

## Strawson on Philosophy – Three Episodes

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### Abstract:

Strawson repeatedly wrote about the nature of philosophy. This article responds to three of his discussions. First, in his review of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1954) Strawson expressed dissatisfaction with Wittgenstein's philosophy of philosophy. It is argued that Strawson's response very successfully brings out the arbitrariness of the conception. Second, in his contribution to *The Revolution in Philosophy* (1956) he characterises the task of analysis as he sees it. It is argued that, despite the care of his treatment, many aspects of analysis remain unexplained. Finally, in *Individuals* (1959), he proposes the descriptive/revisionary distinction within philosophy. It is argued that this brilliant and influential distinction is less helpful than normally thought. What each episode shares, however, are many insights and the power to stimulate thought.

One of the outstanding aspects of Strawson's writings is their breadth, the range of topics they cover. Another is, surely, the quality of their contributions to this range of topics. One topic to which he turned a number of times is the nature of philosophy itself. Having recently had to read some of Strawson's early writings on this topic, I want to set out some reflections that reading them has caused in me. My own story will end in 1959, with a consideration of the conception of metaphysics that Strawson adumbrates in the introduction to *Individuals*. But before getting to that I want to consider his earlier responses to Wittgenstein, and then his responses, in a sense, to Austin's ideas about philosophy (although this might be a misleading way of describing my middle topic). I think, or at least hope, that scrutinising these parts of Strawson's writings will be of interest to anyone interested in Strawson's own philosophical development, but I also hope that it might be of interest because the philosophical questions engaged with are of interest themselves.

Strawson belonged to a generation of British academics whose careers were interrupted by military service in the Second World War. The word 'interrupted', of course, does not properly convey what this period and military service meant for them or their lives. (Other famous philosophers in this category are Austin, Ayer, Hampshire, and Hare.) Strawson himself took (PPE) finals in 1940, gaining the ever since infamous second, and was then called up for military service. He began his Oxford career seven years later, becoming a Fellow at University College in 1948. The reason

for making these brief biographical remarks is that they explain why Strawson began his philosophical life at a place and time when what we might call *meta-philosophical* issues were to the fore. For those who were beginning their lives as philosophers during this period in the UK one crucial debate with which they were more or less bound to be involved was, as one might put it - what is philosophy? (What is the role or the task of philosophy?) The reason, or part of the reason, for the centrality of this debate was, of course, that two apparently original conceptions of the subject had emerged, or were in the process of emerging at the time. The author of one such conception was Wittgenstein, and the author of the other was Austin. These two conceptions had some degree of overlap at a certain level, agreeing that good philosophy must concern itself with ordinary language to make progress, and so the title 'Ordinary Language Philosophy' emerged, as a name, probably intended to be somewhat deprecatory, that covered both approaches. It is an important question, of course, to what extent the two conceptions were really alike. Now, Strawson was situated in the home of one of these conceptions, and was, indeed, involved in Austin's Saturday morning meetings where the idea was that the group would practice what Austin preached. But the Wittgensteinian conception was also well known. It was, presented in his *Philosophical Investigations*, published in 1951, which Strawson reviewed in *Mind* (albeit three years later). It was, surely, a measure of his own status in Oxford by then that Ryle assigned this task to him.

There are, I want to suggest, three other ways in which the fact that period was the aftermath of the Second World War had an influence in making meta-philosophy especially salient. First, one consequence of the strong sense of the awfulness of the war and of the immediately preceding pre-war period was that there was a determination to start afresh, to introduce a new era. The political result of this feeling was the election of the Labour Government. But we can see the same feeling at work in philosophy. It was natural to want to do philosophy better, and so new conceptions were attractive and worth exploring. Second, the war had effectively stopped academic life; the people returning were not simply slotting into an ongoing practice; they had, almost, to re-invent the activity. Third, the people re-gathering in Oxford were mature and had, as one might say, 'seen life', and so they needed a sense that what they were doing was important and was leading somewhere. We should not, then, find the preoccupation with meta-philosophy surprising.<sup>1</sup>

My first topic is Strawson's thoughts about the non-Oxonian conception.

