

24.500 Topics in Philosophy of Mind

Other Minds

Spring 2003/handout 4

Ch. 3 of Strawson, *Individuals*

(“An essay in descriptive metaphysics”.)

“Descriptive” vs. “revisionary” metaphysics: the former is “content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure” (9). Aristotle and Kant are in the descriptive camp; Descartes, Leibniz, and Berkeley are revisionists.

A bit odd, as officially explained. Strawson himself makes claims about what the world is really like (ditto Aristotle and Kant); Descartes et al. do not clearly think that ordinary thought and talk are defective (although they think that the right metaphysical categories are not ordinary ones).

Two questions:

- (a) “Why are one’s states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all?”
- (b) “Why are they ascribed to the very same thing as certain corporeal characteristics, a certain physical situation, &c.?”

This is misleading—possibly the result of the “state of consciousness” terminology. For the most part, (b) seems to be the question: why do we ascribe mental and physical properties to the same things? So (a) should be: why do we ascribe mental properties to anything at all? (a rather strange question). But Strawson in fact understands (a) as: why do we think of *experiences*, or “particular states”, as the experiences of a single subject? In other words: why do we take experiences (conscious mental events) to be bundled together as *someone’s* experiences? (Cf. Hume.)

An answer to both: “because of the unique role which each person’s body plays in his experience, particularly his perceptual experience.” That it is contingent that one body plays this role is shown by the example involving subject S, and the bodies A, B, and C. In this example A, B and C each play part of the role.

We may summarize such facts [about the “unique role”] by saying that for each person there is one body which occupies a certain causal position in relation to that person’s perceptual experience, a causal position which in various ways is unique in relation to each of the various kinds of perceptual experience he has; and—as a further consequence—that this body is also unique for him as an object of the various kinds of perceptual experience which he has.

But, although

these facts...provide a good reason why a subject of experience should have a very special regard for just one body...

they do not explain why I should have the concept of *myself* at all, why I should ascribe my thoughts and experience to *anything*

neither do they explain

why we should, as we do, ascribe certain corporeal characteristics not simply to the body standing in this special relation to the thing to which we ascribe thoughts and feelings, &c., but to the thing itself to which we ascribe those thoughts and feelings

Descartes: the ascription of mental and corporeal characteristics to the same thing is misleading (cf. “I’m overheating”, said by a motorist whose car radiator has sprung a leak, “I’m parked across the street”, etc.). See Stanley, “Persons and their properties”.

The “no-ownership” theorist (Wittgenstein?): the ascription of mental states to any individual thing is misleading.

(1) All my experiences are had₁ by B [i.e. are causally dependent on B in such-and-such ways] (contingent)

(2) All my experiences are had₂ by E (“an Ego, whose sole function is to provide an owner for experiences”) (necessary)

According to the no-ownership theorist, “the belief in E and the belief in ‘having₂’ is an illusion”, on the grounds that “Only those things whose ownership is logically transferable can be owned at all”.

However, this is “not coherent”, because of the ineliminable presence of the first person possessive in (1). “When [the no-ownership theorist] tries to state the contingent fact, which he thinks gives rise to the illusion of the ‘ego’, he has to state it in some such form as ‘All *my* experiences are had₁ by...B’”

It is unclear why the no-ownership theorist can’t use a demonstrative: all *these* experiences are had₁ by B (see ch. 1, on “demonstrative identification”).

We do not have to seek far in order to understand the place of this logically non-transferable kind of ownership in our scheme of thought...if we think...of the requirements of identifying reference in speech to *particular* states of consciousness, or private experiences, we see that such particulars cannot be thus identifyingly referred to except as the states or experiences *of* some identified person...From this it follows immediately that they must be possessed or ascribable...in such a way that it is logically impossible that a particular state or experience in fact possessed by someone should have been possessed by anyone else.

Suppose places could only be identified except as the place occupied by some identified object. Still, a particular place might have been occupied by some other object.

“a very central” thought:

it is a necessary condition of 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.

Given the footnote (“the main point here is a purely logical one”), this is much weaker than it sounds. It is an instance of the schematic claim that it is a necessary condition of applying the property P to an object *a* that “one should be prepared to ascribe” P to objects other than *a*. (The footnote puts this in the formal mode, in terms of predicates.)

The argument against Cartesianism:

1. If one can ascribe states of consciousness to oneself, one can ascribe them to others.
2. If one can ascribe states of consciousness to others, one must identify others. [On “identifying particulars”, see p. 16]
3. One cannot identify others if they are Cartesian egos—mere subjects of experience.

Therefore:

4. If one can ascribe states of consciousness to oneself, others are not Cartesian egos.

Back to the two questions:

they are connected in this way: that a necessary condition of states of consciousness being ascribed at all is that they should be ascribed to the *very same things* as certain corporeal characteristics...That is to say, states of consciousness could not be ascribed at all, *unless* they were ascribed to persons, in the sense I have claimed for this word.

Two predicates applied to persons. M-predicates (materialistically kosher) and P-predicates (the rest). “[I]n the case of at least some P-predicates, the ways of telling [whether an individual possesses it] must constitute in some sense logically adequate criteria for the ascription of the P-predicate”.

It is essential to the character of [some P-predicates] that they have both first- and third-person ascriptive uses, that they are both self-ascrivable otherwise than on the basis of observation of the behavior of the subject of them, and other-ascrivable on the basis of behavior criteria.