



Strawson on Other Minds

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<CT>STRAWSON ON OTHER MINDS

<CA>JOEL SMITH

In the third chapter of *Individuals* Strawson offers a transcendental argument intended to disarm scepticism about other minds. The argument, frequently discussed, has had a mixed reception. Amongst recent commentators, Stern (2000) endorses a version of it, whereas Sacks (2005) argues that it fails. I too believe the argument to be unpersuasive, but I think that it is worth revisiting since, in my view, it fails for reasons not previously articulated.

In §1 I outline two versions of Strawson's argument, one ambitious and one modest. The ambitious argument fails for familiar reasons but, I argue, the modest version still has significant anti-sceptical potential. In §2 I introduce a number of criticisms of transcendental argumentation that call into question their claims to synthetic *a priori*, directedness towards objective reality, necessity, and universality. I argue that, modestly understood, Strawson's argument has some resources with which to respond to each of these criticisms. However, in §3 I point out that Strawson's argument confuses a number of importantly distinct questions and, as a result, fails to convince. I conclude, in §4, with some reflections on the prospects for a revised, naturalized version of Strawson's argument.

<H1>1. *Strawson's argument*

Before distinguishing the ambitious and modest readings of Strawson's argument, it is worth quoting him at length:

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Clearly there is no sense in talking of identifiable individuals of a special type, a type, namely, such that they possess both M-predicates and P-predicates, unless there is in principle some way of telling, with regard to any individual of that type, and any P-predicate, whether that individual possesses that P-predicate. And, in the case of at least some P-predicates, the ways of telling must constitute in some sense logically adequate kinds of criteria for the ascription of the P-predicate. For suppose in no case did these ways of telling constitute logically adequate kinds of criteria. Then we should have to think of the relation between the ways of telling and what the P-predicate ascribes, or a part of what it ascribes, always in the following way: we should have to think of the ways of telling as *signs* of the presence, in the individual concerned, of this different thing, viz. the state of consciousness. But then we could only know that the way of telling was a sign of the presence of the different thing ascribed by the P-predicate, by the observation of the correlations between the two. But this observation we could each make only in one case, viz. our own ... [But] what, now, does 'our own case' mean? There is no sense in the idea of ascribing states of consciousness to oneself, or at all, unless the ascriber already knows how to ascribe at least some states of consciousness to others. So he cannot argue in general 'from his own case' to conclusions about how to do this; for unless he already knows how to do this, he has no conception of *his own case*, or any *case*, i.e. any subject of experiences ... the behaviour-criteria one goes on 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 ... [This conclusion] follows from a consideration of the conditions necessary for any ascription of states of consciousness to

anything ... But once the conclusion is accepted, the sceptical problem does not arise.

(Strawson 1959: 105–6)¹

<H2>1.1 *The ambitious reading*

A 'P-predicate' (short for 'person-predicate') is a predicate that if truly ascribable to an individual implies that that individual is conscious. An 'M-predicate' (short for 'material-predicate') is a predicate that could be truly ascribed to both persons and inanimate objects. Examples of the former are '... is in pain' and '... is playing football', examples of the latter are '... is six feet tall' and '... has fallen over'. I shall assume that associated with P-predicates are P-concepts, and that both denote P-properties. With this terminology in place, I suggest that we understand the central steps of the argument as follows:

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1. Suppose that behaviour (that which can be observed) is 'a sign' of the presence of P-properties (which are not observable).

¹ Also, 'When we take the self-ascriptive aspect of the use of some P-predicates, say "depressed", as primary, then a logical gap seems to open up between the criteria on the strength of which we say that another is depressed, and the actual state of being depressed ... if the logical gap exists, then depressed behaviour, however much there is of it, is no more than a sign of depression. But it can only become a sign of depression because of an observed correlation between it and depression. But whose depression? Only mine, one is tempted to say. But if only mine, then not mine at all. The sceptical position customarily represents the crossing of the logical gap as at best a shaky inference. But the point is that not even the syntax of the premises of the inference exists, if the gap exists' (Strawson 1959: 109).

2. To be able to ascribe a P-predicate to another, on some occasion, I must know that such and such behaviour is correlated with so and so P-property.
3. But since we are asking how I can have come to be able to ascribe P-predicates to others at all, I must have learned of this correlation from my own case.
4. Learning from my own case depends upon the capacity to self-ascribe P-predicates.
5. But it is a necessary condition of the capacity to self-ascribe P-predicates that one possess the capacity to other-ascribe P-predicates.
6. So, the capacity for the self-ascription of P-predicates would be a condition of the capacity for other-ascription, which in turn is a condition of the capacity for self-ascription.
7. The capacity for self-ascription could not be a condition of itself.
8. So, behaviour is not a sign of P-properties but constitutes 'logically adequate criteria' for the ascription of P-predicates.
9. So, the sceptical problem does not arise.

This argument needs clarifying in a number of ways. Top of the list is accounting for what Strawson means by both 'sign' and 'logically adequate criteria'. Clarifying one of these terms ought to clarify the other since, as should be clear from step 8, Strawson takes them to exhaust the options. So let us take 'sign'. Signs, and the things of which they are signs, are distinct existences. Thus it seems reasonable to suppose that if behaviour is a sign then, presented with observable behaviour, my attribution to another of some P-property would have to be based on an inference (with 'inference' taken in some suitably broad way). This inference, Strawson tells us, would have to be based on knowledge of a correlation between behaviour-type and P-property. The inference, then, is inductive rather than deductive.

So much for signs, what of 'logically adequate criteria'? On the assumption that the argument is valid, a logically adequate criterion ought to be nothing other than a way of knowing that is not an inductive inference. If 'logically adequate criteria' had some richer meaning, further justification would be required for step 8. Quite plausibly, the category of non-inductive ways of knowing is exhausted by deductive inferences and non-inferential ways of knowing. The latter, in turn, might either involve the direct observation that the other instantiates a P-property, or the sort of non-inferential, defeasible criteria, familiar from (Hacker 1972) and (Wright 1980). Now, it seems highly implausible to suggest that one can deductively infer the presence of a P-property from the presence of some 'mere' behaviour. And I don't think that there is any reason to suppose that Strawson believed otherwise. Between the two non-inferential options, however, it is not so easy to choose.² There is some evidence that Strawson himself endorsed the direct observation view. He writes, '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' (Strawson 1959: 109). But whatever specific view Strawson has in mind, it seems that the most that he can say, given the argument presently under discussion, is that our ways of telling that others are in certain mental states must be something other than inductive inferences from 'mere' behaviour.

