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The Subject of Experience by Galen Strawson

Bill Meacham subjects Galen Strawson to his critical experience.

The Oracle at Delphi famously advised us to know ourselves. But what is the self which is to be known?

This question is at the heart of contemporary British philosopher Galen Strawson's *The Subject of Experience*. In this collection of essays, Strawson investigates wide-ranging topics pertaining to the nature of the self: What do we mean by the term 'self'? In what sense do selves exist? To what extent is continuity over time essential to selfhood? Must one be able to make a story of one's life in order to be a coherent self? Must one be *self*-conscious in order to be conscious at all? and more. The fourteen essays here are not necessarily meant to be read in order. They do not offer a sustained argument, but rather a number of themes that appear in different places, like threads in a tapestry. These themes cover so much ground that it would be impossible to do justice to them all in a short review, so I'll just touch on a few salient ones.

The first theme is what is meant by the term 'self'. Strawson is a professional analytic philosopher, and one of his strengths is a careful attention to conceptual nuances. Noting that from an early age we realize that our thoughts are private, that is, not observable by others, he asserts that we all have a sense of ourselves as something mental, distinct from our bodies. Whether this sense is accurate is another question; but he says that it has eight components. We ordinarily conceive of or experience our selves in eight ways, listed from the most fundamental to the most broad as follows (p.19). We think of ourself as:

1) A thing or entity;

2) A mental or subjective entity;

3) A single entity when considered at a point in time (synchronically);

4) A single entity when considered over some duration of time (diachronically);

5) Ontically (really or metaphysically) distinct from all other things;

6) A subject of experience – a conscious feeler and thinker;

7) An agent, with choices; and

8) Having a certain character or personality.

That's quite a list. The virtue of an analytic approach is that it helps us avoid ambiguity and equivocation. When we make assertions about the self, it helps to know which of these aspects of selfhood we mean. If I tell you that I ate the candy, 'I' refers to me as an agent (#7 in the list): I and not someone else ate the candy. But if I tell you that I didn't really do it, but rather my addiction to sweets overcame me, 'I' here means something else – something 'ontically' or really distinct from my cravings (#5).

It won't do to ask which of these is the right meaning, as if there could be only one. The analytic approach encourages us to be more precise, and say which sense of 'I' is being used on any given occasion.

Consider the question of self as subject of experience (#6). Strawson goes on to list three conceptions of subjecthood (pp.171-172):

1) Human beings along with other animals can be generally said to be subjects of experience. Strawson calls this the 'thick' conception.

2) A subject of experience can be thought of as "some sort of persisting inner locus of consciousness – an inner someone, an inner mental presence". This he calls the 'traditional inner' conception.

3) A subject of experience can be "an inner thing of some sort that exists if and only if experience exists of which it is the subject." This he calls the 'thin' conception.

Conceptions 1 and 2 assume that a subject of experience continues to exist even when not having any actual experience, as in dreamless sleep or when heavily sedated. In conceptions 2 and 3, the subject is something different from, or at least distinct from, the whole person taken as body and mind together. Conception 3 reserves the term 'subject' for that which gives unity to an individual moment or episode of experience, and so operates only during that moment or episode of being conscious (this conception of the self was a real difficulty for René Descartes).

That there is a unity to episodes of human experience Strawson takes as incontrovertible. In addition to being an analytic philosopher, Strawson is also a phenomenologist, that is, someone who has examined his own experience in some analytical detail. This gives him an edge over those who rely on linguistic or conceptual analysis alone in understanding the self. His description of experience is worth quoting at length:

> "The total experiential field involves many things – rich interoceptive (somatosensory) and exteroceptive sensation, mood-and-affect-tone, deep conceptual animation, and so on. It has, standardly, a particular focus, and more or less dim peripheral areas, and is, overall, extraordinarily complex in content. But it is for all that a unity… simply in being, indeed, *a* total experiential field; or equivalently, simply in being *the* content of the experience of a single subject at that moment. The unity or singleness of the (thin) subject of the total experiential field in the living moment of experience and the unity or singleness of the total experiential field are aspects of the same thing." (p.179)

This 'same thing' is an occasion or moment of experience. That each moment of experience is unitive leads Strawson in two directions philosophically. One is toward a conception of personal identity; and the other toward a conception of the ultimate nature of reality.

