# STRAWSON ON OTHER MINDS

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*Abstract*: This paper outlines and evaluates Strawson's various responses to the conceptual and epistemological problem of other minds. Questions are raised about his way of motivating the conceptual problem and his solution to the problem. His attempt to dissolve the epistemological problem is shown to be unsuccessful since it fails to demonstrate that in order to ascribe states of consciousness to oneself one must have knowledge of other minds. Strawson's explanation of how we ascribe mental states to others is also shown to be excessively narrow. It is a mistake to explain other-ascriptions in exclusively behavioural terms, without taking proper account of other potential grounds. Empathy is of particular interest in this connection, both as grounding ascriptions of mental states to others and as a potential source of understanding of other minds.

## 1. Strawson's contribution

Philosophical discussions of the so-called 'problem of other minds' standardly distinguish two version of the problem, a conceptual and an epistemological version.[1] The conceptual version concerns our ability to *conceive* of minds other than our own. How does it make sense to me that other people have thoughts, feelings, and experiences in exactly the same sense that I have thoughts, feelings, and experiences? The epistemological challenge is to account for *knowledge* of other minds. Here the question is: how is it possible for an individual to know anything at all about the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and other mental states of others? Answering this question is usually understood as requiring a response to scepticism about other minds. Since the sceptic denies that knowledge of other minds is possible, a response to the epistemological problem may be expected to show that the sceptic is mistaken about that. This is the *sceptical problem* of other minds. Even if scepticism is not the issue, there is still an explanatory question that needs answering: given that we know about the mental states of other people, *how* do we know?[2] This is the *explanatory problem* of other minds.

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The conceptual version of the problem is one that Strawson takes seriously in chapter 3 of *Individuals*. He attempts what might be described as a 'solution' to the problem, and much of his discussion is taken up with elucidating his solution and the problem to which it is a solution. His attitude to the epistemological version of the problem of other minds is quite different. He argues that the 'the sceptical problem does not arise' (1959: 106) since the sceptic lacks the resources even to formulate it. In effect, therefore, what Strawson offers is not a solution to the sceptical problem but a *dis*solution. However, the explanatory problem is not one that he dismisses. With respect to the various states of consciousness that one ascribes to oneself, he asks: 'how is it that one can ascribe them to others?' (1959: 100).[3] Strawson argues that one ascribes states of consciousness to others 'on the strength of observation of their behaviour' and that 'behaviour-criteria' are 'criteria of a logically adequate kind' (1959: 106) for the other-ascription of states of consciousness. Logically adequate behavioural criteria settle the question whether a person who satisfies them is actually in the state of consciousness for which a particular type of behaviour is criterial. That is how behavioural criteria put us in a position to *know* (in at least some cases) the mind of another person.

In *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, first published in 1985, Strawson sees things somewhat differently. The emphasis is on belief rather than knowledge: in order for self-conscious thought and experience to be possible, we must *believe* that we have knowledge of other minds.[4] If one were looking for an argument against scepticism about other minds, the best that can be done is something along the following lines:

Given the non-uniqueness of one's physical constitution and the general uniformity of nature in the biological sphere as in others, it is in the highest degree improbable that one is unique among members of one's species in being the enjoyer of subjective states, and of the kind of subjective states one does enjoy in the kind of circumstances in which one enjoys them (2008: 16).

However, Strawson insists, this is no one's reason for believing in the existence of other minds. Rather, 'we simply react to others as to other people' (2008: 16). Since we can't help believing in the existence of minds other than our own, both sceptical and scepticism-rebutting arguments are equally idle.

The following discussion is in three parts. Part 2 will focus on Strawson's approach to the conceptual problem of other minds. The two key questions here are: how and why does the conceptual problem arise, and does Strawson have a satisfactory solution? A satisfactory solution will either be one that solves the problem on Strawson's own terms or, if his terms are rejected, one that solves the problem on a better account of how and why it arises. Part 3 will address Strawson's attempted dissolution of the sceptical problem. The issue here is whether he succeeds in showing that the sceptical problem does not arise. A further question concerns the evolution of Strawson's thought between the publication of *Individuals* and the publication a quarter of a century later of *Scepticism and Naturalism*. Part 4 will address the explanatory problem. What is the problem, and how satisfactory is Strawson's quasi-behaviourist response to it?

Regarding the conceptual issue, there are reasons to be sceptical about Strawson's account of the problem and his solution. Regarding the sceptical problem, Strawson's attempted dissolution is problematic but remains of considerable interest. The same cannot be said of his response to the explanatory challenge, which is both dated and unsatisfactory. The emphasis on logically adequate behavioural criteria for the ascription of states of consciousness to others gives Strawson's account a strong Wittgensteinian flavour, which is not necessarily to its advantage. Furthermore, even if states of consciousness are ascribed to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour, it should be acknowledged that there are also significant non-behavioural routes to knowledge of other minds.[5]

The deeper point here is that, as Paul Snowdon points out, 'there is no reason in advance for supposing that all our knowledge of other minds in its great variety must receive the same answer to the relevant "how" question' (2019: 27), the question: how do we know about other minds? Just as there are multiple pathways to knowledge of the external world, so there are multiple pathways to knowledge of other minds. Strawson was, of course, well aware of this. He would not have supposed that 'diarists, novelists, biographers, historians, journalists, and gossips' (2008: 46) ascribe mental states to others *solely* on the strength of observation of their behaviour. A popular proposal today is that empathy is a fundamental source of our knowledge or understanding of other people.[6] Something along these lines was also proposed by R. G. Collingwood, who was one of Strawson's predecessors as Oxford's Waynflete Professor of Metaphysics.[7] Strawson would have been quite familiar with Collingwood's views, and it is an interesting question whether there is room in Strawson's framework for Collingwood's insights about the nature of human understanding.

