

P. F. STRAWSON

SCEPTICISM AND NATURALISM: SOME VARIETIES

Foreword by Quassim Cassam

This book, Strawson's fifth, was originally published in 1985.¹ In an intellectual autobiography published more than a decade later he gave this account of its aims:

In that book I had two different, though not unrelated aims. The first chapter was concerned with traditional scepticisms about, e.g., the external world and induction. In common with Hume and Wittgenstein (and even Heidegger) I argued that the attempt to combat such doubts by rational argument was misguided: for we are dealing here with the presuppositions, the framework, of all human thought and enquiry. In the other chapters my target was different. It was that species of naturalism which tended to discredit, or somehow to reduce to more scientifically acceptable, physicalistic terms, whole regions of ordinary human thought, language, and experience – in particular the regions of moral discourse, of the subjectively mental and of the intensional. Here my reaction, as well as my target, was different. I did not merely stress the inescapability of the natural or common human standpoint from which we normally take for granted all that is called in question by scientific naturalism. I also allowed the latter its own validity from its own limited standpoint.²

Philosophical scepticism and scientific naturalism represent two types of challenge to 'central features of our ordinary thought and talk'.³ The overall aim of Scepticism and Naturalism is to respond to these challenges and thereby to vindicate what Strawson refers to elsewhere as 'our natural metaphysics'.⁴

The philosophical sceptic is someone who questions the adequacy of our grounds for holding certain beliefs, such as the belief in the existence of external objects or other minds. In two of his earlier books, Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics (1959) and The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1966), Strawson had tried to rebut various forms of scepticism by argument. The anti-sceptical arguments that are developed in these works are Kantian in inspiration and one of the philosophers against whom they are directed is Hume. Yet Hume is one of the heroes of Scepticism and Naturalism, not Hume the 'arch-sceptic' but Hume the 'arch-naturalist'.⁵ Naturalism sees philosophical scepticism as 'idle, unreal, a pretense'⁶ and all attempts to tackle it by rational argument as missing the point. The appropriate response to scepticism is to bypass it rather than to attempt to argue with it on its own terms.

When Strawson describes sceptical doubts as unreal in the present work he means that they are 'powerless against the force of nature, of our naturally implanted disposition to belief'.⁷ For example, whatever arguments may be produced for or against scepticism about the external world 'we simply cannot help believing in the existence of body'.⁸ In Individuals sceptical doubts are also dismissed as 'unreal' but here the point is that 'they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense'.⁹ Elsewhere in Individuals Strawson argues that without knowledge of other minds it wouldn't be possible for us to ascribe states of mind to ourselves. Since we are able to ascribe states of mind to ourselves it can be concluded that we have knowledge of minds other than our own. This is a 'transcendental' argument against scepticism about other minds. In The Bounds of Sense Strawson develops a number of transcendental arguments against scepticism about the external world. The claim is that knowledge of the

existence of objects that are distinct from our experiences of them is necessary for self-conscious experience. Since it cannot reasonably be denied that our experience is self-conscious it cannot reasonably be denied that we have knowledge of external objects.

Strawson retains a ‘tenderness for transcendental arguments’¹⁰ but no longer views them as refutations of scepticism. In 1968 Stroud published a paper on transcendental arguments and it is this paper that explains Strawson’s change of heart. Suppose that S is a proposition the truth of which is claimed by a transcendental argument to be necessary for self-conscious experience. Stroud claims that the sceptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough to make self-conscious experience possible ‘if we believe that S is true, or it looks for all the world as if S is true, but that S needn’t actually be true’.¹¹ Opposition to scepticism on this point would have to rely on a version of the verification principle, the principle that for a statement to be meaningful we must be able to verify or falsify it. Yet the verification principle has very little going for it and, in any case, threatens to make transcendental arguments superfluous.

