

## The Concept of Person- A Strawsonian Analysis

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### Abstract:

The present paper deals with P.F.Strawson's analysis of the notion of person as done in his book- *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. The main aim of this paper is to see, why the concept of person is a *primitive* concept according to Strawson. At the outset, I started with Strawson's bifurcation of two types of metaphysics namely: Descriptive Metaphysics and Revisionary Metaphysics. As the subtitle of the book suggests, Strawson mainly concentrates on Descriptive Metaphysics as his subject of enquiry. The first half of his book focuses on the items in the environment including ourselves and our ability to refer to them. He starts by analysing the concept of particulars and defining what a particular is. According to him material bodies and persons are both particulars and can be demonstratively identified. I have discussed his notion of particular at the beginning of this paper. Then I proceeded over to the focal point of this paper, namely the concept of *persons* which is taken up by Strawson at the third chapter of this book. In the second half of my introduction, I have put forward the central questions which he addressed with reference to persons. The uniqueness of a person is that both mental predicates which are unique to a person are made along with the predicates which are also used while addressing corporeal bodies. In the first section, I have stated the uniqueness of the body as analysed by Strawson. In it I discussed why the concept of person is unique for Strawson. In the second section, I have analysed Strawson's rejection of the No-ownership theory and the Cartesian ego. In it I have shown, how Strawson refutes Wittgenstein's theory wherein no owner is accepted while ascribing something to the *I*. He further goes on to show how he refutes pure ego, because he recognizes the other. In the final section, I have attempted to analyse Strawson's concept of a person which he explained by addressing the peculiarity of the *I* and upholding the notion of P-predicates. In it I have tried to show why I need to accept myself as an *embodied ego* to maintain the uniqueness of person. For Strawson it is necessary to understand the concept of person first, to understand the mental and physical attributes of the body.

**Keywords:** Descriptive Metaphysics, Particulars, Persons, P-Predicates, M-Predicates.

### 1. Introduction-

In his work *Individuals*, P.F.Strawson considered his philosophy to be descriptive in nature, as opposed to revisionary metaphysics. Descriptive metaphysics concerns with something we already have as a structure in our thought about the world, whereas revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure (C.f. Strawson 1959, p.9). In both the cases, it can be seen that a structure is involved. The task of Descriptive Metaphysics, is to revise this structure which is already there. But Revisionary Metaphysics aims at revising the structure and also produce a better structure. In his book, Strawson starts with the identification of particulars. He starts with the position that material bodies occupy. He considers material bodies to be basic for the identification of all other particulars. But how to determine when we are referring to a particular? In doing

this, the first requirement would be the identification of the particular within the history and not within a specific range or story (C.f. Strawson 1959, p.18). Particulars according to Strawson are those which can be demonstratively identified or by uniquely relating them to demonstratively identified objects (C.f. Brownstein 1973, p.90). Demonstrative identification is one, where one can “pick out by sight or hearing or touch, or can sensibly discriminate, the particular being referred to, knowing that it is a particular.... In general, then, this sufficient condition is satisfied only in the case of particulars which one can perceive now or could perceive a moment ago. It is obvious that there are many cases of identification falling under this condition. An expression is used which, given the setting and accompaniments of its use, can properly, or at least naturally, be taken, as then used, to apply to a certain single member of the range of particulars which the hearer is able, or a moment before was able, sensibly to discriminate, and to nothing outside that range...I shall say, when this first condition of identification is satisfied, that hearer is able *directly to locate* the particular referred to...” (Strawson 1959, p.19). Furthermore, a non-demonstrative object can be picked out by depending upon some particular objects being demonstratively identifiable. To this Strawson further adds the concept of basic particular. This is because material bodies are basic particulars and can be demonstratively identified. “They are also held to stand in unique spatio-temporal relations to every other member of their kind” (Brownstein 1973, p.90). Strawson also considers *persons* to be basic particulars.

P.F.Strawson while analysing the notion of Personal Identity, addressed two very pertinent questions regarding the ascriptions done to persons. According to him the ascriptions that we usually do to ourselves are of many kinds. Certain ascriptions we do to ourselves which he mentioned in his book entitled *Individuals* are actions and intentions; sensations; thoughts and feelings; perceptions and memories. So far as these ascriptions are being made, there is no problem since these ascriptions can be made solely to humans. But problem arises when ascriptions which are usually made to corporeal bodies are also ascribed to us. That is, we ascribe to ourselves not only these states, but also physical characteristics like height, weight, shape etc. This seems very peculiar that a person’s thoughts and sensations and also physical characteristics are ascribed to the same person. Certain ascriptions which are usually done can be done to all bodies, for instance-weight. On the contrary certain ascriptions are peculiar only to persons, for instance-feelings. The question is, “Why ascriptions like weight are done to persons?” This is the central problem with which Strawson deals. But before dealing with this problem Strawson also discusses the question regarding the need of the ascriptions of states of consciousness to anything at all at the first place. He lists the questions-

- 1) Why are one’s states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all?
- 2) Why are they ascribed to the very same thing as certain corporeal characteristics, a certain physical situation?