### **Strawson on Wittgenstein**

I want to begin with Strawson's attitude to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. Strawson's attitude to Wittgenstein himself is that he is the foremost philosopher of his age. He repeatedly discusses Wittgenstein's views about, for example, perception and knowledge. As to the fascination that Wittgenstein exerted on Strawson, there is a revealing quotation in an interview he once gave. He said; 'When, in the early 1950's, I first saw a typescript of Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* I felt that I was, for the first time, seeing thought naked, as it were'(Quoted in Hacker 1996:162). This conveys something that is very hard for those of us who read Wittgenstein as undergraduates to have any conception of, namely the experience of encountering Wittgenstein as an original force in a philosophical life underway. But my concern here is with his attitude to Wittgenstein's philosophy of philosophy itself. What, roughly, is that conception?

<sup>1</sup> My interpretation of the forces at work in this period owes much to a conversation with Ann Strawson.

Wittgenstein famously conveys it more or less explicitly in a series of metaphorical remarks in the *Investigations*. His official conception appears to be that the task of good philosophy is fundamentally negative. Its aim is primarily to establish claims of the form Not [P], or, perhaps, we should not think that P. Thus, when he says that his aim in philosophy is 'to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' we should, surely, think of being trapped in the fly-bottle as a metaphor for being in the grip of an intellectual illusion to the effect that P, and escaping is coming to realise that Not [P], or coming not to think that P. The significance of his famous remark that 'the philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness' is that the task of philosophy properly conceived is to clear up and cure philosophical errors. This remark also conveys the idea that the error is to be superseded, not by a better theory, but by a return to health and normality, in which state the impulse to ask philosophical questions will have subsided. Good philosophy gets thinkers out of distorted (or pathological) cognitive states.<sup>2</sup> This last feature is also conveyed by his remark that philosophy leaves everything as it is.<sup>3</sup> The significance of this is that good philosophy does not add theories or positive claims to our conception of the world – its role is to leave us thinking what we thought before the onset of bad philosophising. Presumably, other disciplines – say science, or history, or geography – do not leave everything as it is. Finally, the source of the temptation to engage in bad philosophy is the influence of language. 'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.' (Wittgenstein 1951:sec 109). Good philosophy works by eliminating these bad effects, by somehow re-engaging us with the employment of language without its distorting effect. Now, it is not only Wittgenstein's official conception of philosophy that assigns it a negative role, it is also true to say, I think, that when he does philosophy his approach is basically negative. Thus, what he does is to isolate an attitude about, say, understanding, or rule following, or the privacy of experience, or action, or seeing as, and his discussion is dedicated to persuading us that it is wrong. His complex dialogues are not intelligible unless we know what the target is, and can relate their structure to a debate intended to refute that target. Wittgenstein assigns to philosophy a negative role, and the fundamental goals of his philosophical discussion are negative.<sup>4</sup>

Now, about Wittgenstein's recommended conception of philosophy and his practice many questions suggest themselves. Strawson's response to it is, I believe, beautifully clear-headed. In his review of *Philosophical Investigations* he says

@Weerskante-I = Yet there are at least two very different directions in which it may seem unduly restrictive. First, there is the idea that the *sole* purpose of the distinctions we draw attention to, ..., is to dispel particular metaphysical confusions; and, associated with this, an extreme aversion from a systematic exhibition of the logic of particular regions of language. Now, even if we *begin* with a therapeutic purpose, our interest might not exhaust itself when that purpose is achieved; .... The desire to present the

2 There is an element in the illness metaphor which can be queried even if we allow that Wittgenstein is correct about philosophy being negative. To compare engagement in ordinary error producing philosophy to having an illness requires that such engagement is, in some way, bad or harmful for us. There is, however, no obvious reason to suppose that it is bad for us to engage in it, even if it generates errors in our beliefs. Why is it so bad to do that? Maybe it is a perfectly harmless, non-pathological way to spend our time. Maybe it is fun, if nothing else.

3 *Investigations* sec. 124.