2. The conceptual problem

The solipsist is someone who believes, or pretends to believe, not merely that he is at the centre of the mental universe but that he *is* the mental universe. The solipsist claims (to himself, presumably) that while he has the conception of himself and his mental states, he has no conception of mental states that are not his and, correlatively, no conception of other selves. The conception of other minds and their mental states is one that, he insists, makes no sense. Strawson's response to solipsism in *Individuals* is both straightforward and profound: a person who does not have the conception of mental states that are not his could not have the conception of his own mental states. He would lack the distinction between self and other, and this means that he could have no conception of self. A true solipsist would be incapable of thinking about himself or his states of mind and so would not be in a position to give expression to his bizarre view.

This is not exactly how Strawson puts it. Instead of talking about mental states, he talks about 'states of consciousness' or 'experiences', which are a sub-class of mental states. Rather than formulating his own view as a view about the necessary conditions for *conceiving* of one's own states, or thinking about them, he formulates it as a view about the necessary conditions for *ascribing* experiences or states of consciousness to himself. He claims that 'it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness, experiences, to oneself, in the way one does, that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself' (1959: 99). He interprets the solipsist as someone who wants to hang on to his mental self-ascriptions while denying the possibility of ascribing states of consciousness to anyone other than himself. This, Strawson argues, is incoherent.

Why does the self-ascription of states of consciousness require a willingness to ascribe states of consciousness to others? The point, Strawson argues, is a 'purely logical one: the idea of a predicate is correlative with that of a *range* of individuals of which the predicate can be significantly, though not necessarily truly, affirmed' (1959: 99 n.1). This is the case even if the predicate happens to be a psychological predicate, such as 'is in pain' or 'is depressed'. To *ascribe* a predicate F is to an individual *a* is to think or judge that a is F. If it makes sense to judge that *a* is F, then it must make sense to judge that *b* is F, *c* is F, and so on. In other words, if it makes sense to think that I am depressed then it must make sense to me that someone other than me is depressed. At this stage in the argument, there is no mention of knowledge. Thinking that *a* is F is one thing, knowing that *a* is F is another.

Even if it is true that in order to ascribe states of consciousness to oneself one must be prepared to ascribe them to others, this is not yet an explanation of how the ascription of states of consciousness to others is possible or even intelligible. Showing that something is necessary is one thing. Explaining how it is possible is another.[8] We ask how x is possible when there appears to be an obstacle to the existence of x.[9] The challenge, therefore, is to identify the

apparent obstacle or obstacles to x and show how they can be overcome. Strawson's discussion implies that to have the conception of other minds is to have the idea that the mental states one ascribes to oneself can be ascribed in *exactly the same sense* to others. There is no difference in the meaning of a psychological predicate such as 'is depressed', regardless of whether the predicate is ascribed to oneself or to someone other than oneself. Call this the *univocity* requirement. Anything that prevents a person's use of psychological predicates from meeting this requirement is an obstacle to their genuinely being able to conceive of other minds.

What might this obstacle be? Strawson distinguishes between two kinds of predicates. M-predicates, like 'weighs 10 stone', 'are those which are also properly applied to material bodies to which we would not dream of applying predicates ascribing states of consciousness' (1959: 104). P-predicates, like 'is depressed' and 'is going for a walk', are predicates that we apply to persons. What P-predicates have in common is that 'they imply the possession of consciousness on the part of that to which they are ascribed' (1959: 105). One ascribes P-predicates to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour. This is also the basis on which one ascribes some P-predicates to oneself, namely, those P-predicates which 'carry assessments of character or capability' (1959: 107). However, there are also P-predicates such that 'when one ascribes them *to oneself*, one does not do so on the strength of observation of those behaviour criteria on the strength of which one ascribes them to others' (1959: 107). I ascribe depression to other people on the strength of their behaviour, but I do not usually ascribe depression to myself on the basis of observation of my own behaviour.

Suppose, next, that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification.[10] To say that P-predicates are ascribed to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour is to imply that we rely on other people's behaviour to verify (or falsify) our ascription to them of such predicates. The epistemology of mental self-ascriptions is quite different. Observation of one's own behaviour is not one's method for verifying the ascription of P-predicates to oneself.

One might go further and argue that in this case there is no method of verification. This brings the univocity requirement into focus. If the meaning of a statement is its method of verification, then how can the P-predicates that figure in mental self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions meet the univocity requirement? As Strawson asks, how could the sense of P-predicates be the same 'when the method of verification was so different in the two cases – or, rather, when there *was* a method of verification in the one case (the case of others) and not, properly speaking, in the other case (the case of oneself)?' (1959: 99-100).[11]

Here, then, is an obstacle to conceiving of minds other than one's own: *if* the meaning of a statement is its method of verification, then how is it possible to think of minds other than one's own in a way that meets the univocity requirement? One option would simply be to drop the univocity requirement and accept that predicates like 'is depressed' do *not* mean the same in 'I am depressed' and 'She is depressed'. However, this violates the requirement that the idea of a predicate is correlative with that of a range of individuals of which the predicate can be significantly affirmed. It must be the *same predicate* that can be ascribed to a range of different individuals, and it is not the same predicate if 'depressed' is not univocal in 'I am depressed' and 'She is depressed'. Indeed, if an other-ascription can only be verified on the strength of observation of the ascribee's behaviour, then it is open to question whether 'She is depressed' ascribes a genuine state of consciousness rather than a certain pattern of behaviour.

