Identifying, Discriminating or Picking Out an Object: Some Distinctions Neglected in the Strawsonian Tradition

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In *Individuals* Peter Strawson talks about identifying, discriminating and picking out particular objects. The most general term he uses is clearly that of identifying a particular. Discriminating and picking out count as ways of identifying. In this paper, I shall argue that picking out a particular is not necessarily a way of discriminating it and generally not a way of identifying it in a strict sense. Similarly, discriminating a particular is not necessarily a way of identifying it in a strict sense. Since Strawson regards discrimination and picking out as basic ways of identification his terminology is flawed.

Strawson introduces his notion of particular identification with reference to a situation in which two people are talking about a particular. In such a situation there is a hearer's sense of identification and a speaker's sense of identification:

Very often, when two people are talking, one of them, the speaker, refers to or mentions some particular or other. Very often, the other, the hearer, knows what, or which, particular the speaker is talking about; but sometimes he does not. I shall express this alternative by saying that the hearer either is, or is not, able to *identify* the particular referred to by the speaker. [...] When a speaker uses such an expression [a proper name, some pronouns, some descriptive phrases beginning with the definite article and expressions compounded of these] to refer to a particular, I shall say that he makes an *identifying reference* to a particular. [...] [W]hen a speaker makes an identifying reference to a particular, and his hearer does, on the strength of it, identify the particular referred to, then, I shall say, the speaker not only makes an identifying reference to, but also *identifies* that particular. So we have a hearer's sense, and a speaker's sense, of 'identify'. (Strawson 1959, 16f.)

The hearer identifies a particular referred to by the speaker if he knows what or which particular the speaker is referring to. The speaker identifies a particular if his identifying reference results in a hearer's identification.

Strawson calls the notion of identification as applied to the situation of a communication "original" (Strawson 1959, 87). But he also recognises a more solitary type of identification "in the sense of distinguishing one particular from others in thought, or observation" (Strawson 1959, 87).

There is clearly a broad sense of "identify" according to which to identify a particular means no more than to talk or think about *it* rather than about some other particular. So it means in some sense to isolate the object from all other objects and to make it the focus of one's attention. However, I wish to note that there is also a more strict and precise sense of identification which seems more appropriate for philosophical discussions. According to this notion of identification, to identify means to say of two things that they are *the same*. And to say of two things that they are the same means, in fact, to refer to one and the same thing two times and to say that what is so referred to is just one single object. If we adopt this sense of identification then it makes no sense to say that someone identifies a particular. One cannot just identify one single thing. Rather, to identify always means to identify one thing with *another* thing, to say of the two that they are the same.

We might think that Strawson uses the strict sense of identification when he speaks of hearer's identification. We might say that a hearer identifies a particular referred to by a speaker if he knows what or which particular is the one that the speaker referred to. The speaker then knows of two things that they are the same: The thing referred to by the speaker is the same as the thing that he knows in some other way (perhaps because he sees it). Strawson himself suggests that hearer-identification "involves thinking that something is *the same*: that the particular copy I see in the speaker's hand is the same particular as that to which he is referring" (Strawson 1959, 32).

However, the case is not as clear and natural as Strawson suggests. Suppose a hearer understands the reference a speaker makes with some expression. Can we not simply say that in this case the hearer knows of some particular that the speaker refers to it? If the hearer understands the speaker's reference, say, to "that tree", then he knows of that tree that the speaker is talking about it. If this is the correct characterisation of the hearer's knowledge, or at least a characterisation which suffices to describe the hearer's understanding of the speaker's reference, then the hearer does not have to identify any two things. He does not have to know an identity proposition of the form "The tree that the speaker refers to = that tree". Rather, he just knows a simple predicate-ascription of the form "That tree is referred to by the speaker". So even Strawson's case of "hearer-identification" is not necessarily a case of a strict identification.

When we consider solitary identification it becomes even less natural to construe it as a case of strict identification. Strawson suggests that such identification has the sense of "distinguishing one particular from others in thought, or observation" (Strawson 1959, 87). However, why should distinguishing one particular from others involve thinking (or knowing) of it that it is *the same* as some other particular? It seems that distinguishing one particular from others need not involve more than ascribing some predicates to it that do not apply to any other particular. So one distinguishes or discriminates – I shall use these two terms synonymously – a particular O from others if one knows that O is P, where "is P" is a predicate that applies only to O and not to the particulars from which one distinguishes O. Of course one *could* also construe the distinguishing knowledge as knowledge of an identity statement: O is (identical to) a particular that is P. (Cf. Strawson 1959, 23.) But why should one want to do this? Such a construal seems an entirely artificial and superfluous complication of the phenomenon we wish to describe: the distinguishing of a particular from others. There does not seem to be any necessity to introduce the extra element of an identity statement, except the wish to comply with an inadequate terminology.