4 I say more about the Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy as I see it in 'Wittgenstein on Sense-data and Private Experience' in *The Oxford Handbook on Wittgenstein*, (ed) M. McGinn (Oxford, OUP) forthcoming.

facts systematically here becomes important in proportion as therapeutic aims become secondary. (Strawson 2008:157–158)

In this quotation, Strawson, it seems to me, addresses two significant questions to the Wittgensteinian conception. First, even if the negative goal of weakening the grip of metaphysical error is a legitimate and bona fide purpose in philosophy, and it is effective to do it in Wittgenstein's way, why should we think that it is the sole purpose or value or role of philosophy? Now, there is no obvious answer to that question forthcoming from Wittgenstein. Second, if there are general truths discernible by philosophy when it engages with language, why is discerning these truths not a legitimate task in its own right? Again, there is no obvious answer to this question. Strawson's questions make clear, I think, that we should distinguish between the tenor of Wittgenstein's preferred direction and way of doing philosophy, which is certainly negative, and which may be admirable and effective, and Wittgenstein's *normative conception of philosophy*, which is that this sort of philosophy is the only one that is legitimate. But why *must* its purpose be negative, and why can it not achieve something positive?

It has to be agreed that Strawson's questions do not strictly answer themselves. But their value is that, once formulated, one sees no obvious way to answer them. In fact, once one begins to reflect, prompted by Strawson's questions, on what would be needed to answer them, three major general points suggest themselves. We can start with the observation that if Wittgenstein's negative conception of philosophy could be defended it would require some ground for thinking either that there are no positive truths about (say) language to discern or that, if there are, then philosophy cannot discern them. But first, Wittgenstein himself is in no position to claim any such thing. Thus, Wittgenstein frequently does make positive proposals as part of his philosophical dialogues. For example in sec. 244, Wittgenstein proposes a positive account of how words refer to sensations. He does not affirm that it is true, but certainly invites consideration that it might be. If his method were totally negative, such a proposal would have no role. Again, Wittgenstein suggests that bad philosophy is produced by the 'bewitchment of intelligence by language'. This is a positive explanatory proposal. In fact, since Wittgenstein *argues* people out of the bad convictions (this is what the illness metaphor does not bring out) he has to advance some positive claims (to figure in the persuasive arguments) and there really is no chance that such claims can all be, as one might say, a-theoretical. It seems to follow that, within Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole, even if the overarching ideas or goals are negative, there must be a *non-negative level*. Further, in his description of his practice, he does sometimes include positive remarks. Thus, in sec. 414, Wittgenstein says 'What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes.' This seems to mean that Wittgenstein conceives of himself as saying something positive at some level, albeit of such an untheoretical kind, that no one has ever doubted it (although they may not have realised it either).<sup>5</sup> The two problems with this sentence are (a) which of his own remarks Wittgenstein is thinking of as being about 'the natural history of human beings', and (b) are there propositions that Wittgenstein is proposing that no one has

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein reveals a remarkably sanguine attitude to suppose that there are things no one has ever doubted! I suspect that some degree of strain within his conception is visible in this characterisation of what he is proposing.

ever doubted? So, Wittgenstein himself can hardly consistently provide a defence of his own conception of philosophy when faced by Strawson's questions.

There is however a second problem. If Wittgenstein were to attempt to provide an argument then it presumably would be an argument recognisable as philosophical. But this idea generates a paradox. The argument would have to be an argument in philosophy representing itself as revealing something unobvious and substantive – namely, that philosophical arguments cannot reveal anything unobvious and substantive. Defending the conception would seem to be self-refuting.