It may be argued against this, however, that Strawson does in fact employ a richer notion of criteria; one that is unacceptably verificationist. To justify this, one might point to the opening sentence in the lengthy quotation above which appears to link the *sense* of talking about persons with ways of telling that they possess P-properties. Furthermore, it would seem that, in order to justify the argument's move from 8 to 9, criteria must be such as to satisfy two conditions. First, it must be that if one is in possession of the criteria for there being other

² If, that is, the idea of non-inferential, defeasible criteria is coherent. See (McDowell 1982).

minds, one thereby knows that there are other minds. Second, we must know that we actually are in possession of such criteria.

That the first condition must hold is obvious from the fact that, on a natural understanding, what the sceptic denies is that we know that there are other minds. So, surely, if the sceptical problem does not arise, this must be because we do know that there are other minds. The second condition is required since the fact that something is a criterion for there being other minds is not, in itself, sufficient to show that we know that there are other minds. We need to be in possession of the criterion and, if we can rely on this in the argument, we must know this.

Now, suppose that to be in possession of criteria of a logically adequate kind for an attribution of some P-property to another is to be directly aware that they are in that state. This, plausibly, is one non-verificationist way to satisfy the first condition.³ However, a sceptic might question the claim that we know that we are in possession of such a criterion. That is, the sceptic may argue that we cannot know whether we have actually experienced that another possesses some P-property, rather than it merely seeming to us that we have had such an experience. Thus, the sceptic can question our right to assert that the second condition is satisfied. Suppose, on the other hand, that the satisfaction of the second condition is not open to doubt by the other minds sceptic. Then it would seem that behaviour is being understood in a way that is common between those cases in which it is really expressive of mentality and those cases in which it is not. It is 'mere' behaviour. If so, how can our possessing such a criterion be sufficient for knowledge? The consequence is that it is hard to see how both of the conditions can be satisfied.

As is well known, Stroud (1968) claimed that Strawson's argument depends on a form of verificationism:

³ See (McDowell 1982).

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Strawson's characterization of the skeptic is correct only if my possession of 'logically adequate criteria' for the other-ascription of a particular psychological state implies that it is possible for me to know certain conditions to be fulfilled, the fulfillment of which logically implies either that some particular person other than myself is in that state or that he is not. This must be a suppressed premise of Strawson's argument or an explanation of 'logically adequate criteria' ... the skeptic is seen as maintaining both that (i) a particular class of propositions makes sense and that (ii) we can never know whether or not any of them are true. For Strawson the falsity of (ii) is a necessary condition for the truth of (i), and the truth of (i) is in turn required for the skeptic's claim itself to make sense. Therefore the success of Strawson's attack on both forms of skepticism depends on the truth of some version of what I have called the 'verification principle'. (Stroud 1968: 248)

Stroud sees Strawson as arguing that our being able know whether or not some class of other-ascriptions of P-predicates is true is a necessary condition of their making sense. But this is to tie the meaning of a class of sentences to our being able to ascertain their truth-value and this is a form of verificationism. Without the verificationism, the most that could be asserted is that we can only grasp P-concepts if we *believe* that others instantiate P-properties.⁴

Given what I have said above, Stroud's objection seems exactly to the point. In order to justify the move from 8 to 9, it seems that Strawson must be relying on a conception of criteria

⁴ 'for any candidate S, proposed as a member of the privileged class, the skeptic can always very plausibly insist that it is enough to make language possible if we believe that S is true, or that it looks for all the world as if it is, but that S needn't actually be true' (Stroud 1968: 255).

that satisfies the two conditions mentioned earlier. But, not only is it difficult to see how criteria could satisfy both conditions, it would also seem that this conception of criteria as both required for understanding a concept and sufficient to secure knowledge of propositions involving that concept, is verificationist in some sense of that term.

In later work, Strawson (1985) accepts that Stroud's argument *does* in fact weaken his earlier case against other-minds scepticism. There he writes that,

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even if we have a tenderness for transcendental arguments, we shall be happy to accept the criticism of Stroud and others that either such arguments rely on an unacceptably simple verificationism or the most they can establish is a certain sort of interdependence of conceptual capacities and beliefs: e.g., as I put it earlier, that in order for the intelligible formulation of skeptical doubts to be possible or, more generally, in order for self-conscious thought and experience to be possible, we must take it, or *believe*, that we have knowledge of external physical objects or other minds. (Strawson 1985: 21–2)

Partly in response to Stroud's criticism, Strawson offers an alternative *naturalistic* answer to scepticism. The idea, which he finds in different ways in both Hume and Wittgenstein, is that certain beliefs are so fundamental to us that they are outside the realm of critical enquiry; they cannot be *reasonably* called into question. He suggests that the proposition that there are others much like ourselves may well be one of these. This is shown, as he sees it, by the fact that his (1959) argument against the other minds sceptic shows that we cannot but *believe* in the existence of others.

However, this view is problematic. For even if my belief that others exist is let off the hook of rational justification, it does not follow that my belief that *such and such a particular person instantiates such and such a particular P-property right now* is off that hook. That is, even if, as Strawson contends, we can legitimately ignore the question of how we can justify our

general belief in others, it does not follow that we can legitimately ignore the question of how particular beliefs about others' P-properties are justified. My belief that Paul is happy is not fundamental in the same way that my belief that other people exist perhaps is. And surely scepticism would be the result of a failure to offer an answer to any such particular question; the result would be that our ascriptions of P-predicates to others never do qualify as knowledge.⁵

There is, therefore, reason to see whether Strawson's argument can be modified in another way. What we need is a reading of Strawson's argument that does not rely on an intrinsically verificationist conception of criteria yet which has some real bite against the sceptic about other minds.

