

# Strawson's Concept of Person – A Critical Discussion

Francis Alakkalkunnel / Christian Kanzian, Innsbruck

## 1. Preliminaries

To his main work, *Individuals* (Strawson 1959) P.F. Strawson gave the subtitle: *An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. "Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world" (Strawson 1959, 9). It is to be contrasted with 'revisionary metaphysics', which "is concerned to produce a better structure" (Strawson 1959, 9). The general features of our conceptual structure lie submerged under the surface of language and therefore descriptive metaphysics has to go beyond the examination of the actual use of words and expose this general structure. There are categories and concepts, which in their most fundamental character, do not change at all. They are not technical concepts of special sciences, but commonplaces of the least refined thinking. It is with these concepts and categories, their interconnections and the structure they form, that the descriptive metaphysics is primarily concerned.

In Strawson's metaphysical world, there are two categories of entities, viz., particulars and universals. Among the particulars, the material objects are basic particulars, in the sense that it is ultimately by making an identifying reference to particulars of these kinds, that we are able, in general, to individuate and identify items of other kinds, such as events. To identify any entity means to locate it in space-time; and material objects are the only entities, which constitute space-time-system. A particular is said to be identified, when the speaker makes an identifying reference to it and the hearer identifies it on the strength of the speaker's reference.

Persons are those basic particulars to which we ascribe consciousness. Thus, in Strawson's ontology of particulars, both the material bodies and persons share equal status. Persons constitute a fundamental and irreducible kind of being.

Persons are credited with *physical characteristics*, designating location, attitude, relatively enduring characteristics like height, colouring, shape and weight on the one hand and various *states of consciousness* like thinking, remembering, seeing, deciding, feeling emotions etc- on the other. How these two sorts of attributes are related to each other and why they are attributed to the very same thing, are the two questions Strawson discusses in the third chapter of the *Individuals*.

Two possible attempts to meet these problems, according to Strawson, are "Cartesianism" and what he calls "No-Ownership doctrine" of the self. Strawson examines and rejects both of them and proposes to acknowledge the concept of person as primitive.

## 2. Cartesianism and the "no-ownership doctrine"

According to Cartesianism, when we speak of a person we are really referring to one or both of two distinct substances of different types, each of which has its own appropriate types of states and properties. States of consciousness belong to one of these substances and not

to the other. Strawson rejects this theory because, for him, "The concept of the pure individual consciousness – the pure ego – is a concept that cannot exist; or at least, cannot exist as a primary concept in terms of which the concept of a person can be explained or analysed. It can exist only, if at all, as a secondary, non-primitive concept, which itself is to be explained, analysed in terms of a person". (Strawson 1959, p.102)

He argues as follows: it is a necessary condition for ascribing any states of consciousness, experiences etc- to oneself, that one should also ascribe them to others. Ascribing to others is not possible if we accept the Cartesian ego as the subject of all experiences or states of consciousness. For, to be the subject of a predication, something must be identified. Identification as we saw presupposes location in space-time. Cartesian Egos can't be located in space-time; only bodies can be located spatio-temporally. So predicating a state of consciousness to an Ego, presupposes that the state must be predicated to a subject, which is a material body.

In our day-to-day speech we use expressions like 'I am in pain', 'I had a severe pain', 'My pain...' etc-. These expressions somehow suggest that I am the owner of this particular experience of having pain. According to the no-ownership theorist, experiences can be said to have an owner only in the sense of their causal dependence upon the state of some particular body. This causal dependence is sufficient to ascribe one's experiences to some particular, individual thing. But this causal dependence is not a contingent or logically transferable matter. We can own something only if its ownership is logically transferable. Thus, experiences are not owned by anything except in the dubious sense of being causally dependent on the state of a particular body.

This theory, according to Strawson, is incoherent. The theorist denies the existence of the sense of possession but he is forced to make use of it when he tries to deny its existence. Strawson argues that any attempt to eliminate the 'my' (or any possessive expression) in f.i. "my experience" or "my headache" etc. would yield something that is not a contingent fact at all. It is simply wrong to state that all experiences are causally dependent on the state of a single body. But the theorist cannot consistently argue that 'all experiences of person P means the same thing as all experiences of a certain body B', for then the proposition would not be contingent, as his theory requires, but analytic. With "my experience" he means a certain class of experiences and this class of experiences are the experiences of a person. It is the sense of this 'my' and 'of' that he requires to deny. He cannot successfully deny that, because being 'my experience' is – for the experience in question - no contingent matter but necessary. That my headache is *my* headache is – for the headache – no contingent matter.

## 3. The concept of person as primitive

To get out of these difficulties, Strawson's suggests acknowledging the concept of person as primitive i.e. as a concept that cannot be analysed further in a certain way or another. That means: "the concept of a

person is the concept of a type of entity, such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation & co. are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type" (Strawson 101, 102). In other words, the states of consciousness cannot be ascribed at all, unless they are ascribed to persons (in Strawson's sense). It is to this concept of person, not to the pure ego, that the personal pronoun 'I' refers. Thus the concept of a person is logically prior to that of an individual consciousness.

Strawson names the predicates ascribing corporeal physical characteristics, M-predicates and those ascribing states of consciousness, P-predicates. All P-predicates may not be said to be ascribing states of consciousness but they all imply the possession of consciousness on the part of that to which they are ascribed.