Although Strawson is sympathetic to some forms of verificationism he agrees in Chapter 1 (‘Scepticism, Naturalism and Transcendental Arguments’) that transcendental arguments ‘rely on an unacceptably simple form of verificationism’.¹² On the other hand, he questions the assumption that transcendental arguments are primarily anti-sceptical. He now regards them as establishing ‘a certain sort of interdependence of conceptual capacities and beliefs’¹³ rather than as refutations of scepticism. For example, suppose that in order for us to have self-conscious experience we must believe that we have knowledge of external physical objects and other minds. Once we have given up the project of refuting scepticism we can ‘take satisfaction in the demonstration of these connections – if

they can indeed be demonstrated- for their own sake'.¹⁴ This suggests that transcendental arguments are at the service of 'descriptive metaphysics'. Descriptive metaphysics is 'content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world'.¹⁵ Transcendental arguments are useful in this context because they 'establish connections between the major structural features of our conceptual scheme'.¹⁶

It is one thing to agree that transcendental arguments do not work as anti-sceptical arguments. It is another to agree that scepticism cannot be rebutted by any argument. G. E. Moore's response to scepticism, which Strawson accuses of 'missing the sceptical point altogether',¹⁷ has attracted much attention in the years since Scepticism and Naturalism was first published and is seen by some as more promising than Strawson's discussion implies.¹⁸ According to Strawson, the best scepticism-rebutting argument in favour of the existence of body is one that says that the existence of a world of physical objects 'provides the best explanation of the phenomena of experience'.¹⁹ He ultimately rejects this argument on the grounds that no one accepts the existence of the physical world because it supplies the best explanation of the phenomena of experience. It is not obvious, however, that someone thinks that our belief in the existence of physical objects can be justified on explanatory grounds needs to think that this is the actual basis on which the philosophically unsophisticated actually accept that physical objects exist.

In describing sceptical arguments as powerless against our naturally implanted disposition to belief Strawson is making a point that many sceptics have themselves made. Even if it is agreed that the beliefs that the sceptic challenges are 'absolutely compelling and inescapable'²⁰ the question still remains whether our grounds for holding them are adequate. The sceptic's point is that a belief can be inescapable and yet fail to constitute

knowledge. Although Strawson does not directly address this worry he observes at one point that the beliefs that the sceptic attempts to question are ‘outside our critical and rational competence in the sense that they define, or help to define, the area within which that competence is exercised’.²¹ The implication is that it is paradoxical or even self-defeating to attempt to undermine such beliefs by rational argument. On this reading, the anti-sceptical strategy of Scepticism and Naturalism is not so different after all from that of Individuals. There is a sense in which both regard arguments for scepticism as not only inefficacious but also ‘self-defeating or unintelligible’.²² It is doubtful, however, whether this is how Strawson himself saw the relation between his works.

The naturalism that Strawson endorses is a liberal or non-reductive naturalism. He is opposed to strict or reductive naturalism, which he thinks of as a variety of scepticism. The distinction between the two forms of naturalism first comes into play in Chapter 2 (‘Morality and Perception’), in which Strawson draws on his influential paper ‘Freedom and Resentment’.²³ This paper describes a range of attitudes toward ourselves and others. Personal reactive attitudes, such as resentment, gratitude, and forgiveness are reactions to the quality of others’ wills towards us. Moral reactive attitudes, such as moral indignation or disapproval, are the disinterested analogues of personal reactive attitudes. They are reactions to the qualities of others’ wills towards others. In ‘Freedom and Resentment’ Strawson asks whether ‘it would not be rational, given a general theoretical conviction of the truth of determinism, so to change our world that in it all these attitudes were wholly suspended’. His response is to argue that ‘one who presses this question has wholly failed to grasp.... the nature of the human commitment involved: it is useless to ask whether it would not be rational for us to do what it is not in our nature to (be able to) do’.²⁴