Personal Identity

The question of personal identity is central to this book. Strawson reminds us that the ordinary conception of selfhood –the second one above – is of a persisting inner locus of being conscious of one's world (and, I would add, of acting on it too). We think of ourselves as experiencing beings having long-term continuity over time. We wake up in the morning, and without having to think about it, recognize that we are the same person who fell asleep the night before.

Strawson thinks that this impression of sameness or continuity is an illusion. What is really real, he says, is conception 3 – a subject of experience that exists only while it experiences. He says this partly on conceptual grounds – how can there be a 'subject of experience' when there is no *experience*? – and partly on methodological grounds: he thinks that when it comes to metaphysical discussions of selfhood, one has to

start phenomenologically, by analysing what is actually given in experience (pp.44-45). What is given in experience is episodic moments of experience, not an experience of continuity. As Strawson says, the basic form of our experience is "a gappy series of eruptions of consciousness out of non-consciousness" (p.73). (He adds, "although the gaps are not usually phenomenologically apparent", which seems to call into question his phenomenological premise. This difficulty is resolved by affirming the need to observe more carefully than we usually do what actually goes on in our experience. He recommends the practice of mindfulness meditation to hone such an ability (p.70, p.154 fn. 51).)

One might reasonably ask then, where our sense of personal continuity comes from? How do we know we are the same person as we were, not only when we wake up in the morning, but from moment to moment?

In response, Strawson agrees with the great American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910), who says that we each consist of a great many short-lived selves. Each momentary self appropriates the experience of its predecessor through the immediately preceding contents of experience forming part of the context in which each new moment of experience arises. This context is both outer and inner; both objective and subjective. Objectively, our present situation usually has an expected continuity with the situation previously experienced. We most often wake up in a familiar place and find it no surprise. Subjectively, we find we have familiar bodily sensations, as well as familiar thoughts, feelings, moods, and so forth. As Strawson says, we have a "constant background awareness of our own mental goings on" (p.47). This familiarity leads us to think of ourselves as the same person we were previously. This sense can change over time, of course. Our sense of self usually changes unnoticeably in small increments from moment to moment, and the difference becomes apparent only when contrasted to some far earlier time. In cases of religious or moral conversion, the change in sense of self may happen rapidly. But even in that case there is a sense of continuity: we know that we are the same person who was thinking differently before.

So are we really only a gappy series of momentary subjects of experience; or are we really a continuous being who persists over time? There is no one correct answer to this question. The useful answer depends on the context of inquiry, on what issue we are trying to clarify. For most practical purposes we can confidently affirm that a human being is a persisting psychophysical whole. Certainly, it would be hard to get around in the social world without such a belief. But for questions of fundamental metaphysics, the gappy, momentary nature of serialized selfhood seems quite plausible. And if the Buddhists are to be believed, recognizing this lack of a permanent self is a step toward liberation from suffering. Strawson's contribution is to clarify, sometimes in painstaking detail, just what is involved in such considerations.