<H2>1.2 *The modest reading*

Strawson's primary concern is epistemological. That is, were the argument sound, it would provide us with an answer, for at least some types of P-property, to sceptical worries about other minds. But what is the scepticism that, according to the argument's conclusion, does not arise? It is useful here to distinguish between what, in another context, Martin (2006) refers to

⁵ Essentially this criticism can be found in (Sosa 1998). Strawson's (1998) response is unconvincing. It might be suggested that an answer to the latter question, analogous to Strawson's naturalistic answer to the former, may go something like this: we have an innate tendency to attribute certain P-properties on the basis of certain behaviour types, and that tendency cannot be rationally called into question. Perhaps there is some value in this suggestion, but it is pretty far from Strawson's claim and his original argument certainly does not support it.

as ‘Humean’ and ‘Cartesian’ scepticism.⁶ A sceptic of the Humean variety begins by pointing out that that of which we are aware in the perception of another falls short of that which we subsequently attribute to them. For instance, what I *observe* is various bits of behaviour (wincing, crying out, etc.), whilst what I *attribute* is pain. The Humean then goes on to argue that since there is no way for me to peek ‘behind’ this ‘mere behaviour’, there is no acceptable account of how I could *know*, rather than merely believe, that the other is in pain, or indeed is minded at all.

The sceptic of the Cartesian variety takes a different route to that same conclusion. He points out that for any of my veridical perceptual experiences of another as having some P-property or other, there could be a subjectively indistinguishable state which was nevertheless non-veridical. Thus, since I cannot ever tell which of these two situations I am in, I can never know which I am in and so can never know whether another possesses some P-property or other, indeed I can never know whether that other is minded at all.

With this distinction in place, the reasoning of section 1.1 might be put by saying that the most that Strawson’s argument could show is that scepticism of the Humean variety ‘does not arise’. If, as Strawson argues, that which is observable constitutes ‘logically adequate criteria’ for the ascription of P-predicates, we can reject the Humean’s argument at the very beginning. That of which we are aware in the perception of another does not fall short of that which is subsequently attributed. The simplest way for this to be true—the way that I earlier suggested that Strawson may actually have in mind—is to say that, in some cases at least, another’s mentality is visible. That is, another’s P-properties can enter into the content of one’s perceptual states, and thus at least some P-predicates are non-inferentially ascribable.

⁶ This should not be taken to suggest that any such positions were presented, let alone endorsed, by either Hume or Descartes. However, I hope that it will be obvious why these views are so named.

But there appears to be nothing in Strawson's argument that would defeat or somehow undercut the Cartesian form of scepticism. On the face of it, Strawson's step 8 is entirely consistent with everything that the Cartesian sceptic asserts. That is not to say that the Cartesian line of reasoning should be accepted, just that whatever reason we have for rejecting it must come from elsewhere. Thus, although Strawson makes the perfectly general claim that scepticism about other minds 'does not arise', more realistically this should be limited to a certain type of scepticism, that which Martin calls Humean.

So, if we take Strawson's argument as employing a 'bland' conception of 'logically adequate criteria'—as signifying nothing more than a way of knowing that is not an inductive inference—and we rewrite the conclusion as,

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10. Humean scepticism about other minds does not arise

then the argument may stand a chance of avoiding Stroud's charge of verificationism. Such a reading would nevertheless give the argument some real anti-sceptical bite, for a refutation of the Humean form of scepticism would be a genuine achievement. However, the conclusion would be modest at least in the respect that 10 entails neither that other minds exist nor that we know that they do.

There is even some, admittedly slender, reason to suppose that Strawson may have had this more modest reading in mind. First, as I have mentioned, it appears that Strawson would only be entitled to assume, as he does in step 8, that signs and logically adequate criteria are exhaustive options, if he had the bland conception of criteria in mind. Second, also mentioned above, there is some evidence to suggest that Strawson accepts a perceptual account of our knowledge of other minds. If this constitutes at least one way that one can be in possession of

criteria for the ascription of P-predicates, then there is some reason to believe that the criteria in question are not intrinsically verificationist. Third, after summarizing his argument, Strawson writes, 'The sceptical position customarily represents the crossing of the logical gap [between a mental state and its behavioural expression] as at best a shaky inference' (Strawson 1959: 109). Humean scepticism does indeed assume a picture according to which the move from behaviour to mental state is inferential. Cartesian scepticism, on the other hand, need not. Thus, there is some justification for thinking that Strawson has the Humean form of scepticism in mind. Having said this, whether Strawson intended his argument as ambitious or modest is not my main concern. For the remainder of the chapter I discuss the modest reading, referring to it simply as 'Strawson's argument'.⁷

Strawson's argument derives its anti-sceptical conclusion from a consideration of the necessary conditions of the possibility of self-consciousness (which I presume Strawson takes to involve the capacity for the self-attribution of P-properties). In particular, this is the role of step 5. I call any claim that purports to state some condition of the possibility of some form of

⁷ It should be obvious that the modest reading of Strawson's argument owes much to the reconstruction of Strawson in (Stern 2000: Ch. 6). I sympathize with much of Stern's discussion, in particular the argument against Ayer (1963). However, I depart from Stern in a number of ways. In particular, the distinction between Humean and Cartesian scepticism is not equivalent to Stern's discussion between epistemic and normative justificatory scepticism. Rather, both the Humean and Cartesian sceptic can be read as endorsing either epistemic or justificatory forms of scepticism. See (Stern 2000: Ch. 1.1). Further, in my §3 I find problems with even the modest reading of Strawson's argument that Stern does not.

cognition, a *transcendental claim*.⁸ An anti-sceptical argument with a transcendental claim as a premise deserves the title of transcendental argument.⁹

<H1>2. *Objections to transcendental arguments*

The reasonableness or otherwise of employing transcendental arguments has been much debated.¹⁰ In large part, this debate focuses on transcendental claims. Transcendental claims, it is often supposed, are synthetic *a priori*, necessary, universal, and directed towards objective reality. Concerns can be raised with regard to each of these.

