

Strawson's Realistic monism*

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There is at least one element in Strawson's extremely rich paper that seems to me be correct and important, and Strawson is absolutely right to bring it out. This is the point that people in philosophy of mind go around assuming that they know what the physical facts are, if not in detail then in outline: "...they think they know a lot about the nature of the physical" (p.2). This assumption is false, or at any rate implausible, or at any rate un-argued for. To make the assumption, Strawson says, is a "very large mistake. It is perhaps Descartes's, or perhaps rather 'Descartes's', greatest mistake, and it is funny that in the past fifty years it has been the most fervent revilers of the great Descartes, the true father of modern materialism, who have made the mistake with most intensity" (p.2; footnote omitted.)

Strawson says that the mistake is not only large: it is fatal. Here too I agree, though I think I would express the fatality somewhat differently from him. In my view, the mistake is fatal because, on the assumption that we are ignorant of some of the crucial facts, the central pieces of reasoning in philosophy of mind collapse. For example, consider the zombie argument against materialism, or, as Strawson would say for reasons a bit opaque to me, the *Australian* (p. 16, fn 37) zombie argument. Its first premise is that it is conceivable that I have a zombie duplicate; that is, there is someone identical to me in respect of every physical fact, but different from me in respect of some experiential fact. Its second premise is that if this is conceivable it is possible. Its conclusion is that physicalism is false, for physicalism (setting aside some technicalia) entails that zombies so described are impossible. This argument is unpersuasive if we take seriously the hypothesis that we are ignorant of some of the physical facts. For suppose that the hypothesis is true, and there are some physical facts of which we are ignorant but which are relevant to the nature of experience. We therefore face two (and only two) options: either we include these facts within the scope of the quantifier 'every physical fact' which occurs implicitly or explicitly in both premises of the argument, or we don't. Suppose they are included; then the claim of conceivability loses all credibility. If there are relevant physical facts

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unknown to me, I will simply not be imaginatively acquainted with the putative possibility of zombies in the way that is required of me if the argument is to be plausible. Of course, this is not to deny that there may be *a* sense of ‘conceiving’ according to which I can truly conceive of zombies even if I am ignorant; it is only to insist that this sense is not the one that counts. On the other hand, suppose they are not included; then the physicalist can fairly claim that not all of the relevant facts have been taken into account. It is not at issue that experiential facts bear a contingent relation to *some* physical facts; the issue is whether they bear a contingent relation to all. Either way, the argument fails. (See my 2006 for my own development of these issues.)

So on this point—on the point of out-Descartes-ing Descartes (fn.21, p.7)—I fall into line with Strawson, as he in fact falls into line with others such as Russell and Chomsky. But unfortunately, this element of Strawson’s position sits very uncomfortably with other, and perhaps (for him) more important, elements of his overall view. We may illustrate this if we concentrate on what I take to be a central argument—if not *the* central argument—in Strawson’s paper: the argument against the hypothesis that the world is in some sense fundamentally utterly non-experiential.

As I understand it, this argument proceeds as follows. First, it is asserted that if any experiential fact is wholly dependent on a non-experiential fact, then it must be the case that the non-experiential fact in question is, as Strawson says, ‘intrinsically suitable’—that is, it must be the case that the non-experiential fact, whatever it is, has internal to it a potentiality to, as we might say, *wholly yield* the experiential fact. Next, it is asserted that no non-experiential fact has this potential. In short, the argument is this:

- (1) If an experiential fact *e* is wholly dependent on a non-experiential fact *n*, then *n* must be intrinsically suitable (i.e. be intrinsically such to wholly yield an experiential fact).
- (2) There is no non-experiential fact *n* such that it is intrinsically suitable.
- (3) Ergo, no experiential fact *e* is wholly dependent on any non-experiential fact *n*.

There is clearly nothing wrong with this from a logical point of view. So what is up for discussion is the truth of (1) and (2).

Now, when he discusses this argument, Strawson is mainly concerned to discredit two kinds of opponent. The first kind—the emergentist—denies (1). The emergentist wants to say that *e* is wholly dependent on *n*, and yet insist also that this tells us nothing about the intrinsic or essential nature of *n*. Strawson says this idea is ‘incoherent’ (p.8). I am not sure that it is incoherent, since it is not clear to me what the theory of coherence is that classifies it as incoherent. But I do agree that we are here in the realm of something that—for what it is worth—large numbers of people find decidedly odd. To give the phenomenon a name Strawson does not, we are here in the realm of ‘necessary connections between metaphysically distinct existences’. The emergentist thinks that there are necessary connections between metaphysically distinct existences. Strawson is saying that is you think this you think something mistaken.