Leaving this point aside, there is one last problem that I want to bring out. If we are envisaging how such a case might be made – ignoring any sense of how paradoxical it would be – it would seem that it must rest on or start from a conception of philosophical method, and show that those methods cannot achieve any substantive insights. Let us call the content of that conception M. So the conclusion must be that M cannot discern positive truths. But this forces us to ask; what if anything is distinctive about M? What is included in M? And here it seems to me that there are two ways to view it. The first possibility is that M is itself a distinctive method, unique to philosophy. The second conception is that philosophical method is not unique to philosophy, but it employs methods shared by other disciplines. Now, I want to suggest that a dilemma arises. The dilemma is that if the first option is correct then there might be something about its distinctive method that means it is not actually equipped to locate interesting truths. But then the problem is that it is highly implausible to suppose that it does have a distinctive method at all. In philosophy, the nature of the problems dictates that we cannot employ certain methods – say, physical experiments – but we then simply employ any cognitive strategies that are left over. It appears therefore that there is nothing distinctive. The other side of the dilemma then opens up. If philosophy merely employs the cognitive strategies that are left, given the nature of the problems, then these strategies, also employed outside philosophy, can hardly be ones about which there is any general case for thinking they cannot enable us to latch on to truths.

This is a hastily sketched dilemma, with, no doubt, some gaps and unclarities in it, and so more needs to be said. The general point is that if one does not subscribe to the idea of philosophy as a *sui generis* intellectual activity, then it is difficult to believe that it can have special defective properties. To defend this argument more fully I would need to say more in support of the two principles on which it rests. The first, which I call the Principle of the Non-Specialness of Philosophy, holds that the methods of philosophy are not special to philosophy. The second general claim is that if the former principle is sound then there are no grounds for thinking that the methods employed cannot yield information.

This section has been more about Wittgenstein than about Strawson, but for me, at least, the ideas sketched in it spring from an engagement with Strawson's own beautifully clear remarks.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Revolution in Philosophy**

Now I want now to move the story on to 1956, and Strawson's contribution to the volume entitled *The Revolution in Philosophy*, which is one of the volumes containing philosophy talks presented on the old Third programme during the 1950's, to which, primarily, Oxford philosophers contributed. Strawson's contribution comes near the

<sup>6</sup> I have not considered everything that Strawson says about Wittgenstein's conception in the review – and so have left other remarks of considerable interest aside.

end of the book, and is called 'Construction and Analysis'. It is clearly connected to the final paper in the volume by Geoffrey Warnock, entitled 'Analysis and Imagination'. I therefore want to consider them together to some extent. That they share the word 'analysis' in their titles indicates, I believe, that the shared assumption is that analysis (in some sense) is the central philosophical task. My discussion of these papers here will be highly selective.

I have described the situation in philosophy in the early 1950s as one in which meta-philosophical debates were central, in that people were encountering two apparently novel conceptions of philosophy and had to come to terms with them. Now, I have commented on Strawson's response to Wittgenstein, but what of his response to Austin? Here, it seems that things are less clear. Strawson had a crucial role in doing two things related to the Austinian approach. First, he debated with Austin initially about truth, and then, after Austin's death and the publication of *How to Do things with Words*, wrote about Austin's views on speech acts. In the debates about truth, it is normally thought that Strawson dislodged Austin from the status he was accorded in Oxford. Second, in *Individuals* he made an influential case for an engagement with highly general philosophical questions, of a sort that Austin's conception of philosophy seems opposed to. Strawson therefore played a crucial role in pushing the *practice* of philosophy in a non-Austinian direction. But what intellectual assessment of the Austinian conception of philosophy does Strawson offer? Well, in the paper I want to consider Strawson mentions Austin, and so that offers us a clue as to his attitude.

Strawson's picture seems to be this. In the early twentieth century analysis played a crucial role as the goal of philosophy. But in the hands of early Wittgenstein, Moore, and the positivists, various assumptions, clear or unclear, were made about analysis. These have now been abandoned, but two conceptions of analysis remain. One is an American conception associated with Quine, and the other is an English conception associated with Austin and Ryle. Strawson declares that he is partisan and favours the English approach. So one might summarise the attitude that Strawson endorses as follows: the task of philosophy is analysis, purged of earlier misconceptions. In so far, therefore, as there has been a revolution in philosophy this is the post-revolutionary promised land. Moreover, one person who has heralded us into the promised land is Austin.

