

**LANGUAGE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK :
A NOTE ON STRAWSON.**

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Introduction :

Analysis of language is a twentieth century phenomenon. It has been gradually realised by many important philosophers of this century that language is relevant to Philosophy. It is relevant for more than one reason. For some, language is relevant; because it is the chief tool by which we can know reality. But it is true that language often misleads us and consequently it must be revised in favour of an ideal language. So what is relevant to philosophy is not the language in ordinary use, but an ideal (artificial) language which philosophers construct. Ideal language is very much careful about logical syntax, which they believe would give correct picture of reality.

The proposal that there should be an ideal language has been assailed from different directions. It has been objected that the ideal language philosophers make an approach which is basically circular, because here they propose that they shall know the structure of reality on knowing the structure of language. But it is equally true that we cannot know that a language is ideal unless first we know the structure of reality. Thus the ideality of language requires a prior knowledge of ontology.¹ The ideal language philosophers, therefore, cannot claim ontological neutrality which makes their approach completely biased. It is, therefore, doubtful if an ideal language can be acknowledged as philosophically relevant.

Some philosophers, mostly belonging to Oxford, consequently reject the claim that philosophy can proceed in its task with an ideal language. Some of them believe that our ordinary language is all right so far it goes. Wittgenstein of *Investigations* is of the opinion that it is useless to take a monolithic conception of language. It is wrong to say that language has the single function of recording facts. Why should the world be conceived of as a totality of facts and not in any other way? He discovered that whatever is conveyed by language is not dictated by logic but by convention of use. He, therefore, focussed his attention on natural history of language rather than logic. So what the *Investigations* shows is that if language is relevant to philosophy, it is not an ideal language, but the ordinary one.

This idea is echoed by some other philosophers like Austin and Strawson. Austin is of the opinion that ordinary language has survived the test of time and this shows that it must be adequate for the purpose for which language is invented. He says that " Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing and the connections they have found worth making, in the life times of many generations."² Like ideal language philosophers, Austin believes that we can know a lot of things if we care to look at words and sentences. But "when we examine what we say when, what words we should use in what situation, we are looking again not *merely* at words...but also at the realities we use the words to talk about."³ This is what we call *linguistic Phenomenology*.

Strawson opposes ideal language for two reasons. The first is that everything that is contained in ordinary language does not permit formalisation. Secondly, ordinary language and the actual use of words may be shown to a sure way to philosophy. We shall consider in this paper the position of Strawson in connection with his claim that language, i.e., ordinary language is relevant to philosophy not because it discloses the structure of reality, but because "it lays bare the conceptual framework of human mind."

Descriptive Metaphysics And Language

Strawson believes that the study of ordinary language will make intelligible the conceptual apparatus which lie submerged in it. To use an expression of Urmson we can say that ordinary language makes intelligible our conceptual apparatus " in a way an architect's blue-print can clarify an impressionistic sketch."⁴

The philosophy of Strawson has been built up on the background of his significant distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics. The concept of 'descriptive metaphysics' emerges in Strawson's *Individuals* in contrast with what he calls revisionary metaphysics. The distinction between the two types of metaphysics has been explained by Strawson in the following sentence: " Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure."⁵ Thus Strawson takes metaphysics to be a deliberation on the structure of human thought. In traditional speculative philosophy we find that attempts were consistently made to present a philosophically glorified scheme of things, an ontology which virtually amounted to a revision of our conceptual scheme.

Although Strawson characterises descriptive metaphysics, but actually speaking, it is a survey of our cognitive apparatus. Examination of the way in which we use ordinary words, will show how the fundamental categories of our thought hang together and how they relate, in truth, to those formal notions which range through all categories.