<H2>2.1 *Synthetic a priori*

Someone who offers an argument with a transcendental claim as a premise should be expected to argue for that premise. This, it might be thought, will be especially hard if those claims are both synthetic and *a priori*. Of course, within Kant's project, part of the purpose of the doctrine of transcendental idealism is precisely to allow for the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. Transcendental idealism provides one way of understanding how synthetic *a priori* knowledge could be possible. This fact suggests that a transcendental arguer who rejects

⁸ See the Introduction to this volume.

⁹ Cassam (2007: 52–3) claims that since they present necessary conditions rather than 'means' of knowing, transcendental arguments cannot answer questions as to how knowledge is possible. One of the interesting features of Strawson's argument, as I have interpreted it, is that it shows that this distinction is not sharp. For Strawson's view is that a certain means of knowing (non-inferential) is a necessary condition of self-consciousness.

¹⁰ For very useful discussions see (Stern 2000) and the various essays in (Stern 1999).

transcendental idealism, a position that has tempted more than a few, notably Strawson (1966), must take one or other of the following options: treat transcendental claims as analytic; come up with some alternative account of synthetic *a priori* knowledge; or reject the terms in which I have set up this problematic, say by rejecting the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Whether this poses a threat to Strawson's argument depends on whether we should think of any of his premises as synthetic *a priori*. In fact, there is some reason to think that Strawson himself sees the all important step 5 as analytic. His case for the claim rests on a point that he calls 'purely logical': 'the idea of a predicate is correlative with that of a *range* of distinguishable individuals of which the predicate can be significantly, though not necessary truly, affirmed' (Strawson 1959: 99, n.1). If by 'purely logical' we understand 'analytic', the general concern over the legitimacy of synthetic *a priori* claims might be avoided. Of course, this is not to endorse either Strawson's purely logical point about predicates, or the suggestion that step 5 of his argument is a consequence of it.¹¹ But if those claims are suspect, it is not due to any purely general points about transcendental arguments.

<H2>2.2 Objective reality

As I have already mentioned, a well-known criticism of transcendental arguments is that associated with (Stroud 1968). Minimally expressed, this criticism can be viewed in the following way: If the form of a transcendental claim is 'Necessarily, If *A* then *B*', Stroud claims that *B* cannot plausibly be substituted by a claim about the way the world *is*, but rather must be limited to one concerning the way the world is *experienced* as being, or perhaps *believed* to be. Given the present interest in Strawson's argument, where the transcendental claim has the form 'Necessarily, everything is such that if it is *A* then it is *B*', the Stroudian claim would be that this should be replaced with 'Necessarily, everything is such that if it is *A* then it is

¹¹ The latter is denied by Bermúdez (1998: 232–7).

experienced/believed to be *B'*. Only idealism, verificationism, or something equally poisonous could legitimate the stronger claim about the way the world *is*. Thus, if we wish to remain robustly realist, we must give up the pretensions of transcendental arguments to offer up conclusions directed towards objective reality rather than how reality is represented (either in experience or belief).

Stroud's argument is, I have argued, effective against the ambitious reading of Strawson's argument. But might it also have some force against even the modest version? Is there some claim that Strawson makes that is susceptible to a weakening from truth to belief? The obvious target for a Stroud-style objection would be step 5, yet such an objection looks to be inappropriate here. This is for the reason that Strawson is *not* saying that I must truly, or even actually, attribute P-properties to others. Rather, the necessary condition is that we have a *capacity* to make such attributions—we could make such attributions were we so minded and the conditions appropriate. It seems doubtful that Strawson's reasons for holding this true, rest on idealism, verificationism, or similar.

But perhaps this is a mistake. For a Stroud-style criticism of step 5 would maintain, not that our capacity for other-ascription must fail to yield true judgements, but rather that it might be only a *seeming* capacity, that we need have, in fact, no genuine such capacity, in order to be able to make self-ascriptions. This is fair, but implausible. The reason for this is that one's either experiencing or believing oneself to have the capacity to other-ascribe P-predicates is itself an exercise of that very capacity. Just entertaining the thought that one may or may not possess the capacity to ascribe P-properties to subjects other than oneself involves grasping the concept of a subject *other than oneself*. If one has this concept, and some P-concept, then it seems difficult to

see just how one could be denied the capacity to ascribe P-predicates to subjects other than oneself.¹²

Is this too quick? Have I not illegitimately moved from the capacity to *entertain the thought* that another possesses some P-property to the capacity to *judge* the same? For isn't Strawson's 'ascription' to be understood as a form of judging rather than mere thinking? This might seem especially worrying given that, on a Kantian view, there may be any number of thoughts—empty thoughts—that one can entertain, yet not be in a position to judge. I think, however, that this challenge can be met. I mentioned two possibilities above, belief and experience, each of which might be understood as involving the capacity to entertain the relevant thought. I think it should be clear that the concern does not arise in the case of belief. Believing that P is partly constituted by the disposition to judge that P, in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, if the Stroudian argument is that one need only believe oneself to possess

¹² It might be objected that I have wrongly identified exactly what capacity is at issue. Perhaps the capacity amounts to the ability to judge, based on what are taken to be logically adequate criteria. Then the Stroudian challenge is to show what, other than verificationism or some other view that ties the content of what we judge to the criteria by which we judge it, justifies our faith that what we take to be logically adequate criteria, really are. But, I don't think that this can be the right way of reading Strawson, since it entails that other-ascriptions based on less than logically adequate criteria are not exercises of the capacity in question. Strawson gives no indication that this is his view and, more importantly, his account of the relation between other-ascription and self-ascription appears to mitigate against it. Everything that Strawson says in this vein suggests that he supposes the ability to engage in the other-ascription of P-predicates, which can be based on logically adequate criteria, to be part and parcel of the very same capacity as the self-ascription of P-predicates, which he claims are based on no criteria. He writes, 'In order to have this type of concept, one must be both a self-ascriber and an other-ascriber ... In order to understand this type of concept, one must acknowledge that there is a kind of predicate which is unambiguously and adequately ascribable both on the basis of observation and not on this basis' (Strawson 1959: 108).

the capacity to ascribe P-predicates to others, then this entails that one can judge that one can ascribe P-predicates to others. This, in turn, entails that one *can* ascribe P-predicates to others, although not necessarily correctly.