Now, confronted by the talk of analysis (often coupled to the word 'conceptual' during this period but not, for some reason, in these articles) it seems to me that there are three rough levels of questions that one is tempted to ask. One would hope that anyone recommending analysis as a philosophical activity would indicate their answers to these questions. The first is - what is the actual method of analysis? What is going on when one does analysis? Aspects of this are - what sort of data do analysts appeal to? What kind of inference from the data gets them to their conclusion? What conclusions do they draw? The second level of question is - what is the significance of this process? How should we think of the output? What significance does it have? The third level is - what value do these conclusions have for us (as, one might say, philosophers)? To what extent does Strawson (along with Warnock) illuminate these problems?

Reading these articles with such issues in mind, it is striking how little is said in them about the first two levels. Strawson, it seems to me, makes two negative points which relate to aspects of the method. They are negative in that they claim that two constraints should not be applied to conceptual analysis. The first point is that there is

no commitment to restricting the concepts employed in an analysis to any particular range, for example, concepts of experience. The second is that analysis need not aim at providing complete paraphrases for the sentence being analysed into sentences which do not employ the relevant concept. As to how analysis proceeds, Strawson says this: 'Of course, not all features of the use of these expressions will be relevant to the philosopher's task. It is his special skill to discern *which* are relevant, and *how* they are relevant' (Strawson 1956:104). But we are given no insight at all into that special skill, so the first-level characterisation remains rather thin. There is also the further point shared with Warnock that analysis has to do with language, and so is in some sense an analysis of *language*. This is really part of what they offer in answer to the second-level question; the conclusions delivered by this method yields an *analysis of language*. That not very much is offered in relation to the first two levels is not a criticism of Strawson's article because his purpose (and Warnock's) plainly is primarily to say something about the *value* and *role* of analysis, it being assumed, presumably, that the person addressed knows what analysis is but has doubts about its value. That was, as it were, the dialectical situation they thought they found themselves in. As to the value of analysis, it is described as being partly therapeutic, to correct and explain philosophical mistakes or conceptual distortions, and partly valuable for its own sake. They also wanted to add to the role of simple conceptual analysis the important, but it has to be said, somewhat obscure idea that one fundamental philosophical task is to explain *why* we have the concepts we have. Anticipating a theme in *Individuals*, Strawson says, 'For to fully understand our conceptual equipment it is not enough to know ... how it works. We want to know also *why* it works as it does.' (Strawson 1956:107)

It is worth asking, I think, how satisfactory is the account of the practice, value and purpose of analysis, and of the supplementary task of explaining *why* we have the concepts we do. I shall make five brief remarks in response (by no means saying all that could or should be said).

(1) Part of the ground offered for interest in conceptual analysis was that certain philosophical claims arise from what was called *conceptual distortion*.<sup>7</sup> One reason why conceptual analysis was worthwhile was that it could remove such distinctive distortions. However, the notion of conceptual distortion as a *type of mistake* (and its use as an *explanatory* notion) is, I want to suggest, highly problematic. If I think that there are five people in a room that in fact contains six, that is simply a mistake, and it can arise in many ways. If I think, for example, that there can be perception without the perceived object causing an experience that may be a mistake, and *it* can arise in many ways. To label it a conceptual distortion (as opposed to another type of mistake) seems to put it in no category other than that of a mistake that conceptual analysis, whatever it is, can correct. Talk of conceptual distortion as a type of mistake makes some sense in a picture of the mind like Locke's, where concepts are identified with items we can sometimes only dimly (or distortedly) perceive, but outside that framework, talk of distorted concepts has no evident application.

(2) With the benefit of hindsight, it can also be seen that Strawson and Warnock, but especially the latter, failed to make the correct separation between two quite different approaches to philosophy. This comes out in their talk of the value of conceptual anal-

<sup>7</sup> Here is how Strawson (1956:106) speaks of conceptual distortion. 'In this situation, some conceptual distortion has taken place: .... To correct the distortion, we must clearly expose the full logical workings of the distorted concept, and perhaps others too: and locate if we can the source of the distorting pressure.'