A different response to the 'how possible' question is to reject the verificationist theory of meaning that puts pressure on the univocity of mental self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions. There are good independent reasons for rejecting this approach to meaning. Furthermore, if 'depressed' has the same meaning in self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions of depression, even though self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions have different methods of verification, then this is in itself a reason for detaching the meaning of a statement from its method of verification. The conceptual problem of other minds, if indeed there is such a problem, will need to be

explained in some other way, and there are many non-verificationist accounts of why there is a question about one's ability to conceive of minds other than one's own.[12]

The problem that Strawson faces is that, unlike most philosophers today, he is by no means hostile to verificationism. However, the issues here are complex because he does not say that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification. Instead, he explains his version of verificationism in the following terms in his later paper 'Entity and Identity':

> You do not know what you mean by 'telepathy' unless you know how to identify it, i.e. how you would tell that you have a case of it. You do not know what souls are unless you know how to tell one from another and to say when you have the same on again. And if someone should say that this is just old verificationism writ small, or loose, then I am quite content with that (1997: 50-51).

The implication is that I do not know what I mean by 'depression', or what depression is, unless I can tell when I or someone else has a case of it. However, this leaves it open whether my way of telling must be the same in both cases and, if not, whether this puts pressure on the notion that 'depressed' means the same in the self-ascription and the other-ascription. The challenge for Strawson is to say enough to make it *appear* difficult to reconcile sameness of meaning with the existence of different ways of telling in the two cases, but without thereby making it impossible to secure sameness of meaning.

Having raised the question how sameness of meaning can be reconciled with different methods of verification, Strawson responds as follows:

> We might say: in order for there to be such a concept as that of X's depression, the depression which X has, the concept must cover both what is felt, but not observed, by X, and what may be observed, but not felt, by others than X (for all values of X). But it is perhaps better to say: X's depression *is* something, one and the same thing, which is felt, but not observed, by X, and observed, but not felt, by others than X [….] To refuse

to accept this is to refuse to accept the *structure* of the language in which we talk about depression (1959: 108-9).

While what Strawson says here is plausible, it is hard not to suspect that all he has done is to restate the desired result rather than explained how it can be achieved. What has yet to be explained is *how* the language in which we talk about depression makes it possible for the concept of X's depression to be univocal in self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions.

Recall that the question that Strawson is supposed to be answering is: how, given the factors that make such a thing difficult to achieve, can there be 'a kind of predicate which is unambiguously and adequately ascribable *both* on the basis of observation of the subject of the predicate *and* not on this basis' (1959: 108)? Strawson's reply at this stage is that the existence of predicates of this type is built into the structure of the language in which we talk about states of consciousness like depression. However, he does not leave the matter there. Instead, he begins the penultimate section of chapter 3 of *Individuals* with the following:

> Now our perplexities may take a different form, the form of the question: 'But how can one ascribe to oneself, not on the basis of observation, the very same thing that others may have, on the basis of observation, reasons of a logically adequate kind for ascribing to one?' This question may be absorbed in a wider one, which might be phrased: 'How are P-predicates possible?' (1959: 110).

This passage comes as a surprise. Up to this point, Strawson gives every impression of being content to say that the existence of univocal P-predicates is built into the structure of our language and leave it at that. Now he feels the need to say more and offer a richer explanation of how it can be that the P-predicates meet the univocity requirement. The question to which he now seeks an answer is: what are 'the natural facts' (1959: 111) that make it intelligible that such predicates are available to us?[13]

Strawson's answer to this far from self-explanatory question consists in 'moving a certain class of P-predicates to a central position in the picture' (1959: 111). This is the class of predicates which 'involve doing something, which clearly imply intention or a state of mind or at least consciousness in general, and which indicate a characteristic pattern, or range of patterns, of bodily movement, while not indicating at all precisely any very definite sensation or experience' (1959: 111). Examples include 'going for a walk', 'coiling a rope', and 'writing a letter'. These are P-predicate that one ascribes to others, but not to oneself, on the strength of observation. However, 'in the case of these predicates, one feels minimal reluctance to concede that what is ascribed in these two different ways is the same' because of 'the marked dominance of a fairly definite pattern of bodily movement in what they ascribe, and the marked absence of any distinctive experience' (1959: 111).

Take the example of writing a letter. Suppose that my knowledge that I am writing a letter is non-observational, whereas my knowledge that you are writing a letter is observational. However, there is little inclination to suppose that 'writing a letter' means something different in 'I am writing a letter' and 'you are writing a letter'. Since writing a letter is an action, Strawson's suggestion is that our ability to think of ourselves and others as acting in the same way, despite the obvious differences in how we know about our own actions and those of other people, is the 'natural fact' that makes available to us the idea that P-predicates mean the same thing in self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions. We see the movements of some other bodies as *actions*, and 'we see others as self-ascribers, not on the basis of observation, of what we ascribe to them on this basis' (1959: 112).