However, it might not only be superfluous to construe the discriminating knowledge of a particular as knowledge of identity propositions. It might also be incoherent in the

context of Strawson's investigation. Strawson describes identification as necessary for understanding reference. However, if this is the function of identification, then there could be an incoherence in assuming that it involves knowledge of identity statements. For in an identity statement there are two distinct references to the same entity. In order to understand the identity statement one has to understand both references. Now, if understanding reference to a particular object requires to know some identity statement about it, then it seems that we have produced a vicious regress. In order to understand that "a" refers to a determinate particular I have to know that a is the same as b. But in order to know that a is the same as b I have to understand the reference that is made through the use of the expression "b". How can I understand this reference? Well, if the theory is right, then I can only understand it if I know some identity statement about b. This would seem to mean that I have to know that b is the same as c. And so on. The speaker says "That tree has strange leaves". Now the hearer can only understand the speaker's expression "that tree" if he knows some identity statement about it in which the particular referred to by the speaker is identified with some particular that the hearer can distinguish from all other particulars. Such an identity statement could be "The tree that the speaker refers to is that tree", where "that tree" is a tree perceived by the hearer. But how does the hearer understand his own expression "that tree"? It seems that in order to understand it he should again know some identity statement about it in which the particular that he is referring to is identified with some particular that he can distinguish from all others. It is obvious that the theory under consideration is incoherent.

Perhaps this incoherence is the reason why the tradition of philosophical thought emanating from Strawson generally uses the term "identification" in the broad sense, where it does not involve knowing of two things that they are the same. Most prominently, Gareth Evans, in his *Varieties of Reference*, talks at length about different types of identification (demonstrative identification, self-identification and recognition-based identification), but never suggests that they involve thinking of two things that they are the same. Similar to Strawson, Evans regards "identification" as necessary for understanding reference – though primarily reference of one's own thoughts, rather than that of the expressions of other speakers. Evans bases this idea on what he calls "Russell's Principle": the claim that "a subject cannot make a judgement about something unless he knows which object his judgement is about" (Evans 1982, 90). This claim, in turn, is understood as the requirement that the subject have "*discriminating knowledge*: the subject must have a capacity to distinguish the object of his judgement from all other things" (Evans 1982, 90). So here identification of an object means discriminating or distinguishing it from all other things. One can distinguish a thing from all others by finding some individuating fact about it, something that is only true of it and of no other thing. This means ascribing some predicate to it, not identifying it with some other thing.

However, there is an analogous problem to the one pointed out above. It is claimed that understanding reference to an object O requires knowing that O is P, where "is P" is a predicate that uniquely applies to O and to no other thing. But knowing that O is P already seems to require understanding the reference of "O". How can we understand what "O" means in "O is P", if only the predicate-ascription is what makes the reference of "O" intelligible?

Evans's theory is not vulnerable to this threat of incoherence because in the central cases he describes the capacity to distinguish an object from all others as a *practical capacity* to locate the object in space and time, not as some kind of propositional knowledge. For instance, I am able and disposed to think, "I am in the Institute. The computer is in front of me. So the computer is in the Institute." My understanding of the reference of "the computer" does not consist in knowledge that my computer is such-and-such. Rather, according to Evans, it consists in being disposed to think in the way just described.

How does the notion of "picking an object out" relate to the notions of "identification" and "discrimination"? Strawson equates picking out with discriminating (cf. Strawson 1959, 18). Furthermore, he seems to regard both as instances of identification (cf. Strawson 1959, 19). However, if picking an object out is an instance of identification, this must be identification in the broad sense. For picking an object out does not involve affirming that two objects are one and the same. It seems to me equally dubious to regard picking out an object as a way of discriminating it. If I put my hand into a dark box full of qualitatively identical screws and take one out, then I pick it out, but I do not distinguish it from all others. It is true that the picked screw is distinct from all others in that it is the picked one. But this is a fact that the picker does not have to be aware of in order to do the picking. If the picker notices, "This screw is the one I have picked" then he distinguishes it from all other screws. But it seems possible to do the picking without having this knowledge.

Of course, Strawson does not talk of a mechanical picking out where he uses this term. He has in mind a picking out "by sight or hearing or touch" (Strawson 1959, 18). Some might say that picking an object out by sight, for example, does involve noticing something about the object that distinguishes it from all others. In the Strawsonian tradition the claim would be that sensibly picking an object out (i.e. by sight, hearing, touch or some other sense) involves becoming aware of its location in egocentric space. I see the bird *above me*. Its location in egocentric space, in turn, is supposed to be what distinguishes the object from all others. However, it is possible to doubt these assertions. For example John Campbell denies that, in the most basic case, I see the bird above *me*. Rather, he suggests, I just see it "above" or "to the left" or "in front" etc. (cf. Campbell 1994, 119). If this idea is correct, then it is not so clear that picking an object out with our senses involves recognising something about it that distinguishes it from all others. The object can be distinguished by the fact that it is the picked one, the one that my attention focuses on. But this is not necessarily a fact that I am aware of just because I am the one who is picking the object out. It follows that picking an object out with the help of the senses has to be distinguished from discriminating an object. If picking out, in turn, should be a sufficient base for understanding reference, as Strawson suggests, then Russell's Principle, as interpreted by Evans, would be undermined.

Literature

Campbell, John 1994 *Past, Space, and Self*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.

Evans, Gareth 1982 *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford: Clarendon.

Strawson, Peter F. 1959 *Individuals*, London: Routledge.