The method which Strawson advocates for the discovery of the conceptual scheme has been called the method of descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis is nothing but " a close examination of the actual use of words". Strawson believes that this kind of analysis will be philosophically productive. He writes....."the claim to clarify will seem empty, unless the results achieved have some bearing on the typical philosophical problems and difficulties which arise concerning the concepts to be

clarified. Now these problems and difficulties have their roots in ordinary, unconstructed concepts, in the elusive, deceptive moods of functioning of unformatised linguistic expressions."⁶

Consequently, one has to describe the logical behaviour of the linguistic expressions of natural languages. This alone would solve the problems and difficulties rooted in ordinary language. Descriptive analysis is the attempt to bring out the natural foundation of our conceptual apparatus. Strawson conceives that the descriptive philosophers, i.e., the philosophers who intend to describe our conceptual scheme may have to do more than making literal description, but it is nonetheless true that "the actual use of linguistic expressions remains his sole and essential point of contact with the reality which he wishes to understand; conceptual reality."⁷

The use of words in ordinary language does not only unveil our conceptual scheme, it also determines our ontology. Jack Kaminsky says, "P.F. Strawson has been one of few to elaborate our ontology which involves a serious ontological commitment."⁸ Again he observes that Strawson begins by assuming that individuals do engage in discussion and then he raises the question concerning the extra-linguistic conditions which must be present if we are to be assured that communication be actually occurring. The first and perhaps the most important condition is that there are particulars to which the words employed can refer. Particulars compose ontology for Strawson. This theory has been established by Strawson by his theory of reference and communication, and also by his concept of identification. If we go through Strawson's argument contained in the first chapter of *Individuals* we will find that he believes in a very close connection between language and reality, of course, not in the sense in which the ideal language philosophers would conceive it. Strawson does not concede the idea that there is a structural affinity between language and reality. His idea is rather that the inclusion of a particular within our ontology is determined by linguistic phenomena, viz., whether the particular in question is such that it cannot be known by us which is in

its turn, is to be testified by the fact if it can be referred to by and that again successfully. Success, in this context, is determined by fruitful communication. Communication in Strawson's opinion is fruitful only when the hearer can identify the particular which is referred to by the speaker. If the hearer fails to identify the particular referred to by the speaker then communication fails and the speaker also fails to identify. Strawson's theory is that when the hearer is successful to identify a particular referred to by the speaker, the speaker earns the right to include the particular in his ontology.

If we follow Strawson through the different steps of his account, we find the following :

(a) Language is a means of communication. We can identify particular if we can communicate successfully. Since the world is taken to contain particulars, we use some proper names, pronouns, and descriptive phrases to refer to particulars.

(b) The hearer can identify if on the basis of the referring expression used by the speaker, he can pick out by sight or hearing or touch the particular referred to, knowing that it is that particular.

(c) All particulars referred to by the speaker can not be sensibly discriminated. So when a particular referred to by the speaker is beyond the range of the hearer's senses, it is difficult to ascertain whether the particular identified by the hearer is the same as the particular referred to by the speaker.

What is the guarantee that identification in such a situation is successful? It is theoretically conceivable that there is a multitude of particulars answering to the same referring expressions. Strawson solves this difficulty by suggesting that the particular which is not sensibly present and hence cannot be demonstratively identified, may be identified by a description which relates it uniquely to another particular which can be demonstratively identified. The sector occupied by the particular should be uniquely related to the sector which the speaker and the hearer

themselves occupy.

The process of identification requires that there is a single system of relation in which every thing or event has a place. According to Strawson there is a system of spatial and temporal relation in which every particular is uniquely related to every other. But the conceptual scheme does not simply operate with a spatio-temporal framework. It is not only case that the experience of a particular must be arranged in space and time, as Kant would endorse. Nevertheless, in the Kantian system there is a question of arrangement of the data received through the faculty of sensibility. The disorganised, discrete or isolated data collected through sensibility would not produce knowledge unless they are categorised or arranged by the rather active faculty of understanding. The conceptual apparatus in the Kantian system is partially passive and partially active. In Strawson's system one may notice a similar idea when the spatio-temporal framework is discovered as a passive scheme through which we receive our experience of particulars. But this collection has to be arranged in a certain way. This arrangement does not express itself in the pattern of judgements mentioned by Kant. Strawson's point is that knowledge in the true sense requires identification. From this basic of view, he discovers that there is a relation of dependence between the identification of one class of particulars and another. It may be that we do not identify a class of particulars without a prior identification of another class of particulars. This would mean for him that from the point of identification, a class of particulars may be more basic than the class of another particulars. This amounts to an epistemic arrangement done by our cognitive apparatus. The active imposition of the category of understanding which we find in Kant is here conceived as a process of arrangement according to identifiability dependence in Strawson's philosophy.