There are several things to be said about this argument. The first is that Strawson makes no attempt to defend the idea that knowledge of our own actions is non-observational. This approach to the epistemology of action is associated above all with Anscombe, whose *Intention* was published two years before *Individuals*.[14] Perhaps influenced by Anscombe, Strawson

takes it for granted that we have non-observational knowledge of our own actions, and he expects his readers to do the same. The second is that while Strawson's 'argument from action' is helpful in weakening objections to the possibility of univocal P-predicates that are known in quite different ways to apply to oneself and to others, it is unclear whether we are any further forward when it comes to explaining how P-predicates that do *not* ascribe actions can be univocal in self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions. In the case of P-predicates like 'is thinking of writing a letter', it is the marked *absence* of a definite pattern of bodily movement in what they ascribe that stands out, and this means that the argument from action does not identify the 'natural facts' that make *these* P-predicates available. A third comment is that the argument from action finally puts paid to any idea that the meaning of a term is tied to our way of knowing whether or not it applies. Since Strawson cannot be a verificationist in *this* sense, he cannot rely on this form of verificationism to motivate his concern with the conceptual problem of other minds. The non-verificationist view of meaning required to solve the problem does not allow the problem to arise in the first place, at least as Strawson understands it. This gives his position a distinct air of instability: he *relies on* but is ultimately committed to *rejecting* verificationism. He relies on it to generate his concerns about how it is possible to conceive of other minds, but his solution to the conceptual problem commits him to rejecting it.

Before turning to the epistemological problem of other minds, there is one more thing to say about Strawson's struggle with the conceptual problem. It is striking how much of the heavy lifting in his discussion is done by the principle that the idea of a predicate is correlative with that of a range of individuals of which the predicate can be significantly, though not necessarily truly, affirmed. The incoherence of solipsism follows from this principle, and this makes it all the more surprising that Strawson offers no defence of his principle and only states it in a footnote. Perhaps he regarded the principle as a conceptual truth about the idea of a predicate. In any event, more can be and has been said in defence of Strawson's idea of a

predicate. In *The Varieties of Reference*, Gareth Evans, a former pupil of Strawson's, sees the thought that *a* is F as 'lying at the intersection of two series of thoughts: on the one hand, the series of thoughts that *a* is F, that *b* is F, that *c* is F, …, and, on the other hand, the series of thoughts that *a* is F, *a* is G, that *a* is H, …' (1982: 104, n.21). Evans calls this the Generality Constraint on our conceivings. He adds that even readers not persuaded that *any* system of thought must conform to this constraint may be prepared to admit that *our* system of thought – the system that underlies our use of language – does conform to it.

In these terms, what Strawson says about the idea of a predicate is, in effect, a statement of one dimension of the Generality Constraint, and the fundamental objection to solipsism is that it fails to respect this constraint. Where 'F' is a psychological predicate, the solipsist is precisely someone who fails to see the thought that 'I am F' as lying at the intersection of two series of thoughts in Evans' sense. The solipsist has a problem with the Generality Constraint because he sees an insuperable obstacle to the intelligible other-ascription of psychological predicates. Among the many accounts of the alleged obstacle, verificationism is the least compelling but it is the only one that Strawson considers. For this reason, philosophers who take solipsism more seriously may feel short-changed by Strawson's discussion. Nevertheless, it is a major insight of Strawson's that reflection on the idea of a predicate can be used to raise questions about the coherence of solipsism.

3. The sceptical problem

The epistemological problem of other minds can be expressed in the form of a question: how is it possible for one to know anything at all about the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and other mental states of others? The sceptic thinks that knowledge of one's own states of mind is easy, whereas knowledge of the mental states of others is impossible. In formulating his view, the sceptic relies on a commitment to what Snowdon calls the 'interiority of the mental'. That is:

When we observe those around us in normal circumstances we observe them by observing their surfaces, the movements of those surfaces, and also what we might call emissions from their surfaces (say, the sounds they make). However, although the surface and its behaviour (and products) are observed by us, it is a very basic part of our conception of mental states and occurrences that they require things to be a certain way behind or within that presented surface (2019: 35).

This means that 'my ascriptions of mental states to others goes beyond anything on the surface' (2019: 37) and 'there is no way to explore the interiors to confirm there is mentality behind the encountered surface' (2019: 38). We might regard what we encounter when we observe the surfaces of those around us as *signs* of the presence of mentality behind those surfaces, but the sceptic argues that any inference to mentality is distinctly shaky since it needs to cross a logical and ontological gap between what is visible on the outside and what is actually there on the inside. Thus, we are left in a position of never really knowing whether there any minds other than our own, and this is the essence of the sceptical problem.

Taken in this way, scepticism implies the epistemological priority of self-knowledge over knowledge of other minds: I can know my own states of mind without knowing whether there are any minds other than my own, and it is only because I am aware of how my own states of mind correlate with *my* behaviour or bodily movements that I ascribe mental states to others on the strength of *their* behaviour or bodily movements. I interpret the latter as *signs* of mentality because of what I know to be true in my own case, but the ascription of mentality to others is the conclusion of an inference from premises that include statements about my own mind. This is the 'argument from analogy' for other minds. As Ayer puts it, an essential feature of this argument is that 'the justification, as distinct from the cause, of my ascribing experiences to others must issue from the premiss that I have experience myself' (1963: 104). However,

this argument does not rule out the possibility that 'one might be able to ascribe experiences to oneself, while being invariably mistaken in ascribing them to others' (1963: 108).

If one could show that knowledge of other minds is necessary for knowledge of one's own mind, then the argument from analogy could never get off the ground and the sceptical problem would not arise. If knowledge of other minds is presupposed by knowledge of one's own mind, then self-knowledge would *not* be epistemologically prior to knowledge of other minds, and the considerations we rely on in ascribing states of mind to others would have to be conceived of as more than mere signs of mentality in others. Instead, the behavioural and other outward signs that ground our other-ascriptions would need to be viewed as ways of *knowing* the mind of another person. However, this assumes that self-knowledge would not be possible without knowledge of other minds, but why should one believe that?

