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Empiricism and the Bounds of Sense

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In this book[1] Professor Strawson seeks to renew the Kantian enterprise, stripping off the speculative aberrations of Transcendental Idealism to reveal that hard core of argument which constitutes its analytic essence. Part of what remains is held to amount to a refutation of that radical empiricism which holds that it is possible that all there is, is experience, and that the existence of an independent world populated by material objects is open to doubt. Though fifteen years old and widely discussed, *The Bounds of Sense* remains a *locus classicus* for the modern Kantian movement against empiricist scepticism. It is important therefore to identify and examine any central presuppositions which have so far escaped sustained attention, and in considering Strawson's account of Kant's Transcendental Deduction, I wish to show that he does not oppose, but rather presupposes the basis of radical empiricism, and hence is incapable of escaping its limits or its attendant scepticism.

For Strawson, the Transcendental Deduction results in us favourably entertaining the conclusion that, as a necessary condition of the possibility of experience, experience itself 'must have such internal, concept-carried connectedness as to constitute it (at least in part) a course of experience of an objective world' (p. 117). This is 'the thesis of objectivity' (p. 24). Let us first notice an ambiguity in the phrase 'experience of an objective world,' since Strawson never explicitly concerns himself with it. The 'of' here could be merely intentional, in the Scholastic and Husserlian sense, indicating that it must, at least, seem in experience that there are independent objects in an objective world, whether or not such objects, or such a world, exist. Thus even if we suspend judgement as to their actual existence, experience is still of objects in an objective world in this intentional sense. Alternatively, the 'of' could indicate a

[1] P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966).

full-blown, successful cognitive relation between the experiencing subject and the actually existing objective world it experiences, as is presupposed by our ordinary talk of seeing and otherwise perceiving things.

On first reading it seems as though Strawson is addressing the objectivity thesis under the first interpretation, as concerned merely with the internal structure of experience. For consider this elucidation of the conclusion:

> The minimum implied (by the dual character of experience as requiring both particular 'intuitions' and general concepts for their 'recognition') is that some at least of the concepts under which particular items are recognised as falling should be such that the experiences themselves contain the basis for certain allied distinctions: individually, the distinction of a subjective component *within* a judgement of experience . . . collectively, the distinction between the subjective order and arrangement of a series of such experiences on the one hand and the objective order and arrangement of the items of which they are experiences on the other. (p. 101)

The argument here seems to be aimed at establishing that experience must have a certain *internal* character: the subjective/objective distinction must be made *within* experience, by using concepts in which the distinction is implicit to recognise the particular items of experience (the internal 'accusatives' p. 98) as being of such and such a kind. In Husserl's terms, experience must be (at least in part) *intentionally* of an objective world. This reading is reinforced by the way Strawson takes as his main opponent the sense-datum theorist, descendant of the classical empiricists, who supposes that there could be experience articulated entirely in terms of concepts of items such that 'there was no distinction to be drawn between the order and arrangement of the objects (and of their particular features and characteristics) and the order and arrangement of the subject's experiences of awareness of them' (p. 99). It is this possibility which the Transcendental Deduction is to rule out.

If this interpretation is correct, then a brief comparison with the self-styled radical empiricist Husserl will show that, while damaging to classical empiricism, Strawson's account leaves the radical empiricist essentially unscathed. Husserl, drawing on the Cartesian foundation of reflection on the cogitatio, the pure experience, as that alone which is apodictically given, distinguishes between experiences which are, intentionally, of objects like cats which exist independently of the experience itself, and experiences which are, intentionally, of objects like after-images or tickling sensations which do not exist independently of the experience itself.[2] For Husserl, this distinction can be made *within*

[2] In both kinds of experience there is some sensory material, or 'stuff', but for Husserl

experience, under suspension of judgement as to whether an objective world actually exists. What Strawson, following Kant, has shown is that this distinction *must* be made within experience, if there is to be any experience at all, and that this is effected through the employment, within experience, of concepts of the objective. This seems to leave open the question of the actual existence of anything independent of experience, and, of course, Kant himself insists that all he can rightly claim is that experience must have a certain internal conceptual structure, and that nothing can be said of whatever is beyond the realm of experience. But Strawson seems not to accept this:

> The analytical argument to conclusions about the necessary structure of experience must be evaluated on its own merits. If we accept the conclusion that experience necessarily involves awareness of objects conceived of as existing in time independently of any particular states of awareness of them, then we must accept it without reservation. We have no extraneous standard or scheme in terms of which we can give an esoteric sense to the question whether such objects *really* exist, as we must empirically conceive of them as existing, independently of our perceptions. (pp. 261-62)