The emergentist is one kind of opponent discussed by Strawson; the other is the eliminativist, i.e., the person who denies that experiences exist at all. (The eliminativist may be construed as denying a presupposition of (1-3) above as standardly presented; that is, that there are experiential facts.) Strawson is pretty severe on eliminativism. He says (p.3) it is “the strangest thing to ever happen in the whole history of human thought...the greatest woo-woo of the human mind.” Once again I am not sure about this, because I don’t know what the theory of strangeness is according to which this one is the strangest. Moreover, I am not at all sure that Strawson *himself* is entitled to the strangeness claim, given what he says elsewhere. In an earlier paper, Strawson discusses Chomsky’s methodological naturalism, and comments that he can feel it creeping over him (see Strawson 2003, p.63). Someone over whom Chomsky’s methodological naturalism is creeping is so far as I can see not entitled to say that eliminativism is so strange, though in fairness I suppose this depends on how much it—i.e. methodological naturalism—*has* crept over you. As I understand it, Chomsky’s methodological naturalism not only leaves it open that there might be no experiences: it positively encourages the thought. On Chomsky’s view, a central feature of science is its divorce from commonsense; since there is nothing more solidly commonsense than experiences, Chomsky seems to be getting you ready for the thought that there are none. (Though of course he doesn’t say this, nor does what he says entail it.)

Methodological naturalism aside however, I do agree with Strawson that both eliminativism and emergentism are things to be avoided if possible. However, in

concentrating so much on emergentism and eliminativism, Strawson spends less time than he might have on a more resourceful opponent of the argument we just set out. This opponent denies (2) with something like the accompanying commentary: “Look, I agree there are experiential facts; I am not an eliminativist. And I agree too that it is impossible for two facts to participate in the relation of *being wholly dependent on* without being intrinsically suitable for doing so; I am not an emergentist. However, I think nevertheless that experiential facts *are* wholly dependent on non-experiential facts and in consequence that at least some of those facts are intrinsically such as to yield the experiential facts. What I don’t understand is (2), the assertion that no non-experiential fact is intrinsically suitable. Where does *that* claim come from?”

Strawson seems to me to have something to say to this, but not much. Most of what he says comes up in the context of a discussion of liquidity. Suppose we advance an argument about liquidity that is analogous to Strawson’s about experience. The argument would go like this:

- (4) If a liquidity fact *l* is wholly dependent on a non-liquidity fact *m*, then *m* must be intrinsically suitable (i.e. be intrinsically such to wholly yield a liquidity fact).
- (5) There is no non-liquidity fact *m* such that it is intrinsically suitable.
- (6) Ergo, no liquidity fact *l* is wholly dependent on any non-liquidity fact *m*.

This argument is clearly unsound because its conclusion is false: the facts about something’s being a liquid—for example the facts about water’s being a liquid—do indeed depend on facts not about liquid, for example facts about the nature of various chemical elements and their properties. Moreover, the *first* premise of this argument, (4), has whatever force (1) has and for the same reason. After all, what got us to believe (1) had nothing to do with experience or liquidity *as such*. What got us to believe (1) was a perfectly general piece of metaphysical reasoning, viz., that two facts may not stand in the sort of relation required by dependency without being of such and such a sort. *That* piece of reasoning, if it were intact, would remain so whether the facts under discussion concerned experiences or liquids. In sum, if the liquidity argument is unsound, and (4) is true, the culprit must be (5). And it is this that opens the door for the position I stated in the previous paragraph: according to

this position, just as the second premise of the liquidity argument is false or without foundation, so too is the second premise of the experience argument.

Now, Strawson agrees that (5) is false, but insists that (2) is true. Why? Well one thing he says is that liquidity is no help if you are an emergentist. That is true, but irrelevant. The position I am imagining *agrees* with Strawson about emergentism, and so agrees with both (1) and (4). The issue concerns, not (1), but (2), and about this emergentism has nothing to say. Another thing he says is that it quite transparent in the liquid case how liquidity facts might be necessitated by facts not about liquidity. But again: true but irrelevant. The point is not that it is *easy* to see how non-experiential facts are intrinsically suitable to yield experiential facts, nor that we can get an imaginative grip on how this might happen. The point was to nevertheless insist that it does happen, or at rate to insist that we have been give no reason that it can't. Why does 'we have no imaginative grip on p' entitle us to say 'it is not the case that p'?