It might seem that Strawson has already answered this question. Hasn't he already argued that it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness to oneself that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself? Is this not just another way of denying the epistemological priority of self-knowledge over our knowledge of other minds, and thereby dissolving the sceptical problem? As Strawson puts it in *Scepticism and Naturalism*:

> [T]he sceptic could not even raise his doubt unless he knew it to be unfounded; i.e. he
> could have no use for the concepts in terms of which he expresses his doubt unless he
> were able to know to be true at least some of the propositions belonging to the class all
> members of which fall within the scope of the sceptical doubt (2008: 7).

However, *if* this is Strawson's reply to the argument from analogy then it is unsuccessful for a fairly obvious reason: being able to other-ascribe states of consciousness is not the same as knowing whether one's ascriptions of mental states to others are actually correct.[15] It is one thing to say that my ascribing states of consciousness to others is a necessary condition of my

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being able to ascribe them to myself. It is another to say that my *correctly* or *knowledgeably* ascribing states of consciousness to others is a necessary condition of my being able to self-ascribe them. The most that Strawson is entitled to is the former claim. What he needs is the latter claim. As he recognizes in *Scepticism and Naturalism*, his anti-sceptical argument in *Individuals* turns on the idea that in order to have self-conscious experience one must have 'knowledge…. of the states of mind of other beings' (2008: 7).

Strawson's diagnosis of sceptical problems generally, including scepticism about other minds, is that 'their statement involves the pretended acceptance of a conceptual scheme and at the same time the silent repudiation of one of the conditions of its existence' (1959: 106). The conceptual scheme that the sceptic about other minds pretends to accept is one that allows for a grasp of P-predicates and their self-ascription other than on the basis of observation. The condition for the existence of this scheme that the sceptic allegedly repudiates is that the P-predicates that one ascribes to oneself are ones that one is also willing to ascribe to others, albeit on a different basis. On the face of it, however, the sceptic has no difficulty accepting this condition since he is not a solipsist. He *is* willing to ascribe P-predicates to others, and so is *not* in the position of trying to self-ascribe P-predicates while at the same time insisting that he has no conception of other minds. What he is unsure of is whether his other-ascriptions are ever *correct*.

Strawson's response to this line of reasoning is to argue, in effect, that it is built into the conceptual scheme in terms of which the sceptical problem is stated that the behavioural criteria one relies on in ascribing P-predicates to others 'are not just signs of the presence of what is meant by the P-predicate, but are criteria of a logically adequate kind for the ascription of the P-predicate' (1959: 106). For example, if one ascribes a P-predicate like 'is depressed' to someone other than oneself because they satisfy the behavioral criteria for depression, then it is no longer an open question whether they really are depressed. In Strawson's terminology,

the relevant criteria are 'ways of telling' (1959: 105). It is because they put one in a position to *know* the other's state of mind that the sceptical problem does not arise. The sceptic is in the incoherent position of denying knowledge of other minds while simultaneously applying to himself P-predicates that are ascribable to others on the basis of behavioural criteria that, of necessity, provide us with knowledge of other minds.

It has to be said that this is a remarkably weak argument. It is just a roundabout way of insisting, once again, that the *knowledgeable* ascription of P-predicates to others is a necessary condition for ascribing these same predicates to oneself. The question to which Strawson fails to provide a satisfactory answer is: why isn't it enough for the self-ascription of P-predicates that the self-ascriber can conceive of ascribing these same predicates to others on the basis of behavioural evidence without ever *knowing* that there are other minds? There is a quick but unsatisfactory answer to this question by which Strawson may well have been tempted. According to this answer, one cannot even *think* of other minds unless one can *know* whether or not there are other minds. These ways of knowing are precisely the logically adequate criteria that Strawson posits. If the sceptic is right that there really is no way of telling anyone else's state of mind, then one would lack the conception of other minds and therefore lack the conception of one's own mind.

The problem with this argument is that it does not just rely on old verificationism writ small, or loose. It relies on old-fashioned verificationism writ large and strict.[16] One would have to suppose that the only meaningful statements are ones that can be empirically verified. This would instantly knock out scepticism about other minds since the sceptic is precisely someone who thinks that statements about other minds are meaningful but cannot be verified. However, this argument against scepticism comes at a high price. Apart from objections to old-fashioned verificationism, relying on this principle to deal with scepticism makes much of the complex theoretical machinery of chapter 3 of *Individuals* redundant for anti-sceptical

purposes. Why bother with this machinery if the self-defeating character of scepticism is a direct consequence of verificationism? As Barry Stroud notes, there is 'nothing special or unique' (2000: 24) about this way of attacking scepticism, and it would be disappointing if the supposedly self-defeating character of scepticism 'amounts to nothing more and nothing less than an application of some version of the verification principle' (2000: 24).

The only reasonable conclusion is that in chapter 3 of *Individuals* Strawson fails to deliver a convincing refutation of scepticism. This is how Strawson himself came to see things in *Scepticism and Naturalism*. He accepts Stroud's criticisms of his earlier argument but still maintains that he got something right in *Individuals*. What he got right is that 'self-ascription implies the capacity for other-ascription' (2008: 18). This looks like a notational variant of his claim that it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness, experiences, to oneself that one should also be willing to ascribe them to others who are not oneself. To ascribe states of consciousness to others is to judge that those others are in, or have, the relevant states of consciousness. To judge that another person is F, where F is a P-predicate, is to *believe* that he is F. Hence, 'we must take it, or believe, that we have knowledge of …. other minds' (2008: 17).