Yet it is possible temporarily to suspend our reactive attitudes and to see people and their doings purely objectively, as ‘objects and events in nature’.²⁵ Viewed from the standpoint that we naturally occupy as social beings human behaviour appears as the proper object of personal and moral reactive attitudes. When human behaviour is viewed purely objectively reactive attitudes look alien and inappropriate. Reductive naturalism is the view that it is only from the latter standpoint that we see things as they really are, and that the naturalistic or objective view of human beings displays moral judgement as ‘no more than a vehicle of illusion’.²⁶ In response, Strawson argues that ‘we can recognize, in our conception of the real, a reasonable relativity to standpoints that we do know and can occupy’.²⁷ The appearance of a contradiction between the two standpoints only arises if we assume the existence of a metaphysically absolute standpoint from which we can judge between them but the idea of such a superior standpoint is an ‘illusion’.²⁸

The same kind of relativizing move is used to defuse the apparent conflict between commonsense and scientific realism in the philosophy of perception. The former says that physical objects have the phenomenal properties that we unreflectively credit them with, properties such as colour-as-seen, visual shape and texture as felt. Scientific realism says that no such phenomenal properties really belong to physical objects. This view credits physical objects only with ‘those properties which are mentioned in physical theory and physical explanation, including the causal explanation of the kind of perceptual experience which we in fact enjoy’.²⁹ Again, the recommended solution is to relativize our “really”s: we can say that relative to the human perceptual standpoint, ordinary physical objects really have phenomenal properties. Relative to the standpoint of physical science they do not. In this sense, ‘the same thing can both be, and not be, phenomenally propertied’.³⁰

Among the questions raised by this form of relativism one is whether it defuses the apparent conflict between commonsense and scientific realism. For example, if the former tells us that lemons are really yellow while the latter says that lemons are not really yellow it would be natural to ask which one of these positions is correct. This question arises because as Stroud observes, ‘we are interested in how things are, not only in how certain standpoints or sets of beliefs say things are’.³¹ The challenge is to make it plausible that this question is somehow illegitimate, and critics of relativism might wonder whether this challenge has really been met. A further issue is whether the relativist draws too sharp a distinction between common sense and science. One might think that common sense is permeated by science and that, as Dummett puts it, ‘the idea of the common-sense view of the world is as much a myth as that of the noble savage (or, indeed, that of the savage)’.³² On this account, commonsense realism exaggerates the depth of our habitual commitment to the view that we perceive things as they really are.

Chapter 3 (‘The Mental and the Physical’) is of considerable interest because it is one of Strawson’s rare excursions into mainstream philosophy of mind. The topic of this chapter is the identity thesis, according to which mental events are a subclass of physical events.³³ If, as Descartes holds, mind and body are distinct things of different kinds there is no question of mental and physical events being identical. Strawson makes his opposition to Cartesian dualism clear in Individuals, where he insists that ‘the concept of a person is to be understood as the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation etc. are equally applicable to an individual entity of that type’³⁴ This makes the identity thesis look like a live option but Strawson rejects this thesis. Instead, he

plumps, ‘though without much enthusiasm’,³⁵ for the view that the relation between a particular mental event or state and its physical realization is a relation of causal linkage between two distinct items.

Strawson’s discussion of this topic is organized around the idea that the history of human beings can be recounted in two different ways. A physical history would focus on our bodily movements and explain them in physical and physiological terms. A personal history would focus on our actions and behaviour and explain them in terms of our beliefs, perceptions, and desires. Since there is no conflict between the two stories, each of which invokes its own explanatory connections, there is ‘no need for, and no question of, a relativizing move’.³⁶ While no one would suppose that the two stories are independent of each other this does not mean that the identity thesis is correct. A more non-committal account of the interface between the two stories would say that each mental event belonging to an individual’s personal history is physically realized in an event belonging to his physical history. This is something that one can say without using the concept of identity.