Of course Strawson might just *insist* that (2) is true. Is there something that can be done to counter this insistence? Well, one thing that can be done is to remind him of the large numbers of people who go around thinking they know about the nature of the physical and what *he himself* says about such people. Strawson says, as we have seen, that such people are making a large and fatal mistake. But the mistake is presumably not that of thinking that they know in detail about every single physical fact. That position is absurd and no-body holds it. The mistake that such people are making—we agreed earlier that it *was* a mistake—is to think that they 'know enough to know' (as it is often put; see also fn21, p.7) that no physical fact is such as yield *any* experiential fact, or at any rate that it is very controversial whether it is. More generally, the mistake is to think that you know what *kind* of fact a physical fact is, and moreover that you know that no fact of *that kind* is such as to yield anything experiential. But isn't Strawson's claim about non-experiential facts directly analogous to *this* claim about physical facts? Isn't *he* simply insisting that he knows enough to know about non-experiential facts that they are not intrinsically suitable? Why then isn't his position on non-experiential facts directly analogous to the mistaken position about physical facts that he himself so correctly identifies and criticizes?

For Strawson to insist on the truth of (2), therefore, seems to me to be dialectically weak. But—if I understand matters correctly—his overall position is in

some ways worse than this. For let us reconsider what Strawson means by ‘physical’. What are the physical facts according to him? Well, as he explains in detail, Strawson has a slightly idiosyncratic (though none the worse for that) way of introducing the term ‘physical’. For him a physical fact is a kind of fact that includes as sub-kinds both experiential facts and non-experiential facts. This account of what it is to be a physical fact permits Strawson to officially distinguish himself from those philosophers who out-Descartes-Descartes. Those philosophers think we *know* that no physical fact is such as to yield any experiential fact. Strawson’s denies this. For him ‘physical fact’ includes experiential facts and experiential facts *are* such as to yield experiential facts. So, in Strawson’s terminology, it is not the case that we know that no physical fact is such as to yield any experiential fact.

However, while Strawson may be distinguished from his opponents in this way, we need also to keep our wits about us. For Strawson’s way of introducing the term ‘physical’ is, as I have said, idiosyncratic. His opponents don’t mean what he means by ‘physical’. What do they mean? I think they mean, near enough, ‘non-experiential’. Factoring this into the issues we have been considering, it turns out that ‘the’ mistake of out-Descartes-ing Descartes might be one of two quite separate mistakes. On the one hand, it might be the mistake of supposing that you know enough to know about *both* the experiential *and* the non-experiential that no fact of that kind, i.e. either experiential or non-experiential, is such as to yield any experiential fact. On the other hand, it might be the mistake of supposing that you know enough to know about the non-experiential *alone* that no fact of that kind, i.e., the non-experiential, is such as to yield any experiential fact.

Now, which mistake does Strawson intend to attribute to the philosophy of mind establishment when he talks so compellingly in (e.g.) the passage I quoted at the beginning, of “the most fervent revilers of the great Descartes?” I think it very unlikely that anyone, even the pillars of that establishment, make the first mistake, i.e. the one about both the experiential and the non-experiential. For surely everybody agrees that experiential facts *themselves* are sufficient to yield experiential facts. So the only mistake that could be at issue is the second mistake, i.e. the one about the non-experiential alone. And as I have said, I agree with Strawson that this mistake is large and fatal, though again I would express the fatality differently from him. On the other hand, while this is a large and fatal mistake, so far as I can make out one philosopher who makes it is, unfortunately, Strawson himself. For, as we have seen,

Strawson insists on (2), and (2) is the claim that no non-experiential fact is intrinsically such as to yield an experiential fact. When we ask what grounds this insistence, however, all we seem to find is that we know enough to know.

I argued a moment ago that Strawson's confidence that (2) is true is dialectically weak because it is analogous to a confidence that he rightly sees as misplaced. Once we adjust for the terminological difference between him and his opponents, however, this charge of dialectical weakness may be upgraded to one of contradiction: part of Strawson's overall account entails he is ignorant of non-experiential facts; another part entails he is not. More generally—and here I am summarizing my overall reactions to Strawson's paper—there appears to be two rather different views struggling for dominance here. The radical view is that we really are ignorant of the nature of the physical or non-experiential, and moreover that this ignorance has a significant impact on philosophy of mind. This is the view that we find hinted at but not developed in Russell and Chomsky, a view that I believe has the potential to completely transform philosophy of mind. The conventional view is a kind of dualism about the experiential and the non-experiential, a dualism not mitigated by the idea that there might be a super-kind of fact that includes both, and that deserves the name 'physical'. I have been suggesting that these two views are inconsistent. If that is right, Strawson needs to give up something; I hope it is obvious what I at least think should go.

References.

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