If philosophical sceptics are among those who must believe that they have knowledge of other minds, then they are in the incoherent position of believing that they have knowledge of other minds while at the same time denying that knowledge of other minds is possible. The sceptic might respond that since he can self-ascribe experiences while denying that knowledge of other minds is possible, he is living proof that the self-ascription of experiences does *not* require belief in knowledge of other minds. Strawson's reply to someone who argues in this way is that they are deluding themselves. They think that they believe that they lack knowledge of other minds, but this is not, and cannot be, what they actually believe. In practice, they believe, like the rest of us, that they have knowledge of other minds. One startling consequence

of this argument is that philosophical sceptics do not know what they believe. What they think they believe about knowledge of other minds is not what they actually believe.[17]

Suppose that Strawson is right, and that the sceptic must believe that he has knowledge of other minds, and so must believe that there are states of mind that are not his own. However, if one is to believe that there are other minds one needs adequate reasons to believe this.[18] It cannot be Strawson's view that a self-ascriber of states of consciousness must believe that there are other minds regardless of whether he has any reason to believe this. The required reasons must be *epistemic*, and evidence for P is the most basic type of epistemic reason for believing that P. But is there any guarantee of the availability of such evidence of other minds? What if one never encounters any other minds, or anyone other being that behaves in ways that would warrant the ascription to them of states of consciousness?[19] In reply, Strawson could retreat to the position that in order to self-ascribe P-predicates one must be *prepared* to ascribe them to others, even if one never actually does so because one is alone in the world. On this view, the self-ascriber is like a juror who is prepared to believe that the defendant is guilty but only if presented with adequate evidence of the defendant's guilt. Even though there is no guarantee that such evidence will be forthcoming, and therefore no guarantee that the juror will *actually* believe that the defendant is guilty, it is essential that this is something that the juror is prepared to believe.

In the case of other minds, the worry that we lack evidence or reasons for believing that there are other minds is not serious. Evidence of other minds is not lacking, and what Strawson says about the behavioural criteria for ascribing states of consciousness to others can be read in this light. To describe these criteria as 'logically adequate' is not to suppose that their being satisfied in a given case logically entails that the individual in question is in the mental state for which the criteria are criterial. Going by a person's behaviour, it can look for all the world as if she is depressed and yet she is not depressed. It is sometimes suggested that what Strawson

wishes to rule out is that our other-ascriptions are *always* mistaken but even this might be going too far. Strawson's point is that the logically adequate criteria for, say, depression are criterial for the *belief* that some other person is depressed: the concept of depression is such that a person's satisfying the associated behavioural criteria is an adequate reason for *believing* that he or she is depressed in the case in which the person is not oneself.

It is a perfectly familiar point that even justified beliefs can be false. Even if one has good behavioural reasons for other-ascribing depression, these reasons do not logically entail that the person to whom depression is ascribed is depressed. There is still room for the sceptic to stick in his knife, so it cannot be said that 'the sceptical problem does not arise' (1959: 106). However, Strawson might reasonably claim to have emasculated scepticism about other minds. For once it is agreed that self-conscious beings, including sceptics, must be prepared to other-ascribe states of consciousness and so must believe and have adequate reasons to believe in the existence of other minds, the residual sceptical worry is that there is no absolute guarantee that this belief is correct. Perhaps not, but does that matter? Strawson thinks not, and it is arguable that he is right about that.

Where does this leave his suggestion that the best argument against scepticism about other minds is that the non-uniqueness of one's physical constitution and the general uniformity of nature make it highly improbable that one is unique among members of one's species in having subjective states? Strawson maintains that 'this is no one's reason for believing in the existence of other minds' (2008: 16) because it over-intellectualizes this belief. The existence of other minds is something that we take for granted, but Strawson cannot have it both ways. If we must *believe* that there are other minds, and this is an example of a genuine belief, then we must have reasons for the belief, that is, reasons for which we believe that there are other minds. There are, no doubt, many such reasons, and they could include the non-uniqueness of one's physical constitution.

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This brings into focus another aspect of Strawson's discussion. When he asks how is it that one can ascribe states of consciousness to others, his answer is strikingly one-dimensional: one ascribes states of consciousness to others on the strength of observation of their behaviour. However, there is no reason to suppose that this is the sole basis on which we ascribe states of consciousness to others, even if a person's 'behaviour' includes their utterances about their own states of consciousness, that is, if even their behaviour includes what Strawson calls their 'first-person P-utterances' (1959: 108). As Strawson knew quite well, many other-ascriptions are based on something other than a person's behaviour. Furthermore, the biological justification for general belief in the existence of other minds is of little help in resolving what *specific* state of mind another person is in. A realistic account of the basis on which mental states are ascribed to others needs to be thoroughly multi-dimensional. Indeed, it is rather surprising that a thinker as subtle as Strawson should have said so little about non-behavioural sources of knowledge or justified belief about other minds, and the next task is to correct this troubling limitation in his account.