ysis as therapeutic.<sup>8</sup> In Wittgenstein's official later conception of philosophy the description of it is as therapy is to be taken literally. According to Wittgenstein, philosophical mistakes are not terminated by theorising or by adding to our knowledge, but rather by terminating the impulse to engage in theorising. This is removed by a course of reminders and basically negative arguments that remove it, in the way in which aspirin removes a headache or that the activity of shopping (retail therapy) can get rid of depression, and certainly not by persuading you of some theory or proposition. In stark contrast, practitioners of conceptual analysis advance positive theoretical claims, about, for example, what knowledge or perception require or consist in. It is quite different, and to describe it as therapy has as much sense as describing someone who is recalculating a sum in which he has made a mistake as engaged in numerical therapy. It seems not to have been clear in the late 1950s just how opposed these approaches are. What happened, I suggest, is that the metaphor of therapy became detached from the Wittgensteinian context in which it made sense, and was applied more generally and quite indiscriminately.

(3) If, in the way Strawson and Warnock wrote, there is, as I have just argued, evidence of a confusion between Wittgensteinian therapy and conceptual analysis there is surely a second confusion present in their account in the way they yoked together, on the one hand, conceptual analysis, and on the other, a conception of philosophy as devoted to the analysis 'of the complexities of actual usage' (Strawson 105), or as involving 'systematic research into the functioning of language' (Warnock 116), a way of speaking associated with Austin. I shall make only two very simple points. First, the former activity issues in claims of the form

(A) Nec (if G then Q &... & R),

which are not about language, and certainly not about usage. Whereas research into usage presumably issues in claims of the form

(E) Expression 'E' is used thus and so.

As well as contrasting in topics, it is possible to see how a claim of form (A) can contribute to the solution of a philosophical problem, whereas it is simply obscure how a claim of type (E) can do the same. The slogans, deriving from or associated with, Austin recommending attention to linguistic usage or speech, seem to point in quite a different direction from those indicated by conceptual analysis, indeed a direction the value of which in philosophy has always been obscure. I shall say a little more that is relevant to this later.

(4) Strawson, and, following him Warnock, suggest that, as well as analysing concepts, philosophers should investigate *why* we have the concepts we have. This investigation will show 'how the nature of our thinking is rooted in the natures of the world and in our own nature' (Strawson 1956:107).

On this suggestion, I have three comments. (a) Even if this question is a good one, and we can see how, as philosophers, to set about answering it, it is not obvious at all why it is *the* supplementary task to be emphasised. The question *how* we acquire our concepts seems equally valuable and salient. (b) It is, actually, very difficult to see

<sup>8</sup> Warnock (1956:112) speaks thus. 'First, then, therapeutic analysis. This name itself, with its clinical metaphor, vividly expresses a now widely held view of the nature of some philosophical problems. .... its wide diffusion today is due pre-eminently to the later work of Wittgenstein.'

how philosophers can answer the recommended question. Strawson suggests (a suggestion he follows in *Individuals*) that we specify modes of experience distinct from those we in fact have and consider whether the concept could be formed in those circumstances. But how are we to decide this? We have no general understanding of the constraints experience place on concept formation. Further, such an approach merely licences us to say that we form the concept because our experiences are not of a certain impoverished sort. This may be true, but is about as illuminating as saying that a certain person is 6 feet tall because he has not been crushed. (c) It does not seem to be a game that has in fact caught on, perhaps regrettably, but understandably.

(5) I have been alleging that Strawson and Warnock, in their defence of the value of conceptual analysis, mixed up a number of things, but what I think was really their biggest misconception I have not yet noted. It was, I believe, a mistake to think that there was anything revolutionary or novel or mysterious about conceptual analysis. This should be clear from one line of defence that they offered. In response to the outraged traditionalist who was supposed to say that what they were recommending was simply not philosophy, they often replied by reminding him or her that it has always been part of the philosophers' task to offer analyses, if not to describe what they were doing in that way. For example, Plato tried to define knowledge, Hume tried to define causation, Berkeley supposed himself to be defining existence, and so on. With that reminder the traditionalist was supposed to become calm and happy. But although this is perfectly reasonable, it can hardly be combined with the idea of conceptual analysis as revolutionary, or even new. Why did there seem to be something revolutionary or novel here? The main elements in the explanation have really been given already. In the 1950s, there were two revolutionary approaches to philosophy; one deriving from Wittgenstein, and the other from Austin. Conceptual analysis seemed revolutionary and in need of some special defence because it was attached, quite wrongly, to these other ideas. Once the separation is made, it hardly looks novel at all.