As Strawson sees things, the identity thesis is a non-starter because it requires one to assume that our physical and personal histories can be unified. He also takes it that what underlies the identity thesis is a kind of reductive naturalism or scientism that is dismissive of whatever cannot be exhaustively described and accounted for in scientific terms. Yet there are prominent versions of the identity thesis that do not see things in this way. Davidson’s ‘anomalous monism’, to which Strawson refers, is a case in point. Anomalous monism sees all events as physical but rejects the thesis that mental events can be given purely physical explanations.³⁷ The resulting account, which emphasizes the ‘disparate

commitments of the mental and physical schemes’,³⁸ is neither a form of reductionism nor of scientism. If Strawson is right, however, then that it isn’t a substantive form of monism either. If our physical and personal stories cannot be unified then ‘we have no genuine practical use for the concept of identity here; and where we have no genuine practical use for it, we have no metaphysical use either’.³⁹

Chapter 4 (‘The Matter of Meaning’) is a contribution to the debate between realism and nominalism. The realist points out that perfectly ordinary ways of talking appear to commit us to the existence of abstract objects, to meanings, concepts, attributes, properties, kinds and types. Abstract objects, if there are such things, are ‘not found in nature’⁴⁰ and are neither locatable in space nor datable in time. Nominalism is committed to a form of naturalism according to which ‘whatever exists at all exists in nature’.⁴¹ There is no room in the nominalist’s ontology for abstract objects because such objects ‘do not even compete for spaces and dates’.⁴² The only realities that underlie acceptable ways of talking about meanings, concepts, necessities and so on are ‘natural realities’.⁴³

Among the challenges to nominalism that Strawson considers, one is to give a convincing account of the phenomenon of perceptual recognition without referring to concepts or abstract ideas. Another is to give a purely naturalistic account of the notion of necessary truth. While Strawson’s own sympathies lie with the realist he does not claim to have refuted nominalism. He also refrains from trying to reconcile nominalism and realism by proposing the relativization of their rival conceptions of what “really” exists to different standpoints. The prospects for such a reconciliation are poor because the nominalist will continue to see the realist as deeply misguided while the realist will

continue to regard his opponent as someone who is caught in the ‘grip of a reductive rage’.⁴⁴ This is a case in which the two sides are irreconcilable.

It is striking that in expressing sympathy for realism Strawson also finds himself expressing sympathy for a form of rationalism. Yet the rationalism that Strawson describes is something of a hybrid. Standard characterizations of rationalism represent it holding that we have a faculty of rational intuition the proper exercise of which enables us to acquire a priori knowledge of certain necessary truths such as ‘Nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time’. Unlike many empiricists, rationalists deny that such truths are true purely in virtue of meaning.⁴⁵ They think, for example, it is the nature of the relevant colours themselves rather than the meanings of the words ‘red’ and ‘green’ that makes it true that nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time. Yet Strawson’s rationalist claims both that we have the power of rational intuition of necessary truths and that such truths are ‘guaranteed by meaning alone’.⁴⁶

An aspect of his account of the debate between nominalism and realism that Strawson came to regret was its failure to distinguish clearly between concepts and properties.⁴⁷ Someone may have the concept of generosity without being generous, that is, without having the corresponding property, and someone may be generous without having the concept of generosity.⁴⁸ Once concepts and properties are distinguished in this way it is a further question whether, as Strawson assumes, properties are abstract. If properties, unlike concepts, are constituents of natural reality then there is room for a position that countenances their existence without countenancing the existence of more incorrigibly abstract objects.⁴⁹

In the space of fewer than a hundred graceful and elegant pages this book engages with some of the deepest questions in philosophy. The opening chapter gives expression to a sense of the idleness of arguments for and against scepticism that many will have felt at some point. The idea that there is an ultimate relativity in our conception of the real is both radical and seductive. Like many other post-war Oxford philosophers Strawson is a realist about the external world, secondary qualities and moral values but his realism is a relaxed realism that has little time for reductionism, scientism or other forms of philosophical extremism.⁵⁰ It is a realism that is not dismissive of the claims of science but that refuses to see the possibility of thinking of the physical world in the abstract terms of the physical sciences as calling into question the legitimacy of our natural metaphysics. Indeed, it is hard to think of any other single work that so perfectly captures the philosophical outlook of a generation of British philosophers, a good number of whom were students of Strawson's.⁵¹ For anyone seeking an overview of Strawson's many valuable and highly influential contributions to different areas of philosophy this is the place to start.