The case of experience is less clear. It is difficult to know what to make of a supposed *experience* of oneself as having the capacity to make other-ascriptions. We can, however, ask whether this experience entails the capacity to form experiential beliefs with matching content. Of course, this need not be the case if the experience in question is non-conceptual, for then one need not possess the concepts required to form the belief. However, given that the supposed experience has such a sophisticated, high-level content (it is, after all, of oneself as having the capacity to make judgements about the mental states of others), I take it that a non-conceptual reading is implausible. Thus, I suggest that, if there is such a thing as having this experience, it involves the capacity to form the corresponding experiential belief and, therefore, judgement.

Thus, if we read Strawson's argument modestly, the Stroudian objection has no force against the transcendental claim made in step 5. This, I take it, is the most significant motivation for moving to the modest version of the argument in the first place.

<H2>2.3 Necessity

Transcendental claims are modal claims; they describe necessities. Different transcendental arguments support their transcendental claims in different ways, but there are at least three categories. First, a transcendental claim can be the consequence of a theory. Second, a transcendental claim might be based on a piece of conceptual analysis. Third, a transcendental claim might be (more or less explicitly) based on a claim about what is conceivable. Here it is argued that because it is not conceivable that P be true and Q be false, it is not possible that P be true and Q be false.

Transcendental arguments of the third variety clearly rely on some principle linking inconceivability and impossibility. But there is a question mark over the legitimacy of any such principle.¹³ So before we accept that it is methodologically legitimate to base a transcendental claim on what is inconceivable, we must defend the principle that inconceivability is a good guide to impossibility.

This objection to transcendental arguments is distinct from the Stroudian objection.¹⁴ Stroud's objection, if accepted, forces a change in what is claimed to be impossible. In the claim that *A* without *B* is impossible, *B* must concern the way that the world is represented as being. But this is still a modal claim. The present objection challenges even that weakened modal claim, contesting the transcendental arguer's right to claim any modal knowledge whatsoever on the basis of the evidence of inconceivability. The problem raised by Stroud has become known as the 'inference to reality' problem. The present difficulty might be thought of as the 'inference to modal reality' problem.

If what I said earlier concerning the way in which Strawson argues for step 5 is correct, then it would seem that the claim is based on an analysis of the concept of a predicate. Since the claim in step 5 is based on conceptual analysis rather than an inconceivability claim, scepticism about the link between inconceivability and impossibility is neither here nor there. To this it might be responded that the activity of conceptual analysis involves reflection upon the nature of, and interrelations between, our concepts. Such reflection can tell us in which situations our concepts have application and in which situations they do not. In other words, conceptual analysis involves, at least in part, pushing our concepts to their limits in an attempt to determine whether a particular unusual situation really is conceivable. Thus, basing a

¹³ See the various essays in (Gendler and Hawthorne 2002). Also, Cf. Dennett, 'Philosophers' Syndrome: mistaking a failure of imagination for an insight into necessity' (Dennett 1991: 401).

¹⁴ Cf. the discussion in (Stern 2000: Ch. 2.3). Also see (Stern 2007).

transcendental claim on conceptual analysis and basing it on inconceivability are actually rather closely related.

If one were moved by such a thought, one might restate one's transcendental claim explicitly as a conceivability claim. That is, rather than claim that necessarily, if *A* then *B*, one could claim that it is not conceivable that *A* hold in the absence of *B*. Given this, the conclusion of the transcendental argument would have to be changed from *B* to, 'It is not conceivable that *B* is false'. Making this move has the virtue that it distances transcendental arguments from the controversy surrounding the relationship between inconceivability and impossibility. Indeed, if one's aim in presenting transcendental arguments is to elucidate the structure of our conceptual scheme, then such a limitation might not even be of special concern. For, one might argue, what is conceivable is given, at least partly, by our conceptual scheme itself. Thus, the way to lay bare the structure of that conceptual scheme is to give expression to those situations that are and those situations that are not conceivable. And, of course, this characterisation seems to cohere well with the avowed intent of Strawson's descriptive metaphysics, within which his transcendental argument is situated. For, as Strawson famously wrote, 'Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world' (Strawson 1959: 9).¹⁵ It may even be held that, limited to making claims about conceivability, transcendental arguments still have some anti-sceptical force. Suppose that *B* is the sceptic's target, that *A* is something that the sceptic cannot rationally doubt, and that *A* without *B* is inconceivable. It follows that, whilst the sceptic may be right that *B* is something we do not know to be true, its falsity is something that is inconceivable to us. This, it might be argued, is a serious blow to the sceptic's position.

In the case at hand, step 5 of the argument might be rewritten as,

¹⁵ Also see (Strawson 1966: 271).

<NL>

5*: It is inconceivable that a subject possess the capacity to self-ascribe P-predicates yet fail to possess the capacity to other-ascribe P-predicates.

Of course, the argument's conclusion would have to be similarly adjusted, now maintaining that it is *inconceivable* that behaviour fail to constitute logically adequate criteria for the ascription of P-predicates, at least in some cases. As such, the reason that the sceptical question 'does not arise' would be that it asks us to contemplate an inconceivable state of affairs.

<H2>2.4 Universality

Transcendental claims are, at least in many cases, universal generalizations. Along with some of the issues discussed above, Sacks (2000) raises a worry about this feature. The concern is the relativistic one that transcendental claims, 'threaten to be only apparently universally necessary. The question is whether the modes of reasoning and the conclusions reached are merely historically or culturally indexed universalizations, such that however unimaginable it might be for those whose horizons are suitably set, there is nothing to preclude different universalizations equally well anchored elsewhere' (Sacks 2000: 285).