So the 1950s defence of conceptual analysis neglected many questions, those which I have described as belonging to the first two levels, or to some extent mistakenly answered them, and defended its value by mixing it up with other approaches.

### **Individuals – Revisionary and Descriptive Metaphysics**

The famous introduction to *Individuals* is about philosophy, and in particular about metaphysics. It is the third episode that I wish to explore. The crucial distinction that Strawson propounds is that between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics. Strawson describes *Individuals* as 'an essay in descriptive metaphysics' (Strawson 1959:11). The topic of metaphysics is, roughly, the *general* structure of our conceptual scheme, but one sort of metaphysician, the describer, aims to describe that general structure, whereas the revisionary metaphysician aims to change and improve that structure. Strawson places, with qualifications, Descartes, Leibniz and Berkeley in the revisionary camp, and Aristotle, and Kant in the descriptive. Strawson's thesis is that there are central and general aspects of our conceptual scheme that do not change, a 'massive central core of human thinking which has no history' (Strawson 1959:10). Exercises in descriptive metaphysics aim to describe (parts of) that abiding structure.<sup>9</sup> Around the central core, at the more or less specialist peripheries, there are, of course, developments and changes. About descriptive metaphysics, Strawson claims, or ap-

<sup>9</sup> Of course, if there is constant and deep conceptual change, the descriptive metaphysician would simply need to *describe* this.

pears to claim, that it has priority over revisionary metaphysics, and also that the normal method of philosophical analysis, which is the ‘close examination of the use of words,’ is not the best method here, because the basic structure does not ‘readily display itself on the surface’.<sup>10</sup> Strawson is, therefore, hinting at a different and novel method for pursuing descriptive metaphysics, without saying what it is in the introduction. No doubt, he has in mind, for one thing, the explorations exemplified in Chapter 2 of *Individuals*, of the conceptual consequences of imagined forms of experiences radically different to our own.

This revisionary/descriptive contrast is a resonant distinction that has entered into the self-classificatory terminology of philosophy. It surely deserves some scrutiny. Before I begin analysing it, two things need to be conveyed. The first is that, as originally written, *Individuals* lacked the introduction, with its exposition of the distinction. Strawson was persuaded, at the last moment, to write an introduction to make the purpose of the book more accessible to the reader.<sup>11</sup> It is, therefore, reasonable to conjecture that the distinction was one to which Strawson was not deeply committed. Second, it is not a contrast that he returned to or reaffirmed in later writings.<sup>12</sup> Again, this implies that the distinction was not central to his views.

I shall, however, raise a few questions about it. (1) The first is a clarificatory observation. We might ask what the descriptive metaphysician describes. Strawson says that ‘there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history ...; there are categories and concepts which in their most fundamental character, change not at all.’ (Strawson 1959:10) The contrast that I have in mind in raising my first question is that between abiding *concepts* (or categories), and abiding *thoughts* (or types of thoughts). There is a difference, because a single set of concepts can be involved in quite different ways of thinking. Thus, the subject who thinks that there are no ghosts, and the person who thinks that there are (not no) ghosts, share the same concepts but differ in the thoughts they have with them. What abiding structure interests Strawson? I think that it is clear that Strawson is not simply concerned with the abiding concepts but also with, as he puts it, our ‘thinking’. (2) An infelicity in Strawson’s description of himself as a descriptive metaphysician is that it cannot be said that *he* is engaged in a *merely* descriptive exercise. There are in his discussion claims advanced on the basis of arguments about what must be so, what could not be, explanations of our thinking, and defences of it against sceptical objections. It is, therefore, quite wrong to think of his strategy as *purely* descriptive. (3) One problem with the classification is that the two categories (ignoring for the moment precisely what they amount to) are obviously not exhaustive. For example, a metaphysician who describes our basic thoughts and tries to prove they are correct is not simply a descriptive metaphysician, nor is he a revisionary one. Again, someone who gives a profound criticism of a suggested novel system of thought is not in Strawson’s sense revisionary, but need not be descriptive either. It would seem then that if we want a comprehensive classification of metaphysics we must select one of Strawson’s categories as basic, and then define the second as metaphysics which is not of that basic kind. Which should we select? It seems to me that the more useful basic category is that of the revisionary, and the second category

<sup>10</sup> Strawson 1959:10. Strawson’s remark about method marks one respect in which he is aiming to distinguish between the type of philosophising he is doing in *Individuals* and the type that had previously gone on (in Oxford).