These two questions are dependent on one another. While answering these two questions, Strawson addresses the unique role one person’s body plays.

## 2. Uniqueness of the body:

While answering these two questions, Strawson mentions the unique role that each person’s body occupies among others. Each person’s body plays a unique role particularly with regard to his/her perceptual experiences. A person’s perceptual experience is dependent in the way his/her body is placed among other objects. Another

significant point to be mentioned here is that my bodily sensations are immediate to me because bodily sensations are linked to my consciousness. To illustrate this point, suppose I am walking or I am sitting crossed leg, I do not need to prove that to know that I am walking or sitting crossed leg. I do not need observation. I can immediately sense that I am doing that particular action. I am aware of my own action. This will not be the case in knowing about other humans. We will have to observe and infer their actions. Another pivotal point is that there will be different perspectives of different persons with respect to the positional placement of the body of that person. For instance, if five people are sitting in a room forming a circle, based on the perceptual experiences the view of each person will be different.

From this it can be deduced that each person's body plays a unique role depending on that person's perceptual experiences. It must be noted that each person's body is unique based on a dependence relation on their perceptual experience. So, it can be said that this uniqueness of the body is dependent upon the perceptual experiences that this body undergoes. So far it can be seen that these facts explain why my body is unique or why I should have a special regard for my body. Strawson says it answers why I have a peculiar attachment to my body and so why regard my body as *mine*. But it does not at all explain why the corporeal characteristics are ascribed to the very same body to which states of consciousness are ascribed. Hence the uniqueness of my body does not really explain the concept of an *I* or the concept of a person.

### 3. Rejection of the No-ownership theory and Cartesian Ego:

I will proceed to explain a specific theory which Strawson has criticised while attempting to answer the questions which he at first proposed. Strawson argued against the "no-ownership theory" or the "no-subject doctrine of the self". The no-ownership theory propounds that when we ascribe something to ourselves then, we do not establish the "I". Rather we merely establish the ascriptions. The self cannot have mental states as properties or it can be said that the self cannot be the owner of the mental states. According to Wittgenstein, to acknowledge something like "I have a tooth ache" is not the acceptance of an ego or a self. Against this, Strawson provides his criticisms. "The first is explicitly stated in an argument that starts with the premise that there exists a contingent relation of dependence between what each of us refers to as my experiences and a certain unique body." (D.S. Clarke Jr. 2010, p.97). This contingent relation of dependence follows from the fact each person's body occupies a unique position and thus experiences will vary regarding different person. The experiences for instance of the five persons sitting in a room will differ in each case at the same point of time. So Strawson argues that since this relation is contingent, therefore there must be certain criterion by which we can coin the experiences as *mine*. This would be impossible if there is no common owner of the experiences. Eliminating the *my* would result in something that was not a contingent fact at all. The second objection against the Wittgensteinian denial of the *ego* or the *self* is the problem of presupposing an *I*. When I say *I am sad*, the use of *I* here as a referring expression presupposes the person to which *sadness* can be ascribed.

Another objection that can be raised here is regarding the differentiating of various states without a common owner or self or ego of the ascribed states. For instance, consider two groups of statements.

- 1) a) I am thinking
- b) There is thought

- 2) a) I am sad
- b) There is sadness

In the above group of statements if no owner is accepted, then we need to accept the second type of statements namely 1) b and 2) b. But if mental states are accepted like this without any owner, then how do we distinguish between my state and other's states. Then *I* need to be presupposed. Identifying *I* would mean identifying whom does the state belong to. This would lead to incoherence of the no-ownership theory, since they rejected the idea of self or *I*.

Strawson also refutes pure ego. While explaining the concept of Personal Identity a very pertinent point that Strawson upholds is the recognition of the other. According to him states of consciousness can be ascribed to oneself only if it is also ascribed to others. Ascribing to others is not possible if we accept Cartesian ego since we need to identify the ego in space and time. And Cartesian ego cannot be located in space and time; only bodies can be located in space and time. So, if we predicate something to an ego it would presuppose that the state of consciousness must be predicated to a subject which will be a material body in space and time.

