specific social, aging, and bodily factors. In similar studies, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) shows that the body serves as an indispensable element for forming the sense of the self. In his words, "we find ourselves on sound empirical grounds for affirming ... the indispensability of the tactile-kinesthetic body to a sense of self" (p. 57). In accordance with this, intuition about the self would differ from one to another, but crucially it would do so because the bodily experiences would differ. In turn, Tamar Gendler (1998) sees that what constitutes our intuitive sense of the self is not a single thing but a bunch of determinants that might be psychological, physical, or social. But, again, differences in these influences may very much translate into differences in intuitions.

The arguments considered above show that Strawson's intuitions are an unreliable basis for the phenomenology of the self. But suppose someone states that what you call unjustified intuitive generalisation is itself not a too uncommon practice in philosophy. Philosophers rely on intuitions while making arguments. So, you have to show why this practice should not be acceptable in Strawson's case. And, in any case, this line of argument seems to be minimally relevant to Strawson's account of the self. The supposed problem of Strawson's relying on intuition is not the only game in town. Hence, it is better to focus on more essential elements of his account. To this, I say that I agree with the commonality of philosophers' relying on intuitions in their works and that what experimentalists question is exactly the evidentiality of such type of philosophical practice. The thing is, if criticisms of experimental philosophers are right, I think that we have a good enough reason to believe that Strawson's basic intuition, which is at the root of his position, is false. This also provides a strong reason why I am entirely unsympathetic to Strawson's intuition of the human sense of the self. Clearly, he is in fact quite wrong. Yet, experimentalists had been, I propose, mistaken in thinking that the question of reliability applies to intuition as an isolated entity and not as a component of a whole. This leads one to the next point.

<sup>7</sup>Shaun Nichols and Michael Bruno (2010) urge that how a particular thought experiment is presented plays a crucial role in the folk intuitions about the necessity of identifying the persistence of self by the persistence of psychological characteristics.

<sup>8</sup>The idea that the self must necessarily be identified by its body has been argued for by Williams (1956–1957). Precisely, he writes: "bodily identity is always a necessary condition of personal identity" (p. 230).

<sup>9</sup>The suggestion that moral traits are central to the folk sense of the self has been urged by Nina Strohminger and Nichols (2014).

Up to this point, I have been arguing that the problem with Strawson's phenomenological grounding of the sense of self is that it is a mere intuition about ordinary people's intuitions of the conception of the self. But even if I am right about that, it does not follow that there can be no objection to this way of thinking. Strawson may well object that philosophers most often have simply consulted their own intuitions about particular questions. At least, this is common in philosophy. An uncommon practice lies in experimental philosophers' movement toward investigating what ordinary people intuit about certain philosophical questions such as the self.

However, to properly respond to the current objection, I need to make it explicit that I have no objection to philosophical conclusions benefiting from intuitions, those of philosophers or ordinary people. The problem, I think, is that it simply is not acceptable to rely on mere intuitions for building a general account of any topic. Philosophers who rely on such an approach do not want to move away from proverbial armchair theorising. If, as argued for by experimental philosophers, intuitions are likely to be vulnerable to effects irrelevant to the issues these intuitions are designed to address. These arbitrary effects become biases when intuiters engage in establishing philosophical views. Of course, it is wrong to constitute philosophical accounts based on potential biases. That is not to say that intuition cannot be used in philosophy as an adequate starting point. But then again, we should not let it do that directly, but after calling it into question and distilling it from the inclination to biases. Only then can we use it to make arguments. The challenge is to find a way of picking the highly reliable intuition, which is justified independently of intuition. One potential methodological principle to remove impurities from intuition might be the above-mentioned empirical psychological research. This might be true. Nevertheless, I submit that the better methodological process is the fitting-ness approach. The suggestion is that the reliability of intuition does not depend on intuition itself. Rather, it rests on its being combined with other pieces to make up a whole—thought experiment or argument.

Hence, as a piece of evidence in an argument, intuition is reliable as long as it fits well with other pieces into one story to support its justifiedness. This can be seen as a criterion to examine the dependability of specific intuition for philosophical theory—building. Intuition alone has no evaluative value. Their value lies in their justificatory status. In fact, intuition's justificatory power is derived from its possession of the ability to produce justified belief in the conclusion and premises of an argument. If so, the question of reliability does not apply to intuition separately. Rather, it is applicable to the argument itself, which can be either justified or unjustified.

However, I want to stop this argument at this point since I also agree that I have to be concerned with other elements of Strawson's account of the self. Accordingly, I shall attempt in the next section to argue that there is another way in which Strawson's notion of selfhood presents itself as a fragile phenomenon: his metaphysical position with regard to the self.