<sup>11</sup> I owe this information to both Bill Child and Quassim Cassam.

<sup>12</sup> Quassim Cassam pointed this out to me.

should then be the non-revisionary, to which we might, if we wish, assign the term 'descriptive'. The reason is that if we take as basic the descriptive, meaning 'aiming solely at the description of our basic categories' it is dubious that any serious thinker is descriptive in this sense, and, further, the category of the rest would be so heterogeneous as to be unhelpful. We should, then, treat the revisionary category as basic, and in an effort to preserve Strawson's terminology mean non-revisionary by 'descriptive'. Strawson, on this understanding, does turn out to be a descriptive metaphysician.

(4) If we do follow this recommendation then one amusing consequence is that the application of 'revisionary' presupposes a conception of what our prior way of thinking is. Its application must be posterior to fixing that, and the task of fixing that might be called 'descriptive metaphysics' in a narrow sense. Part of what Strawson was doing would then count as descriptive metaphysics in the narrow sense. (5) What, however, does 'revisionary' mean? I think that for Strawson it starts from this; there are certain fundamental and abiding ways of thinking, which we can regard as the conjunction of propositions P1 ... PN. To be revisionary a system must claim that some Pi in that group is incorrect. A system would not then count as revisionary if it accepted P1 & ... & PN but wanted to add to our basic ways of thinking a further proposition Q. This, indeed, may be what some idealists, including Kant, think of themselves as advocating. We have here as well a further reason for saying that Strawson's original two categories are not exhaustive. The metaphysician wanting to add Q is neither revisionary, nor, in the original sense, descriptive. They count as constructive but non-revisionary metaphysicians. (6) Further complications about the motion of revisionary metaphysics can be illustrated by Strawson's contrasting treatment of Berkeley and Kant. First, it is clear that we need to distinguish between a philosopher's own view as whether he or she is revisionary and whether in fact they are revisionary. It may be, say, that Berkeley thought he was not going against common sense, whereas, in fact, he was so doing. It is therefore neither necessary nor sufficient for being revisionary that a thinker declares him- or herself to be revisionary. Second, there are probably no more reasons to classify Berkeley as revisionary than there are to classify Kant that way. Both probably conceived of themselves as constructive but non-revisionary metaphysicians, adding idealism (of different sorts) to our ordinary beliefs. But they were both probably wrong in thinking that their respective idealisms can be added to common sense. (7) In talking of his approach as descriptive metaphysics, Strawson intends to convey that his purpose is to describe, and perhaps explain, some aspects of how we do *think and speak*. In his case it is describing how we refer to, and understand reference to, objects. This same agenda can be seen in subsequent writings by, for example, Evans, Wiggins and Campbell. They therefore count as descriptive metaphysicians in Strawson's sense, and belong to a tradition started by Strawson.

My conclusion about the descriptive/revisionary contrast is that, despite its brilliance and attraction, it is in need of fairly serious repairs (which could of course take various forms).

### Conclusion

It is quite possible for human being to spend their time doing things of which they have very little understanding. They can, without realising it, repeat formulas and procedures that make little sense. It is clearly of considerable importance to ensure that philosophy and philosophers do not fall into such a trap. Serious meta-philosophy is

therefore an essential part of philosophy. Strawson, an intensely self-conscious person, gives us many thoughts about the nature of philosophy, three of which I have engaged with here. In each case, Strawson's proposals, if not the last word, are brilliant, clear, stimulating, and above all rewarding to engage with.<sup>13</sup>

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