It is common to suppose that transcendental claims are universal quantifications. But there is some room for manoeuvre here. We need to specify the domain of quantification. At their strongest, transcendental claims would involve completely unrestricted quantification. So, Strawson's claim, 'necessarily, everything is such that if it can self-ascribe then it can other-ascribe', really would purport to hold of *absolutely every subject*. But one may balk at making such a claim. Might there not be possible individuals so vastly different from us that their forms of self-ascription, of which we are entirely ignorant, fail to necessitate the capacity for other ascription? Perhaps. In such a case, one may wish to limit the domain of quantification to

subjects who are 'like us in some relevant respect'. For example, one might restrict the domain to 'discursive subjects'.¹⁶ Given such a restriction, non-discursive subjects and their potential to surprise us with bizarre forms of consciousness, need not trouble our endeavour to discern the conditions of the possibility of (discursive) cognition.¹⁷

What would be the point of restricting the domain of quantification? Wouldn't it just be simpler to retain an unrestricted domain of quantification, but admit that the transcendental claim may not state a necessary truth? After all, it may still be true of all *actual* subjects. I take it that one of the main reasons for looking fondly on the strategy of restricting the domain would be the thought that one could thereby retain the status of the claim as *a priori*. For, although we no longer take this for granted, for the most part of the tradition of transcendental philosophy, to reject necessity is to reject *a priori*. If, then, we restrict the domain of quantification and retain the necessity operator, we can continue to maintain *a priori*. And retaining the *a priori* status of transcendental claims might be thought important insofar as our concern is to answer the sceptic.

¹⁶ 'Kant's idealism depends crucially on his conception of human cognition as discursive ... to claim that human cognition is discursive is to claim that it requires both concepts and sensible intuition' (Allison 2004: 12–13).

¹⁷ The strategy of restricting the domain of quantification to subjects who are like us in some relevant respect should be treated with care. For what is then being claimed in the transcendental claim is that B is a condition of the possibility of *our particular kind* of cognition. One needs to take care so as not to reduce one's transcendental claim to what can look like the trivial consequence of an ad hoc move to avoid a counterexample.

Can Sacks' problem of universality be solved in this way? In Sacks' terminology, the question concerns the difference between genuine 'transcendental constraints' and mere 'transcendental features'. Introducing this distinction, he writes:

<EXT>

Roughly, a transcendental constraint indicates a dependence of empirical possibilities on a non-empirical structure, say, the structure of anything that can count as a mind. Such constraints will determine non-empirical limits of possible forms of experience ... A merely transcendental feature, on the other hand, is significantly weaker.

Transcendental features indicate the limitations implicitly determined by a range of available practices ... Human practices, concerns, interests, etc. will then stand to vary with empirical contingencies ... Consequently, those transcendental features of what we can currently envisage are not constraints on what is possible. (Sacks 2000: 213)

A transcendental constraint is the consequent in, what I have been calling, a transcendental claim. A transcendental feature, on the other hand, is the consequent in a transcendental claim in which 'it is presently inconceivable that not' has replaced 'it is necessary that', *and* in which the universal quantifier has been restricted to that group of individuals that share our 'current practices'. Thus, the move from transcendental constraints to transcendental features involves rejecting both the necessity and unrestricted universality of transcendental claims. Given that Sacks goes on to call transcendental features, 'at best ordinary empirical constraints' (Sacks 2000: 214), I presume he means also to deny their status as *a priori*. If all we can lay claim to are transcendental features then, it might be thought, that is a serious blow to the pretensions of transcendental arguments. Restricting the domain of quantification to discursive subjects is one thing, restricting it to that group of individuals that share our 'current practices', is quite another.

At this point, we might remind ourselves that the target of Strawson's argument, on its modest reading, is Humean scepticism about other minds. However, Sacks' problem of universality has recourse to a far more radical form of scepticism. That is, it draws on the possibility of a general scepticism towards our 'modes of reasoning'. But Strawson might fairly adopt a principle of *one sceptic at a time*. Indeed, unless one thinks with, say, Husserl (1950) that the problem of others is conceptually or epistemologically *prior* to the problem of the 'external' world, then in even approaching the sceptical problem of other minds, one is already setting aside external world scepticism. Other people and their behaviour are, after all, part of the external world. I think, then, that it is legitimate to put aside scepticism about 'modes of reasoning', which in the current case is conceptual analysis, when considering Strawson's argument against the Humean other minds sceptic.¹⁸

<H1>3. Many questions

A more damaging criticism of Strawson's argument is that it muddles epistemic and developmental issues. In order to make this point clearly, I need to distinguish between a number of questions, any of which might be being asked when we ask how knowledge of others is possible. First, there is the purely epistemic question,

<DIS>

K: In virtue of what do beliefs about another's P-properties, and the belief that there are others, count as knowledge?

¹⁸ I have not discussed Sacks' (2005) 'problem of transcendental necessity' which points out that Strawson's conclusion is that we have a certain capacity for identifying the P-properties of others if there are any others, but not that others must exist or even appear to. I take it that this problem is resolved once the move is made from the ambitious to the modest reading.

Second, there is the question of methods,

<DIS>

M: What methods do subjects employ in the formation of beliefs about others' P-properties, and the belief that there are others?