4. The explanatory problem

In a discussion of physicalism in *Scepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson distinguishes between the physical and the personal history of a person. In recounting a person's history in purely physical terms, in terms of bodily movements and electrochemical events, we would 'leave out almost everything that was humanly interesting' (2008: 46). It is a person's personal history that is humanly interesting, that is, the history of their actions, thoughts, desires, beliefs, intentions, and so on. Personal histories, told in mentalistic terms, are the main concern of diarists, novelists, biographers, historians, journalists, and gossips. These histories are exercises in folk psychology, a type of psychological explanation favoured by 'such simple folk as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Proust, and Henry James' (2008: 46).

How do biographers and historians go about their business? They ascribe P-predicates to the human subjects of their enquiries but what is the basis on which they do that? Historians and biographers are not in a position to ascribe P-predicates to Julius Caesar on the strength of observation of his behaviour since it is no longer observable. They might rely, instead, on the historical record of his actions and utterances but that is hardly sufficient. The distinguished biographer Richard Holmes describes *empathy* as 'the biographer's most valuable and perilous weapon' (2017: 6). Empathy in some form is also seen by some philosophers of history as the key to historical explanation. Of particular interest in this regard are the views of Collingwood. He defends the radical thesis that what he calls the 'historical method' is 'the only one by which I can know the mind of another' (1946: 219). The historian 'does not know the past by simply believing a witness who saw the events in question and has left his evidence on record' (1946: 282). History is the re-enactment of past thoughts and experiences in the historian's own mind. This is Collingwood's version of empathy, which he sees as delivering imaginative knowledge or understanding of other minds.[20]

This is far removed from the Strawsonian reliance on behavioural criteria in ascribing mental states to other minds. Indeed, for Collingwood, the historical method also provides one with knowledge of one's *own* mind since 'it is only by historical thinking that I can discover what I thought ten years ago' (1946: 219). In this sense, *all* knowledge of mind is historical. If Strawson's conception of our knowledge of other minds is too behaviouristic for some tastes, Collingwood's account is the perfect antidote, but only if it is successful. Even if it is not, this does not invalidate the concern that Strawson's theory is too narrow. Our picture of the mental states of others is shaped by a variety of factors apart from their behaviour. It is an argument in favour of treating empathy as one such factor that it accords with the practice of biographers and, if Collingwood is to be believed, historians.

In what sense must historians or biographers re-enact the thoughts and experiences of those they seek to understand? Suppose that an historian is trying to ascertain Caesar's thoughts when he decided to cross the Rubicon.

> But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? .... [T]he historian of politics or warfare, presented with an account of certain actions done by Julius Caesar, tries to understand these actions, that is, to discover what thoughts in Caesar's mind determined him to do them. This implies envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself what Caesar thought about the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind (Collingwood 1946: 215).

However, this is to be understood as 'a labour of active and therefore critical thinking' rather than 'a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind' (1946: 215). The historian criticizes past thoughts in re-enacting them: 'nothing could be a completer error concerning the history of thought than to suppose that the historian …. merely ascertains "what so-and-so" thought, leaving it to some one else to decide "whether it was true"' (1946: 215-6).

What is going on here? On a purely epistemological reading, what re-enactment offers the historian or biographer is a way of *knowing* the mind of another. This fits with the repeated references to the task of *discerning* or *ascertaining* the thoughts of one's subject. Yet there is an obvious difficulty with the idea that it is possible to discover Julius Caesar's thoughts by re-enacting them: one cannot re-enact his thoughts if one does not know what they are. However, the appearance of circularity is only superficial. The sense in which one might re-enact Caesar's thoughts about crossing the Rubicon is that one can imagine oneself in Caesar's place and ask what one would have thought or done in his place. By engaging in this imaginative exercise, one can ascertain Caesar's thoughts.

On the face of it, there is little justification for supposing that the thoughts that *I* would have had in Caesar's place are thoughts that *he* had, even if I do my best to take on board his context and background assumptions. In defence of Collingwood, John Campbell argues that what needs to be acknowledged is what he calls the *dynamic* role of imagination in providing knowledge of the mind, that is, the role that imagination plays in 'an understanding of how one mental state generates or produces another' (2020: 71). For example, did Brutus assassinate Caesar because he was jealous or because he loved the republic? When Brutus's countrymen found him to be acting from one motive rather than another, 'they used their imaginative understanding of him to get a sense of how the action was generated. It was their empathetic understanding of Brutus that provided knowledge of which mental process was operative here' (2020: 11). Far from regarding our imaginative understanding of one another as speculative, we see our ordinary knowledge of which motive someone acted from as 'meeting the highest possible epistemic standard' (2020: 12), that is, as beyond reasonable doubt.

This is far-fetched. Knowledge of other people's motives is notoriously elusive, and the most we can say about Brutus is that it is plausible or likely that he acted from a given motive. However, hypotheses about other people's motives are just that: hypotheses that are far from being beyond reasonable doubt. Findings in this domain are provisional even if Campbell and Collingwood are correct to draw attention to 'the use of imagination to track the ballistics of people's thoughts and feelings' (Campbell 2020: 9). However, the fact that imagination is used in this way is something that Strawson ought to acknowledge. Even if there are questions about the extent to which the procedures described by Campbell and Collingwood yield *knowledge* of other minds, it is beyond question that empathy is one basis on which we *ascribe* states of mind to other people, that is, form *beliefs* about their thoughts and feelings. Observation of Brutus's behaviour might leave one none the wiser as to his true motives unless supplemented by imaginative understanding.