Strawson's philosophy contains a method determining basicness which he describes as independent identifiability. Apart from that he offers certain other criterion of basicness. Material bodies and persons, according to Strawson, are considered basic not only because they can be independently identified but also because they answer perfectly to the

character of the unified spatiotemporal framework. When Strawson speaks of the spatio-temporal framework, he does not take it to be a system where all particulars find a place. The framework, in his opinion, is not something extraneous to the object in reality of which we speak. There is atleast one class of particulars which answers to the description of the framework. As a matter of fact such particulars, by virtue of their fundamental characteristics, may be said to confer their characteristics upon the framework. The framework is admittedly spatio-temporal, and material objects are three dimensional, and endure through time. Thus material bodies which meet the key conditions of three dimensionality constitute the framework. Hence Strawson concludes that given a certain general feature of the conceptual scheme we possess and given the character of the available major categories, things which are or possess material bodies must be the basic particulars.

Concluding remarks :

It is clear from the above that Strawson's examination of the actual use of words, his emphasis on the phenomenon of referring expressions and the significance of identification bring home some truth about the constitution of our cognitive mechanism. But still several problems raise their heads there. The most serious problem is the supposed necessity of communication. If one can know without publicly referring to that, then ordinary language cannot expose our conceptual scheme. Because the discovery of the conceptual scheme really hangs upon the necessity of communication through referring expressions which in fact has been questioned by some philosophers. Prof. B. A. Brody, for example, when admitting the importance of reference, has expressed his doubt regarding the need for communication and consequently for identification. In this is really questionable, then Strawson's method of unfolding our conceptual scheme will be totally frustrated.⁹

But I think Prof. Brody's remark is not cogent. It is really a contingent matter whether somebody will decide to talk to others about a particular which he knows. But such knowledge must be necessarily communicable. We cannot acknowledge the existence of particulats unless

we believe that such acknowledgement is communicated to others. It would be highly absurd if we say that a man acknowledges the existence of a particular and at the same time denies its communication possibility. It also explains partly why such a particular must be identified. That is why Strawson aptly remarks : " That it should be possible to identify particulars of a given type seems a necessary condition of the inclusion of that type in our ontology." ¹⁰

Strawson claims that the success of descriptive analysis of ordinary language would depend to a large extent on the claim which Strawson makes in favour of the conceptual scheme. He tells us that "there is a massive core of human thinking which has no history."¹¹ What he means to say is that the analysis of language would reveal a universal and invariant conceptual apparatus. But it may be suspected that the conceptual scheme which ordinary man operates is relative to his cognitive content and the cultural climate of his age. This question gets a very sharp edge in the contention of Iseminger. He asks, "Was there a time in history or is there a culture in which men employed or employ a conceptual scheme in which there is no provision for the identification of basic particulars?"¹² One can also refer to the misgivings of E. A. Burtt who comments in his article "Descriptive Metaphysics" :

.....it seems to me quite clear that his (Strawson) belief in a changeless categorical core of human thinking rests on an illusion - a very natural illusion, arising from the fact that at any given point in history some concepts appear to us to be central and basic that we cannot imagine how anyone can dispense with them. To engage in any responsible inquiry seems to require their use. But when we adopt the broadest historical perspective that it is possible to adopt, do we not find that any candidate for a place in this massive core-causality, substance, space, time, individual, universal- has in fact undergone changes that are most drastic than those of linguistic idiom and personal style, and do we not naturally expect that such changes will continue, however, slowly and therefore imperceptibly to most of these who employ these concepts?

Burt further continues that "the implication of such a survey is that Strawson is mistaken in believing that there is a changeless core of metaphysical categories, and also in believing that a metaphysical system can be purely descriptive, avoiding any revisionary taint."¹³

Strawson opines that conceptual scheme pervades all languages that we presently use. But following Davidson it is claimed that Strawson's commitment becomes true only when different languages are translated into each other.¹⁴ Burt observes that Strawson is mistaken in making this presupposition. A good number of recent linguistic philosophers maintain that the so called conceptual scheme is reflected in the structure of different language differently. So the claim that there is a "massive central core of human thinking" is not tenable, since there is no such core. Burt says, "My point in this critical reflections is simply to bring out vividly the fact that the conceptual system with which "we" are operating may be much more changing, relative and culturally limited than Strawson assumes to be....."¹⁵.