¹ His previous books were Introduction to Logical Theory (London: Methuen, 1952), Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics (London: Methuen, 1959), The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (London: Methuen, 1966), and Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar (London: Methuen, 1974). In addition, he had published two collections of his own essays, Logic-Linguistic Papers (London: Methuen, 1971), and Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays (London: Methuen, 1974).

² 'Intellectual Autobiography', in L. Hahn (ed.) The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson (Chicago and Lasalle: Open Court, 1998), p. 17.

³ 'My Philosophy', in P. K. Sen and R. R. Verma (eds.) The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical research, 1995), p. 7.

⁴ 'My Philosophy', p. 9.

⁵ p. 3. Unless otherwise indicated all page references are to Scepticism and Naturalism.

⁶ p. 19.

⁷ p. 13.

⁸ p. 11.

⁹ p. 35.

¹⁰ p. 21.

¹¹ Stroud, 'Transcendental Arguments', in R. C. S. Walker (ed.) Kant on Pure Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 128. This paper was originally published in the Journal of Philosophy, 1968.

¹² p. 21. Strawson signals his approval of a moderate form of verificationism in the concluding paragraph of his paper ‘Entity and Identity’, reprinted in Entity and Identity and Other Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹³ p. 21.

¹⁴ p. 22

¹⁵ Individuals, p. 9. The contrast is with ‘revisionary metaphysics’, which is ‘concerned to produce a better structure’.

¹⁶ p. 23

¹⁷ p. 5

¹⁸ Moore has more than one response to scepticism. Strawson mentions two of Moore’s papers, ‘A Defence of Common Sense’ and ‘Proof of an External World’, both of which appear in Moore’s Philosophical Papers (London: Allen and Unwin 1959). Recent discussion has tended to focus on Moore’s ‘Proof’.

¹⁹ p. 20

²⁰ p. 39

²¹ p. 19

²² p. 10

²³ This paper was originally published in 1960. It is reprinted in Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays.

²⁴ ‘Freedom and Resentment’, p.

²⁵ p. 40

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ p. 42.

³⁰ p. 45

³¹ The Quest for Reality: Subjectivism and the Metaphysics of Colour (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.187

³² ‘Common Sense and Physics’, in G. F. MacDonald (ed.) Perception and Identity: Essays Presented to A. J. Ayer with his Replies to them (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 19.

³³ Strawson does not concern himself with versions of the identity thesis that identify mental properties with physical properties.

³⁴ Individuals, p. 100.

³⁵ p. 64.

³⁶ Strawson, ‘Reply to E. M. Adams’, in L. Hahn (ed.) The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson, p. 87.

³⁷ As Davidson puts it, ‘Anomalous monism resembles materialism in its claim that all events are physical, but rejects the thesis, usually considered essential to materialism, that mental phenomena can be given purely physical explanations. Anomalous monism shows an ontological bias only in that it allows the possibility that not all events are mental, while insisting that all events are physical. Such a bland monism, unbuttressed by correlating laws or conceptual economies, does not seem to merit the term “reductionism”’ (‘Mental Events’, in Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 214).

³⁸ ‘Mental Events’, p. 222.

³⁹ p. 62.

⁴⁰ p. 70.

⁴¹ p. 71

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ p. 75

⁴⁴ p. 94

⁴⁵ For a recent defence of this form of rationalism see L. BonJour, In Defense of Pure of Pure Reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ p. 91

⁴⁷ See Strawson's 'Reply to Panayot Butchvarov', in L. Hahn (ed.) The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson, p.108.

⁴⁸ This example is taken from Strawson's 'Reply to Panayot Butchvarov'.

⁴⁹ L. S. Carrier mentions this possibility in a critical review of Skepticism and Naturalism published in The Philosophical Review, XCV, (1986), p. 439.

⁵⁰ I owe this characterization of Strawson's realism to Paul Snowdon.

⁵¹ A list of British philosophers who have been directly influenced by Strawson or whose work carries traces of his non-reductive realism would include Gareth Evans, Jennifer Hornsby, John McDowell and Paul Snowdon.