Image by Paul Gregory

The Nature of Reality

The idea of the unitive nature of moments of experience leads Strawson to a view of the ultimate nature of reality as well. He is a *pluralist*, believing that many things exist (using 'thing' in a loose sense). For instance, "there is a plurality of fundamental physical entities (leptons and quarks, say, or 'fields', 'loops',

'field quanta'…) or as I will say 'ultimates'."(p.174). But he is also an *attributive monist*, saying that each of these ultimates is of the same kind; that each is composed of the same kind of stuff (again, using 'stuff' in a loose sense). Strawson's model for the ultimate stuff is a moment of experience consisting of a 'thin' subject (conception #3) and its total experiential field. (His argument for this position can be read in his paper 'Realistic Monism', available on Academia.edu.) Each ultimate, or 'concretely actualized' entity, is, he says, "a concretely existing total experiential field and a concretely existing subject for whom that field is an experiential field" (p.185). This is just what process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) took to be the nature of what is ultimately real, which he variously called an actual entity, an actual occasion, and an occasion of experience (See *Process and Reality*, Part 1, Ch. 2, sec. 1, and *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 221.) So Strawson gives support for Whitehead's process panpsychism, despite his reluctance to put himself in the same category as Whitehead.

Consciousness of Consciousness

One of Strawson's many other themes is worth a mention. He claims that "All consciousness involves consciousness of that very consciousness" (p.143). Such involvement is 'pre-reflective', 'immanent', and 'non-positional' (p.155). In other words, this is not something you deliberately do.

Strawson claims to know the truth of these assertions from his examination of his own experience. I don't find his argument here (such as it is) persuasive at all. In examining my own experience, I find numerous instances of being conscious that involve no trace of being conscious of being conscious – being absorbed in an engaging task, for instance, or in a good book. (I treat this question in detail at bmeacham.com/blog /?p=1660.) Strawson can *assert* that when I am conscious I am always conscious of being conscious (in addition to whatever I am focusing on), but he can't prove it. And I can't prove that he's wrong, either. The issue is about subjective experience, which is private, not public, and so not objectively either verifiable or falsifiable. The point is that the idea is not amenable to objective verification. The best we can do is to describe our experience in terms that are as unambiguous as possible, so we can at least understand what the other is saying.

That itself is a difficult task, and unfortunately, Strawson is here not as careful with his vocabulary as he could be. It's difficult because what we're trying to talk about is not public, which means that the words that one person uses to describe their experience may not mean the same to someone else. The difficulty is compounded in English because we have relevant words that mean roughly the same thing. The words 'conscious' and 'aware', for instance, both translate to a single word in Spanish (*consciente*) and German (*bewusst*), so one might think that the two English words are synonyms. And so they are; but not quite. There is still ample room for ambiguity. Strawson says for instance, "By 'awareness' (the mass term) I'll always mean 'conscious awareness'… I'll also use 'consciousness'… for what I mean by 'experience' or 'awareness'." (p.137) In a footnote, he further contrasts this use of 'awareness' to one that means, roughly, knowledge. In this latter sense, one can be said to be aware of a great many things – the current crisis, for instance – even when in deep sleep. By 'conscious awareness', Strawson does not mean awareness in the sense of knowledge. Even so, if 'awareness' means 'conscious awareness', and he uses 'consciousness' to mean 'awareness', then 'conscious awareness' is synonymous with 'conscious consciousness', which is redundant.

He also says, "there are contexts in which it makes sense to speak of unconscious awareness" (p.193, fn. 11). What is this unconscious awareness? Substituting putative synonyms, we get 'unconscious consciousness', which is nonsense. Does he mean unconscious knowledge here? If so, he should say so.

Strawson may assume that his meaning is sufficiently clear in context. The words 'consciousness', 'awareness', and the like, are familiar ones. But too often readers think they know what a word means just because it is familiar. What they think it means might not be what the author intended. One would hope that a

philosopher in the analytic tradition would take extra pains to be more careful about this, especially dealing with language so fraught with possibilities for misunderstanding.

That being said, this book is worthwhile. I have touched on only a few of its topics; there are a lot more. It's not an easy book. Strawson's work is difficult, but rewarding. If you want a popular, breezy run-through of some ideas on selfhood, then you'd best look elsewhere. But if you enjoy reading a text slowly and carefully, pausing to reflect on, understand, and perhaps argue with the author's assertions, then *The Subject of Experience* should prove quite gratifying.

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