But I think Strawson is right in his standpoint in claiming that the conceptual scheme is constant and changeless. Of course, there may be different methods of unfolding it which vary depending on the intellectual and perhaps cultural climate of age in which the investigation is carried on. But basically there is a constant and invariant conceptual scheme.

Now, Strawson being aware of the above phenomenon observed that "certainly concepts do change, and not only, though mainly, on the specialist periphery; and even specialist changes react on ordinary thinking."¹⁶ Nevertheless he believes that "there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all."¹⁷

Strawson's contention seems to be that the categories and concepts which constitute the massive central core of human thinking change not at all in their most fundamental character. It is true that the concept of causality, as Prof. Burt suggests, has undergone change in the course of the progress of metaphysical investigation. But the concept itself, we must not forget, was always there. The change is not fundamental in the sense

that it is effected on the endorsement of the concept in human cognitive structure. It shows that any change that is not effected on the existing framework of concepts does not do away with the ordinary and common place view of the world. Such change does not call for alternative use of linguistic expressions fitted to describe an alternative ontology.

The all important conclusion is that the ordinary man's ontology being constant a process of linguistic analysis would reveal a conceptual scheme the central core of which is invariant and changeless. Despite our cultural advancement such central core remains constant. What is important is that there is a universal ontology of ordinary people which comprise of particulars that must be objects of reference. It is this phenomenon which would reveal the invariant conceptual scheme of man which has been discovered by Strawson with the method of descriptive analysis.

NOTES

1. Copi, Irving. : " Reply to Bergmann", included in *The Linguistic Turn*, edited by Richard Rorty; The University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London; 1967,p.135.
2. Austin, J.L. : " A Plea for Excuses", included in *Ordinary Language*, edited by V.C.Chappell; Prentice-Hall, 1964,p.46.
3. *Ibid.*, P. 47
4. Urmson, J.O. : " The History of Analysis, included in *The Linguistic Turn*, edited by Richard Rorty, The University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London; 1967, p. 297.
5. Strawson, P.F. : *Individuals*; Mathuen; London; 1959, p.9.
6. Strawson, P.F. : " Analysis, Science and Metaphysics " included in *The Linguistic Turn*, edited by Richard Rorty; The University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London; 1967,p. 316.

7. Sec Discussion of Strawson's " Analysis, Science and Metaphysics ", (chaired by Jean Wahl); *Ibid.*, p.324.
8. Kaminsky, Jack.: " The Ontology of P.F. Strawson", included in *Language and Ontology*, Southern Illinois, University Press, London, 1969,p.31.
9. Brody, B.A. : "On the Ontological Priority of Physical Objects", *Nous*.Vol.5, 1971, Pp. 139-155
10. Strawson, P.F. : *Individuals*; *op. cit.* p.16
11. *Ibid.*, P.10.
12. Iseminger, Gary : " Our Conceptual Scheme", *Mind*, Vol.75, 1966, p.132.
13. Burt, E.A.: " Descriptive Metaphysics", *Mind*, Vol.72, 1963, p.32.
14. Davidson, Donald : *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*; Clarendo Press; Oxford, 1984, pp. 185-86.
15. *op. cit*, p. 35.
16. Strawson, P.F. : *Individuals*; *op. cit* p. 10.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

ANNOUNCEMENT

WORLD PHILOSOPHY CONFERENCE

(PLATINUM JUBILEE SESSION OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL CONGRESS : 2000)

We are happy to announce that the 75 th Annual Session of the Indian Philosophical Congress which was founded by eminent Philosophers like Dr. Rabindranath Tagore and Dr. Radhakrishnan - The Platinum Jubilee Session of the Congress - will be celebrated in the form of World Philosophy Conference from 28 th December 2000 to 1st January 2001 at Delhi, the metropolis of India. The Celebrations are being sponsored by the Indian Council of Philosophical Research and the Hon'ble President of the Republic of India has kindly consented to be the Chief Patron. The Jawaharlal Nehru University of New Delhi will be the Chief Host of the Conference.

Prof. S. R. Bhatt of the University of Delhi is the Co-ordinator and Organizing Secretary.

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