#### 4. Primitiveness and peculiarity of the "I" and "P-Predicates":

Strawson, therefore, while explaining the notion of person recognised the *other*. And the other can be recognised only as a spatio-temporal body. Proper predication or proper ascription<sup>1</sup> depends upon being able to predicate or ascribe mental properties to others. Self-predication depends upon our ability to predicate that very thing to others. We therefore need to admit others along with ourselves. We cannot admit of ourselves as pure ego. Since recognition of others by means of ego is not possible so we need to admit ourselves as "embodied ego". We need to admit bodily identity because we need to admit others by body. In other words, we need to admit both body and ego since we usually know our activities not by observing it but by being aware of these activities.

The notion of *I* for Strawson is a primitive concept. Primitiveness of the *I* means that *I* can be explained without the help of any other concept. This also brings into account the uniqueness of *I*. This uniqueness of *I* helps us to answer the two questions mentioned above to answer which Strawson introduced the notion of P-predicates.

So, person is a primitive concept. It is neither a mind or mental nor is it solely a body or physical. Strawson breaks these two sole classifications of attempting to understand a person as a mere mind or as merely a body, and he made a transition from the mental and physical predicates by which philosophers earlier attempted to understand Personal Identity, to Material Predicates and Person Predicates. For Strawson, identification of person does not depend on mental (memory) or physical (brain), but it is the other way round. On the contrary, mentality or physicality can be understood by understanding the concept of a person. Strawson considers person to be a basic particular. A basic particular for him is that which can be identified, without identifying any other

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<sup>1</sup> For Strawson the "other" is as important as the "I". So, if we ascribe something to "I" we also should be able to ascribe that very predication to others. His notion of "P-Predicates" is constituted of this very fact that such predicates should have both first person and third person ascriptive use. This point I have analysed later in my paper while discussing P-Predicates.

particular. Thus, if I say, “x is sitting on a chair”, “x” is not a basic particular. This is because “x” is identified based on the chair he is sitting on. So, if person is a basic particular, then individuating a person does not need identification of any other particular like “mind” or “body”. From here on Strawson tries to analyse the peculiarity of the basic particular “I” which is not solely restricted to either mental or physical but takes even the mix of both predicates. Thus, Strawson introduces Material Predicates (M-Predicates) and Person Predicates (P-predicates) to address the peculiarity of body.

Now returning to the questions which Strawson wanted to address, he further says that “...the individuals concerned, including oneself, should be of a certain unique type: of a type, namely, such that to each individual of that type there must be ascribed, or ascribable, both states of consciousness and corporeal characteristics” (Strawson 1959, p.104). Strawson therefore distinguishes two different kinds of predicates which incorporate both states of consciousness and corporeal characteristics. These are:

- 1) M-predicates which are properly applied to material bodies.
- 2) P-predicates which are applied to persons.

P-Predicates have a very unique ascription for Strawson. The most significant characteristic of P-Predicates is that they admit both first person and third person ascriptive use. Analysing this first person and third person ascriptive use reveals the significance of the other also in case of P-predicates. This implies that in order to ascribe P-Predicates to ourselves, one must also ascribe P-Predicates to others. From this we can deduce the first person and third person ascriptive use. Thus, I may say “I am in pain” and also “x is in pain”. But these two ascriptions will have differences. When I say “I am in pain”, I do not need to infer or observe it. I can understand my pain without observation. But when I say “x is in pain” then we need to observe and infer it.<sup>2</sup> So the mode of predication is different in both these cases. Also, everyone who uses these P-Predicates must also be recognised as a self-ascriber as well as that same person will be an “other” ascriber.

But M-predicates do not have this difference in the mode of ascriptions. To illustrate if I say “I am 5ft tall” and also “x is 5 ft tall”, I need observation and verification in both the cases. I will not have the immediacy of inferring as in the case with P-Predicates with first person ascriptions.

Concept of a person is therefore considered to be a primitive concept because it cannot be exhausted only by mental or physical predicates but it is a mix of both predicates. Thus, for Strawson, persons are constituted of two aspects. And by introducing the notion of P-Predicates he recognised the other. By analysing personhood as primitive concept he answered the two questions and explained the uniqueness of person that can take both states of consciousness and even ascriptions done to corporeal things.

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<sup>2</sup> Observe the pain by means of the person’s behaviour or actions and so on.

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