P-predicates are essentially both self-ascribable and other-ascribable. One ascribes P-predicates to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour, but to oneself, not on the behaviour criteria. It is because of the special nature of the P-predicates, or of a class of P-predicates. To learn their use is to learn both the aspects of their use. We speak of 'behaving in a depressed way' and of 'feeling depressed'. Feelings can only be felt not observed, and behaviour can only be observed not felt. But to have the concept like 'X's depression', the concept must cover both what is felt by X and what is observed by others. "It is not that these predicates have two kinds of meaning. Rather, it is essential to the single kind of meaning that they do have, that both ways of ascribing them should be perfectly in order". (Strawson 1959, 110)

#### 4. Appreciation and criticism of Strawson's theory

Strawson makes an attempt to show that the concept of person is primitive or simple in the sense that it cannot be further analysed. The whole argument is based on a group of central P-predicates which are other-ascribable and self ascribable. Persons cannot be defined as a union of mind and body because the possession of mental properties as well as physical properties presupposes that the owner is a person. His subtle point is that the criteria of application of any particular psychological state or property are indistinguishable from the criteria of application of physical properties unless the subject has already been identified as a person.

However, we think that one must call to mind that Strawson's theory of persons does not meet at least some important aspects of the mind-body problem, although he explicitly pretends to deal with it. His attempt, we think, has resulted not in solving the problem, but in escaping it or explaining it away. What he does is only to suggest that there is no problem with the concept of person, so to say, 'if you consider it like this', that is to say, if you consider the concept in a non-Cartesian and non-physicalistic way, the problem vanishes. In other words: his suggestion to consider the concept of person as primitive does not solve the traditional problem of the relation between mind and body, ontologically considered. So he offers only a conceptual solution to a real problem. And it is the real problem with which philosophers of mind deal with, especially under the influence of modern neurosciences. For instance Strawson's conceptual analysis cannot cover problems in the context of questions concerning mental causation. How should we explain the causal relevance of mental states in the physical world in a Strawsonian way?

In addition to the above-mentioned general semantic problem, we believe in particular that it is simply not the case that the concept of person, as we have it even in our ordinary language, cannot be further analysed. As long as we can conceptually distinguish between M-predicates and P-predicates of persons, are we not analysing "person"? As long as we speak of persons as, for instance, having intentions or making experiences, and of persons as having physical properties like weight or shape or something like that, are we not analysing them?

Furthermore: The key idea of ascription of M-predicates and P-predicates are, as we think, to be reconsidered. 'To ascribe' is to consider as 'belonging to'. 'Belonging to' can be understood at least in two senses. In the first sense, as we think Strawson does, M-predicates and P-predicates are ascribed to persons, as a kind of underlying *substratum* of these predicates. In the second sense, one might take it in a more 'Russellian' or 'tropist' way, i.e. persons, so to say, as *made of* M-predicates and P-predicates or properties. In the first *Aristotelean* sense persons are real subjects of properties; in the second sense persons are a kind of sum total or bundle of properties. We cannot deal here with the second alternative. But we want to point out that Strawson, as a theorist following the first way, must presuppose, that there is, necessarily, something that already exists, before you ascribe M- or P-predicates to it. But: if the concept of person has to be primitive, as Strawson's theory requires, it should not be able to refer to something which exists, at least conceptually, without M-predicates and P-predicates.

Another aspect of criticism may be that Strawson's criteria can be applied to other living beings like animals (perhaps to plants and trees) too, without any modifications. At least a big class of P-predicates can be applied to any sort of animals. No doubt, animals also have experiences; they too feel pain and so on. Even the behaviour of plants can be interpreted in a vocabulary using P-predicates. If this is the case, how does Strawson distinguish between animals and plants on the one hand and *human* persons on the other, if at all he distinguishes? Or does he intend to raise animals and plants to the level of human beings and to credit them too with personhood? How to argue for this rather radical thesis? These and some similar questions are left open from Strawson's treatment of the concept of persons.

One has to admit that Strawson actually does not discuss this question whether animals can be ascribed the status of persons at all. Of course, he shouldn't be accused of what he doesn't deal with, but doing systematic philosophy we think we are to point it out.

In this context it is also worth mentioning that it is difficult to distinguish between Strawson's concept of a person and the concept of a human being, understood as the concept of a member of a biological species. Obviously the concept of a human being can also be analysed in terms of M- and P-predicates. Is Strawson of the opinion that there should not be such a distinction at all? – Then he is confronted with all the problems concerning the "traditional concept" of persons, which takes "person" as synonymous with "member of the species of human beings". We just want to call to mind arguments from authors in the field of artificial intelligence research, who regard it as a kind of "racism" to exclude all sorts of computers or robots from personhood because of conceptual reasons.

## 5. Summary

To sum up we can mention, that Strawson's theory may be seen as a conclusive theory of the concept "person". Nevertheless it cannot solve the main problems of a philosophy of personality or personhood as they are discussed nowadays in philosophy. It is an open question whether we can reformulate Strawson's theory or we must refute it altogether. At any rate we can come to the conclusion that it is short-handed to be applied to a modern theory of personality without more detailed considerations.

## Reference

Strawson, P.F. 1959 *Individuals*, London: Methuen & Co Ltd.