### 3.2 | A disputatious remark on Strawson's metaphysics of the self

In the previous section, I have shown how Strawson's speculative phenomenological approach to the problem of the self does not hold. He thinks further that the metaphysics of the nature of the self is subordinate to the phenomenology of the sense of the self. Since the answer to the phenomenological question did not go well, I am in a good position to argue, in what follows, that such a response, in turn, fails to undergird his fundamental and straightforward metaphysics of the self, which at best can be criticised as an ahistorical metaphysical postulate. Here is the argument that suggests, however, the following line of reasoning:

- Selves, *sesmets*, so conceived and so described do indeed exist.
- They lack a proper historical foundation.
- Therefore, it is no surprise that a metaphysics of the self as such be labelled as ahistorical.

Earlier, I indicated that Strawson denies the distinction between the *sesmet* or object or substance and its being a process. In connection with this, he also refuses the object/property distinction or, in my own words, the *substance/property distinction*, and for this reason, he repeatedly cites Kant as a justification for his statement. Here is one of these citations: “when Kant says that ‘in their relation to substance, accidents [or properties] are not really subordinated to it, but are the mode of existing of the substance itself,’ I think he gets the matter exactly right” (Strawson, 2009, p. 313). What I find worth mentioning here is that I am not going to question these two types of rejection, but rather, what I am trying to do is to make an attempt to capture what the substance is in Strawson’s text. For what appears to be the substance according to these two types of rejection is the self or *sesmet*, which has accidents or properties, its being a process included, which in turn are just modes of the existence of the substance itself. But, as I have already mentioned and quoted him, Strawson contends that selves are not objects, but they are properties, modes, or modifications of the only object or, in my own words, *substance* there is, the universe. So, what is the substance, according to Strawson? Is it the universe, and accordingly the self or *sesmet* is just a property, mode, or modification of it? Or is it the self or *sesmet* which has properties, such as its being a process that is, in turn, not distinguishable from its substance? This issue is really unclear in Strawson’s text. Being so, I find it convenient to go with Peter van Inwagen’s suggestion that “Strawson will not be able usefully to discuss issues ... (such as his theory of *sesmets*) till ... [he has] reached agreement about what the most fundamental ontological categories [substances] are” (van Inwagen, 2004, p. 478). Ultimately, this deep conceptual disagreement affects our epistemic access to the self, which will thus go unrecognised.

We suggest that Strawson’s failure to clarify the status of *sesmets* results from the fact that his self-phenomenology is so mistaken and unreliable. Precisely, the reason why it is not clear whether his *sesmets* are substances or properties is understanding them in terms of their thinghood. I find it inevitable that folks interpret “thing” as an object made of spatiotemporal materials. Admittedly, it is true that contemporary physics view matter in terms of energy and pure process-like ideas, and not dualistic terms such as “substance/properties” distinction. Nonetheless, this is not the way how ordinary human beings understand the word *thing*. The most common conception of “thing” is roughly a first, typical, or preliminary model of something of any kind from which other forms are developed or copied. We should always remember that with talk of robust self-phenomenology, we are engaging with the language spoken by ordinary people, not with the body of precise, technical, or theoretical terms used with subatomic physics.

Not so far from his aforementioned statement that the universe or the world is the only object or substance there; and accordingly, the self or *sesmet* is just a property, mode, or modification of it, Strawson clears up his thesis of Real Materialism by considering that when we talk about the world making a distinction between what is physical and what is mental, what we are actually talking about is nothing but the same world possessing two aspects: mental and non-mental or physical.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, by “the mental aspect”, he means the self as he characterised it as a “mental presence”. Accordingly, he characterises himself as a Cartesian, saying that “if this makes me a Cartesian, then that is what I am ... that is an honour” (Strawson, 1999b, p. 331).<sup>11</sup> As I mentioned above, he asserts that mental and physical aspects of the world exist together as equally fundamental. That is all right. But what I see to be missing from his metaphysical account of the self is exactly one of the main things for one to be a Cartesian that is to tell or at least to try to suggest some sort of relationship between what is mental and what is not.

<sup>10</sup>I do not think that even current science has yet established any fact of an object, similar to Spinoza’s monistic conception of substance, that has both mental and physical aspects. Indeed, our understanding of the objects as yet has a dual form.

<sup>11</sup>In spite of his claim that his bilateral conception of the self is dichotomized into mental and non-mental, his materialism cannot be said to be wedded to a Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body. Cartesian substance dualism speaks of two substances, that is, mind and body, which have two essences, that is, thought and extension. While Strawson’s monism speaks of one substance, that is, the self, that has two aspects (or essences), mental and non-mental. Dualism contrasts with monism.

Descartes at least noticed that there should be some kind of relationship between these two substances of the world. Whether or not he could resolve this problem is a further question, but at least he realised the problem and tried to suggest some solutions to it. But Strawson did not only find any solution to the issue of this type, but even more, he did not discuss it at all, at least not to the best of my knowledge of his works I have read.

However, it might be stated that Strawson's metaphysical version is not historically unprecedented. It can be, for example, assimilated to Leibniz's metaphysical universe. But can it be really?