Third, the developmental question,

<DIS>

D: How do subjects come to grasp P-concepts, and the concept of another subject?¹⁹

Strawson's argument has the overall form of a *reductio* of the initial assumption in step 1, that behaviour (that which is observable) is 'a sign' of the presence of P-properties (which are not observable). Let us call that assumption 'the sign view'. The sign view is most naturally understood as part of an answer to M, the question of methods. However, given that the notion of a sign is an epistemic one, it should also be read as part of an answer to the epistemic question, K. Now, the acceptability of step 2 of the argument implies that we are interested in only those versions of the sign view that rely on knowledge of correlations between behaviour and mentality. An actual example of someone who accepts something like this might be David Chalmers who claims that, 'We note regularities between experience and physical or functional states in our own case, postulate simple and homogenous underlying laws to explain them, and use those laws to infer the existence of consciousness in others. This may or may not be the reasoning we implicitly use in believing that others are conscious, but in any case it seems to

¹⁹ There is also the conceptual question, C: In what does a grasp of P-concepts, and the grasp of the concept of another subject, consist?

provide a reasonable justification for our beliefs' (Chalmers 1996: 246). Chalmers explicitly distinguishes between K and M, offering something like a rational reconstruction of our knowledge of others. This suggests the possibility that Strawson's target is in fact the sort of account envisaged by Chalmers. Indeed, Strawson's use of 'know' in step 2 may suggest that he is interested in K, pursued independently of M. For, if K were not at issue, the occurrence of 'know' in step 2 would be unjustified, all that we would be justified in claiming is that one must *believe* or *assume* in some correlations between behaviour and P-properties.

But this cannot be correct. For, if the sign view were a view solely concerning rational reconstructions then there is no reason to suppose that it would conflict with step 5 of Strawson's argument, which places no requirements on justificatory relations. Strawson's claim is that the sign view violates the principle that self-ascribers must be other-ascribers. The sort of picture painted by Chalmers, however, can happily accept this, before going on to offer a rational reconstruction of our knowledge of others based on the observation of correlations between our own experiences and our own physical states. It seems, then, that Strawson *must* see the sign view as proposing an answer to M, and I think it is reasonable to suppose that his use of 'know' in step 2 is the result of an implicit presumption that questions M and K are to be pursued together.

But, now notice that step 3 of Strawson's argument assumes that we are interested in asking how subjects can have come to learn to ascribe P-predicates.²⁰ This is most naturally

²⁰ Actually, as I have quoted him, Strawson says 'know' not 'learn'. However, that he sees the sign view as involving an account of learning is clear from his ensuing discussion. There, in discussing the view that he has just rejected, he says that, 'there is not in general one primary process of learning, or teaching oneself, an inner private meaning for predicates of this class [a special subset of the P-predicates], then another process of learning to apply such predicates to others on the strength of a correlation, noted in one's own case, with certain forms of behaviour ... [This picture is a] refusal to acknowledge

thought of as part of an answer to D, the developmental question. Strawson seems to assume that the sign view takes a stand on developmental issues. That this is so becomes evident when we reflect on the reliance on the notion of learning in steps 3 and 4. It is also clear from the fact that Strawson's argument (albeit tacitly) relies on step 7, the claim that the capacity for self-ascription could not be a condition of itself. On one reading, where 'condition' means *pre-condition*, 7 looks unarguable. Nothing can temporally precede itself. But on another reading, where 'condition' means necessary condition, 7 is evidently false, asserting that the capacity to self-ascribe couldn't be a necessary condition of the capacity to self-ascribe. To the contrary, everything is a necessary condition of itself. For the argument to be valid, 'condition' needs to be read in the former, temporal, way.²¹ So, once more, Strawson's assumption is that the sign view is committed to a particular account of conceptual development. I should stress that this is not to say that Strawson's primary concern is with developmental issues. It is not. Rather, my claim is that whilst Strawson's primary concern is with both the grounds for and the justification of ascriptions of P-predicates to others, he implicitly assumes certain developmental claims. In arguing that at least some ascriptions of P-predicates to others are grounded in logically adequate criteria and are thereby justified on non-inductive grounds, Strawson assumes that the contrary view is committed to a certain picture of the development of the capacity to make such ascriptions.

That picture, which I shall refer to as a 'first-person first' account, would involve the claim that subjects possess P-concepts and can apply them to themselves at a time prior to their

the unique logical character of the predicates concerned' (Strawson 1959: 107–8). Also note the focus on the concept of learning in Stern's reconstruction of Strawson's argument (Stern 2000: 235–6).

²¹ Not quite. What is required is that 'is a condition of' be read non-reflexively. A non-temporal candidate might be the relation of rational justification. This would fit in with the reading of Strawson as attacking the sort of rational reconstruction view proposed by Chalmers. I have already said why I reject this reading.

being able to apply them to others. For it is only this sort developmental claim that would be inconsistent with the argument's all-important step 5, the transcendental claim linking the capacity for self-ascription with the capacity for other ascription. A first-person first account might say something such as the following: individuals acquire the concepts employed in attributing P-properties to others by noting, from their own case, correlations between behaviour-types and mental P-property-types, then observing behaviour elsewhere than their own bodies and making an analogy-based inference.

We should ask, then, whether on any natural reading of it, the sign view is committed to a first-person first account of conceptual development. I think it pretty clear that it is not. Consider, for example, the theory theory, which holds that attributions of P-properties to others are based on the application of a tacitly held folk psychological theory. Theory theory is a version of the sign view. Observed 'mere behaviour' is treated as one of the inputs to the tacitly held folk-psychological theory, with the attribution of P-properties being the output. Theory theorists may well think of the possession of a P-concept in terms of tacitly holding a theory that embeds that P-concept. Given that the folk psychological theory posited by theory theory is, indeed, a theory, the theory theorist may accept step 2 of Strawson's argument, but will be quick to point out that such knowledge is tacit.

There are varieties of theory theory, two of which are the modular and the child-scientist versions. The modular view states that the tacitly held folk-psychological theory that is used in other-attribution is innate, whilst the child-scientist view holds that it is constructed by the child.²² Supposing the theory theorist takes the innatist line,²³ he could reject Strawson's

²² See (Goldman 2006: Chs. 4 and 5) for useful, although critical, discussion.