There is also another lesson for Strawson in Collingwood's account. In discussing whether we have knowledge of other minds or only the belief that there are minds other than our own, Strawson does not take due account of another fundamental aspect of our interest in minds other than our own: an interest in *understanding* them. From this perspective, the challenge is not so much to work out what another person thinks but rather to make sense of their thinking what they think. The question in this context is: why would someone think that? In the same way, other people's actions lead us to wonder: why would they do that? The focus of such questions is *Verstehen*, the attempt to understand beliefs and actions from within, that is, from the standpoint of the thinker or agent. What we are after is not so much *knowledge* but *intelligibility*. We want to make what other people think and do intelligible to ourselves, and thereby not only to see them as minded but as minded in a sense that makes sense to us. In these terms, Collingwood was what Michael Martin calls a 'radical Verstehenist', someone who held that 'historical events must be understood from the inside, and that in order to understand the action of historical agents, historians must rethink the agents' thoughts' (2000: 7). When it is a matter of Verstehen, talk of logically adequate behavioural criteria for the other-ascription of P-predicates is beside the point.

Consider, in this light, the example of Caesar and the Rubicon. In the words of the eminent Collingwood scholar William Dray, what would make Caesar's action understandable is the thought that 'given the situation as he conceived his to be, and goals like the ones he wanted to pursue, faced by a barrier like the Rubicon, the thing to do would be to cross it' (1995: 55). The only way to establish whether this is in fact the case would be to try out Caesar's practical argument for crossing the Rubicon, to re-enact it and see whether it can really be thought. Thus, 'to understand an action in a properly historical way is in some degree to see it as having been appropriate to the circumstances as the agent saw them' (1995: 56). This is a

form of normative assessment that explains Collingwood's insistence that re-enactment is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking.

Since Strawson rather than Collingwood is our main concern here, what is most helpful about this account is the way that it highlights a lacuna in Strawson's theory of other minds in *Individuals*. Not only does Strawson not make enough of our desire for Verstehen, but his emphasis on behavioural criteria also leaves out the normative dimension of our engagement with other minds, the subjecting of other minds to what Davidson calls 'the constitutive ideal of rationality' (1982: 223). When we attempt to make sense of other people, we attribute to them mental states that it makes sense for them to have in the circumstances in which they find themselves. We have their behaviour to go on, including their utterances, but their utterances are not self-interpreting. We can talk about logically adequate behavioural criteria for the other-ascription of P-predicates, but such criteria are only of any use to us if we haven't misunderstood the relevant behaviour. In *Individuals*, Strawson says remarkably little about the extent to which our interest in behavioural criteria for the other-ascription of P-predicates is shaped by our desire for Verstehen.

These gaps in Strawson's account are, no doubt, a reflection of when *Individuals* was written. Philosophical writing is always influenced by contextual factors, and *Individuals* is no exception. Its arguments suggest that Strawson was heavily influenced by Wittgenstein and the crude behaviourism of some of his followers. Strawson was far too subtle a thinker to fall for this and he saw himself as avoiding the extremes of behaviourism and Cartesianism. However, just as the residual influence of Cartesianism is evident from his insistence in *Individuals* on intelligibility of life after death, his epistemology of other minds fails fully to shake off the influence of behaviourism. As a result, we have less to learn from *Individuals* about the epistemological problem of other minds than about the conceptual problem. As far as the latter is concerned, however, Strawson's discussion remains essential reading.

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[1] For an account of this distinction, see Avramides 2001, Gomes 2011, and Parrott 2019.

[2] As Snowdon notes, it is taken by many 'to be a condition on the existence of knowledge that there is a way the knowledge was received or generated' (2019: 26).

[3] Notice, however, that asking how one can *ascribe* states of consciousness is not equivalent to asking how one can *know* of others' states of consciousness. Ascriptions need not constitute knowledge.

[4] See Strawson 2008: 17. This is a reprint, with additional material, of the 1985 edition of *Scepticism and Naturalism.*

[5] The notion of a person's 'behaviour' is also less straightforward than Strawson's discussion assumes.

[6] See, for example, Matravers 2011 and Campbell 2020.

[7] The classic text here is Collingwood 1946. Collingwood occupied the Waynflete Chair from 1936 to 1941. Strawson's tenure lasted from 1968 to 1987.

[8] The importance of this distinction is highlighted in chapter 2 of Cassam 2007.

[9] See Cassam 2007 for this conception of the 'how-possible' framework. Anil Gomes uses this framework in his illuminating account of Strawson's version of the conceptual problem. See, especially, Gomes 2011: 356-61.

[10] This implausible supposition is only worth mentioning here because it, or something like it, plays a significant role in Strawson's discussion.

[11] As Anil Gomes puts it, the suggestion here is that 'the generality of our mental concepts is threatened by the fact that we have different ways of coming to know whether they apply' (2011: 357).

[12] Gomes 2011 also expresses concern about the role in Strawson's argument of 'a controversial claim linking meaning and verification' (2011: 357) but makes the point that verificationism is not the only potential source of the conceptual problem of other minds.

[13] Strawson does not explain the notion of a 'natural fact'.

[14] Anscombe 1957.

[15] As Ayer points out. See Ayer 1963: 105.

[16] See Ayer 1963: 110 and Stroud 2000 on the role of verificationism in Strawson's argument.

[17] As argued in Cassam 1996, this is a general problem with 'transcendental' arguments that try to establish claims about what we must believe to be the case. The sceptic claims not to believe what these arguments say he must believe.

[18] This claim assumes the truth of some version of evidentialism about belief. For a defence of this view, see Adler 2002: 5.

[19] See Ayer 1963: 106-9.

[20] Dray 1995 provides an illuminating account of Collingwood's view.