In Leibniz's system, for instance, Monad (i.e., a basic, nonspatial, immaterial, and imperishable substance of the universe) is windowless. That is to say, neither any substance nor an attribute (both accident/property-instance or permanent property) can enter or exit it. This is what makes the changing of the Monad by an external force impermissible. The path of the Monad can be changed depending on the impact on it by the other monads. No two monads interact directly with each other. They always interact through a principle of reflection, in the sense that A and B interact through their capacity to reflect. Through this reflection, the relationship between A and B is determined. There is no necessary "equal and opposite action and reaction" relationship between them. The relation between A and B is formed on the basis of the concept of reflection. Leibnizian Monad has two types of reflection: One is inside itself. And the other is outside, upon other monads to create them. The motive of the internal principle of interaction, that is, the first kind of interaction, is called appetition. And the object of appetition is the power of perception (Leibniz, 1973).

The central question is whether the same story goes for Strawson's metaphysical realm of *sesmets*. What do the terrains of such a world look like? What form of synchronic relation do these *sesmets* have? Do they interact reciprocally? If they do, then what are the effects their interactions give rise to? If I understand the picture correctly, then Strawson's metaphysical universe, unlike Leibniz's, is filled with quickly fading *sesmets*, or *ultimates* as Strawson (2006) calls them. And if the Leibnizian ultimate constituents are wholly incorporeal, each of Strawsonian short-lived selves is just a physical object, or *neural activity* as Strawson (2017) calls it.<sup>12</sup> The interactive experience is fundamentally rooted in *sesmets*, according to Strawson (2006). Each *sesmet* has two kinds of interaction: One is inner, for itself. And the other, which is missed from Leibniz's settings, is external; the causal effect upon other *sesmets* to create them. But it is important to note that Strawson gives no indication as to what he takes to be the accompanying implications of interactions as such—the power of perception in the Leibniz case. Furthermore, the question that now arises is where these *sesmets* are supposed to exist. Is there an inclusive matrix that encompasses them all? If yes, it is supposed to be distinct. Indeed, Leibniz's (1973) universe is a united whole, a dominant monad that exists as a possibility. Thus, the action of such a dominant monad will have an effect on other monads. Each Monad is a reflection of the complete universe/the united whole Monad. In Strawson's case, there is no dominant *sesmet* though (Strawson, 2006); he wonders whether we have to posit it. Certainly, common sense does not think of a complete whole that would be capable of hosting physical objects/*sesmets*. At any rate, to the best of my knowledge, Strawson has not yet sorted out this problem. At best, what all this means is that Strawson's account of the metaphysics of the self is still in the making. At worse, the above argument is a further reason to regard his account as inferior and not justified enough.

It also explicates why a self so conceived and so described appears philosophically to drive itself to be magnified into a metaphysics of the self that is thoroughly ahistorical in nature. A metaphysics that hesitates to remember its founders. Worse still, it is not even so. It fails to

<sup>12</sup>So far, we have seen different features he regards as characteristics of the self, such as mental presence, having two aspects: mental and non-mental, and physical object or neural activity. Maybe the underlying thought is that the self is something mental, but the sense of it is a physical thing or neural activity.

have in or be able to bring to its mind awareness of what it has seen, known, or experienced in the past in an argumentative spirit. That is, engaging with historical texts without being indispensable in order to draw lessons for “trans-historical” philosophical problems. This is a serious failure. This is what Richard Rorty has in mind when he accuses endeavours like Strawson’s metaphysics of the self as “an attempt to escape from a history—an attempt to find nonhistorical conditions of any possible historical development” (1979, p. 9). In other words, it lacks historical perspective or context. It is no surprise, then, that its metaphysical moorings are tenuous in the extreme.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

I have given my own explanation of Galen Strawson’s approach to the self that is based on my comprehension of some of his works. To that end, I have shown that his central argument seems appropriate to be broken up into two main parts: phenomenology and the metaphysics of the self. I have tried to develop a counterargument, according to which Strawson’s entire enterprise of the self is based merely on unjustified intuitive generalisation. And this makes his central argument shakeable. At the end of the paper, I have made certain attempts to show that the metaphysical part of Strawson’s central argument omits some important points compared to other western philosophers’ systems of metaphysics. In this ahistorical spirit, Strawson’s metaphysics could not avail itself of paying heed to the past. However, it could benefit immensely because old metaphysical texts ultimately make substantive arguments of a historical kind.

In short, I have come to the conclusion that a nonintuitive phenomenological analysis of the nature of the self can provide us with a more accurate model for understanding the notion of the self. It has also become extremely clear that a far more fruitful and adequate account of the metaphysics of the self cannot satisfy itself with a mere ahistorical analysis of the self but must also seriously turn to the historical argumentations on the self inaugurated within the philosophical tradition.

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