Here Strawson seems to reject the radical empiricist notion that it is possible that only experience actually exists. For we can give sense to the question of whether purportedly independent objects actually exist, only within our conceptual scheme, and the answer it receives is a commonplace affirmative. It now appears that the phrase 'experience of the objective world' is to be understood as indicating the actual existence of such a world, with which some cognitive consummation is effected. But consider this further. The context of Strawson's injunction is a discussion of Transcendental Idealism in which he dismisses both Kant's transcendental contrast between things as they appear and things as they are in themselves, and the accompanying metaphysics of the affection of our faculties by things-in-themselves which generates our representations. As earlier critics remarked, this theory involves an extension of the application of the categories beyond the realm of experience, an extension ruled out as incoherent by Kant's own 'principle of significance' (cf. p. 16). We do not, and cannot, have any scheme in which we could speak of how things really are in the sense of Kant's Transcendental Idealism. It is from this critique that Strawson's claim that we can rely only on the conceptual scheme we do, and must, employ *in* experience, gains its strength. However, things are not so straightforward. Strawson refuses to go beyond the conceptual scheme which structures experience; questions of existence only make sense,

any meaningful talk of such stuff presupposes an understanding of the distinctions in the intentional character of experience.

and can only be settled, within that scheme.[3] But this refusal, and its supporting theory, themselves presuppose the validity of another sense of existence: that in which experience itself is held to exist.

For the validity of this prior sense of existence, in which experience is said to exist, must be presupposed before the Transcendental Deduction to the validity of the employment *within* experience of concepts of the objective can even begin. The sense of the claim that there is experience cannot, then, itself presuppose the validity of that conceptual scheme. Indeed, within that scheme, it is a mere 'commonplace' that there is experience, on the part of bodily people engaged with the world and each other, but clearly neither Kant nor Strawson wish to begin their deductions from such a point. The question as to what this prior sense of existence amounts to, indeed the whole issue of the presupposition of the validity of such a sense, is nowhere explicitly considered by Strawson; from the opening page he talks of experience in a way which assumes its existence to be entirely unproblematical. Seeking further elucidation we must turn to Kant himself, whose problems, and hence the presuppositions of whose problems, Strawson takes up. And in Kant, and even more in Husserl, it is clear that the sense in which experience exists is derived from Descartes. Experience is that which is immediately present, here and now, given with absolute certainty. So whilst rejecting Kant's double-aspect theory of objects — as they appear, and as they are in themselves — we can recognise the existence of a standard according to which we can ask whether the objective world really exists: that of immediate presence, which is accorded to experience itself. Nor is this standard merely 'extraneous'; it is central to the Kantian, and the Strawsonian, project. This emerges in Strawson's reformulation of the argument for the objectivity-thesis, which considers the 'necessary self-reflexiveness' of experience as the 'essential core of personal consciousness' (p. 107):

> For the necessity of saving the recognitional component in an experience from absorption into its sensible accusative (and thereby saving the status of the experience as experience [sc. as having the dual character mentioned earlier]) is simply identical with the necessity of providing room, in experience, for the thought of experience itself; and it is just this necessity which calls directly for the distinction between how things are and how they are experienced as being and hence for the employment, in judgements of experience (though not in *every* such judgement) of concepts of the objective. (pp. 110-11)

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[3] Parallel to Strawson's denial that there can be sensible talk of things as they are in themselves, is Husserl's claim that, having dealt with the realm of sense (in his description of phenomenological essences), to ask for anything more is to ask for non-sense.

In this important re-casting of the central argument Strawson allows himself to speak both of the concept (or 'thought') of experience, and of experience itself, while with regard to the objective world we are to be satisfied with concepts only. This asymmetry, which rests on the unacknowledged and unquestioned sense of existence in which experience is assumed to exist, is surely the mark of the problem which the sceptic seizes on as the question of the actual existence of the objective world. For the sceptic demands the same high standard of immediate presence, and the accompanying apodictic certainty, accorded to experience. This is the fundamental sense of existence here, underlying both the objectivity-thesis and the principle of significance, and the restriction to the conceptual scheme necessarily employed *within* experience, grants only a second-rate ersatz to the objective world. In Kant himself, while rejecting the mechanics of his Transcendental Idealism, we can see an attempt at dealing with a problem which Strawson fails to recognise.

It is possible that Strawson might balk at being told that he presupposes the existence of experience in the Cartesian sense, and reject the notion of experience as immediately given, though this would make less clear the interest which the concept of experience, indeed the whole Kantian epistemological project, has for him. Nor, given his failure to consider adequately Kant's Cartesian presuppositions, would this be a particularly graceful gesture. The central point, however, remains. There is a primary sense, however elucidated, of existence in which experience is taken to exist, and neither Kant nor Strawson have shown that the objective world exists in the same sense. Accounts with the sceptic remain to be settled.

We can conclude from this that the victim of Strawson's account of the Transcendental Deduction is classical empiricism and its descendants, especially sense-datum theories. This may indeed leave us with part of 'the framework of a truly empiricist philosophy' (p. 19), but we must recognise its limitations, in particular its failure to deal with radical empiricism. If we wish to show that radical empiricism and its sceptical attendant is untenable, we must address ourselves to that understanding of the existence of experience which is its central presupposition, and to the necessary conditions of the possibility of that understanding. It is this presupposition which lies unacknowledged at the foundation of *The Bounds of Sense*. The overcoming of scepticism requires more philosophical self-reflection than is manifest in Strawson's book.