²³ As is taken, for example, by Segal (1995). In actual fact, the important claim is not that the theory is innate, but that it is not acquired in the way that Strawson's argument assumes, via inductive

step 3, and so happily accept the all important step 5, whilst paying no attention to the rest of the argument. That is, he could endorse a version of the sign view that is not committed to a first-person first developmental account. Such an account would hold that the capacity to attribute P-properties to oneself co-matures with the capacity to ascribe P-properties to others. If this is so much as coherent, and I suggest that it is, then Strawson's argument fails.²⁴

<H1>4. Naturalised transcendental arguments and scepticism about other minds

Strawson's argument assumes, incorrectly, that a proponent of the sign view *must* endorse a first-person first view of conceptual development. The mere fact that a version of the sign view that rejects a first-person first developmental account is so much as *coherent* is sufficient for Strawson's argument to fail. But what if it turned out that all such views were empirically false, that any empirically plausible version of the sign view was committed to a first-person first account? For example if, as Goldman (2006) argues on empirical grounds, the most plausible version of the sign view is a broadly simulationist one that is committed to the priority of first-personal ascription, might not something of the argument be salvaged?²⁵ The idea would be that since, empirically, the only plausible version of the sign view is committed to a first-person first developmental account, the sign view cannot tell the whole story. That is, since the capacity for self-ascription cannot exist prior to the capacity for other-ascription, behaviour must, at least in some cases, constitute logically adequate criteria for the ascription of P-predicates.

generalization from one's own case. This wrinkle may turn out to be important depending on what we want to say about exactly how children's theories of mind change over time.

²⁴ Although I have presented this as an objection to the modest reading, it serves equally as an objection to the ambitious reading and also to the version presented in (Stern 2000: Ch. 6).

²⁵ Of course, Goldman would not put matters this way arguing, as he does, for the truth of his simulationist account.

Given its explicit reliance on an empirical premise, I think it reasonable to call this a 'naturalized' version of Strawson's argument.²⁶

The addition of a non-self-evident, empirical premise to a transcendental argument, it might be argued, would mean that it could no longer provide any sort of answer to the sceptic. The necessity and, more importantly, *a priority* of transcendental claims is important, at least in part, to ensure that the premises in transcendental arguments are immune from sceptical doubt.²⁷ An empirical transcendental claim, even if we did have evidence for its truth, would be wide open to sceptical doubt. Thus, the argument cannot be naturalized in this way. No amount of empirical evidence will help.

But this is too fast. Recall the *one sceptic at a time* principle. If one is engaging in a dispute with the other minds sceptic, *both parties* have, perhaps for the sake of argument, put aside scepticism about the 'external' world. So, by what right is the other minds sceptic simply able to help themselves to scepticism about the empirical evidence in question, say that of neuroscience and developmental psychology? Isn't this now moving the goalposts, introducing a far more wide reaching sceptical position? The defender of a naturalistic form of Strawson's argument can point out that the argument was never intended to counter such a form of scepticism.

At this point the sceptic might claim that the empirical evidence appealed to in ruling out all but first-person first versions of the sign view relies on the assumption that others exist, and it does so in at least two ways. First, the methodology of the cognitive sciences is not behaviouristic. Rather, cognitive science *assumes* that its subjects are experiencing subjects, not

²⁶ If Bell (1999) is correct, the sorts of transcendental argument pursued by Strawson are, in any case, embedded within a naturalistic framework that is quite un-Kantian.

²⁷ Cf. (Hookway 1999: 173).

zombies. Second, our justification for believing anything that has been delivered via testimony relies on our justification for believing that those who testify are not zombies. Since the majority of the information we acquire from the sciences is, in some way or other, testimonial, any reliance on scientific claims in an answer to other minds scepticism begs the question. If these two points are correct, then it seems that the sceptic is not changing the subject at all. Rather, they are simply drawing on the perhaps unappreciated consequences of their local scepticism.

Both points deserve more attention. The first makes a specific point about the human sciences. The second is far more general, ruling out reliance on any of the empirical sciences in an answer to scepticism about other minds. I begin with a few remarks about the plausibility of this second point. The question is whether I could know any testimony-based fact if I was not in a position to rule out the possibility of all humans other than myself being zombies. I think that there is a case to be made that we can. Zombie scientists are zombie-rigorous. Their experiments are zombie-controlled, and the quality of their work is subject to zombie-peer-review. Supposing that we are, or at least can be, justified in believing propositions based on the testimony of scientists, it is unclear why the fact that they might be zombie-scientists would make any difference. Further, the sceptic's position here would seem to make doubtful any knowledge gained from the use of computers which, just like zombies, we can assume to lack rationality and conscious awareness. This is highly implausible, especially given that the scientific evidence likely to be appealed to is such that it can, in principle, be checked oneself.²⁸ We do not, then, have a compelling reason to think that a defender of a naturalized version of Strawson's argument can appeal to no scientific evidence that he or she has not personally generated.

²⁸ This may not always be the case. For example, there are certain mathematical proofs, such as the four colour theorem, that ineliminably involve computers. However, even in this case, the standard view is that we do know the theorem. Burge (1998) even takes such knowledge to be *a priori*.

Of course, if the first point is correct, and one's justification for believing anything in the *human* sciences relies on one's justification for believing that *test subjects* are not zombies, then such acceptable evidence will be severely limited. To the extent that this point sounds plausible, and this is certainly the case with developmental psychology, the prospects for a naturalized version of Strawson's argument that does not beg the question against the other minds sceptic may seem dim. Dim, but not entirely dark. In fact, much more needs to be said concerning the assumptions and methodology of each experiment and interpretation drawn upon in the case against co-maturational versions of the sign view. This, however, is not the place for such an examination.

<H1>5. Conclusion

I have argued that the modest reading of Strawson's argument can be defended against a number of general charges levelled against transcendental arguments. As it stands, however, the argument fails to answer the Humean sceptic about other minds. This is for the reason that it presumes the incoherence of versions of the sign view that reject the first-person first account of conceptual development. Perhaps this gap in Strawson's argument can be plugged empirically. However, given the fact that the cognitive sciences are not, in general, behaviouristic, it looks as though the argument may well prove resistant to such a naturalization.²⁹

²⁹ Thanks to members of the philosophy departments at Essex and Manchester; to audiences in London and Cambridge; to two anonymous referees for OUP; and especially to Ann Whittle, Peter Sullivan, Lucy O'Brien, and Mark Sacks.

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