ONTOLOGICAL PRIORITIES:
A CRITIQUE OF THE ANNOUNCED GOALS OF
"DESCRIPTIVE METAPHYSICS"

DAVID KOLB

Is there a *the* metaphysics of ordinary language? In recent decades philosophers have attempted to obtain "ontological" results by analyzing the language we ordinarily speak, its semantics, and the conditions that make it possible. Peter Strawson's "descriptive metaphysics" is perhaps the most famous of these attempts; I will try to show in this essay that it does not fulfil its stated purpose.

After a brief review of some of the main theses of *Individuals,* I discuss an ambiguity in Strawson's notion of "ontological priority". This ambiguity seriously weakens Strawson's arguments and raises the question whether "descriptive metaphysics" is metaphysics at all. I then try to outline his project as a whole and show why it might lead to this ambiguity. This involves examining what Strawson means by "other conceptual schemes". I close with a brief look at similar issues in Strawson's later book, *The Bounds of Sense.*

This essay restricts itself to one author, but it is part of a wider attempt to show that analysis of (ordinary) language yields no necessary metaphysical results except at Kant's price: the elimination of metaphysics by some sort of transcendental philosophy.

I

In the Introduction to his *Individuals,* Strawson says that "descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure". Descriptive metaphysics aims to "lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure . . . a massive central core of human thinking which has no history . . . the commonplaces of the least refined thinking . . . the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings" (pp. xiii-xiv).[1] Alterna-

[1]P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (Doubleday, 1963). First published by Methuen in 1959. Page references (to the paperback edition) will be incorporated into the text.

tives to this conceptual structure are offered to us by the revisionary metaphysician "with whom we do not wish to quarrel, but whom we do not need to follow" (p. 25). For example, the descriptive metaphysician clarifies the basic role played by the concepts of material objects in our conceptual scheme, while the revisionary metaphysician offers us new basic concepts such as those a sense-datum theory provides. Descriptive metaphysics "needs no justification beyond that of inquiry in general" (p. xiii); the revisionary metaphysician must give us reasons to adopt his scheme in place of our own.

In the first half of his book, Strawson attempts to show that the concepts of material bodies and persons are basic to our ordinary ontology. In the second half he defends the distinction between universal concepts and particulars and the necessity of language containing expressions for both types of entities. He uses this distinction to illumine the role of subject and predicate, and develops a univocal concept of existence which he opposes to reductionism. He argues that material bodies are the basic particulars and that particulars are the paradigm cases of logical subjects ("individuals"). The details of Strawson's arguments have been widely discussed. Many of the critics have expressed dissatisfaction with the overall program, but have concentrated on the specific arguments. For example, Bernard Williams states

> There is one general question raised by *Individuals*, which is of great importance, but which I have been able to touch on only obliquely. This concerns the nature and limits of what Strawson calls "descriptive metaphysics" . . . but as Strawson has written a book that admirably seeks not to describe metaphysics but to produce some, I have correspondingly tried in this notice to concentrate on the results rather than the nature of the activity.[2]

I would like to concentrate on the nature of Strawson's overall program.

II

Strawson tries to establish relations of priority among types of things in our ontology. He has a straightforward notion of what it means to have something in our ontology. It is to "think of the world as containing" objects of that type, to "think of

[2]Bernard Williams, "Mr. Strawson on Individuals", *Philosophy* xxxvi (1961), pp. 309-332.

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these . . . things and events as included in the topics of our common discourse, as things about which we can talk to each other" (p. 2). He concludes from this:

> 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. For what could we mean by claiming to acknowledge the existence of a class of particular things and to talk to each other about members of this class, if we qualified the claim by adding that it was in principle impossible for any one of us to make any other of us understand which member, or members, of this class he was at any time talking about? The qualification would seem to stultify the claim. (pp. 2-3)

In his first chapter Strawson argues that most types of particulars (e.g. places, events) can only be identified by referring to another type (material bodies). Material bodies are "primary particulars" which can be identified without dependence on other types of particular. The revisionary metaphysician falsely thinks he can overturn this priority and substitute a new type of primary particular, but if we are to be able to identify particulars at all, we must possess the concept of a material body, or a concept very similar to it.

In a later chapter, Strawson argues a special primacy for "persons".[3] In order to be able to make the distinction between objective particulars and our experiences of them, and so be able to ascribe experiences, as states of consciousness, to ourselves and to others, we must presuppose as logically primitive the concept of a person. Unless we employ this concept as primitive we are not able to identify subjects for the ascription of experiences. Persons are a subclass of material bodies, and the ability of the category of persons to provide suitably individuated subjects for ascribing conscious states to depends on the identifiability of material bodies.[4]

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[3]The Strawsonian "person" is an entity capable of receiving both M-predicates (such as "weighs forty pounds") and P-predicates (such as "intends to go to the store"). P-predicates can be ascribed both with behavioral criteria (other-ascription) and without the use of such criteria (self-ascription). Strawson argues that this complex concept is not built up from more primitive simpler concepts such as "a consciousness" or "a human body". Rather these simpler concepts are abstracted from the logically primitive concept of a person.

[4]It is this built-in dependence on the prior identifiability of material bodies which enables Strawson's concept of a person to avoid his objection to the concepts of a separated consciousness or mind. The objection demands proof that there could not be many such separated entities possessing the same string of experiences or point of view upon the world. This is similar to his argument for the primacy of

Thus the category of material bodies has a special primacy over that of persons. Indeed Strawson originally introduces the term "ontological priority" to characterize the relation of material bodies to other types of particulars. However at the end of the book he joins the somewhat different priority accorded persons together with that of material bodies.

> It appears that a central place among particulars must be accorded to material bodies and to persons. These must be the primary particulars. In the latter part of the book I was concerned with the more general task of trying to explain the central position held by particulars among individuals in the broadest, logical sense of this word. . . . Taking these two results together, we obtain, perhaps, a rational account of the central position of material bodies and persons among individuals, i.e. among things in general. I noticed also, and in part explained, the close connexion between the idea of an individual in the logical sense, and the idea of existence, of what exists; so perhaps may even be said to have found some reason in the idea that persons and material bodies are what primarily exist. (p. 256)

This passage suggests that exciting metaphysical results have been obtained through the analysis of relations of dependence in identification. But there are ambiguities here. Let us look more closely at the meaning of the "ontological priority" Strawson assigns to material bodies. He has carefully limited what he intends by the term.

> Sometimes "category preference" is manifested by the declaration that the word "exist" has a primary sense or meaning, and that only *a*s exist in this sense, other things only in a secondary sense; sometimes by the declaration that other things are reducible to *a*s, that to talk about other things is an abbreviated way of talking about *a*s. I want to emphasize that in saying that material bodies are basic among particulars, at least in our conceptual scheme as it is, I am not saying

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material bodies: we must have demonstratively identifiable material bodies if we are to refer to a particular at all, because it is always possible that there may be two or more particulars satisfying a non-demonstrative description no matter how detailed. Hence the importance of his objections to Leibniz, who would deny the real possibility of the "massive reduplication" on which both of these arguments are based. Another objection to these reduplication arguments is presented by B. A. Brody, "The Ontological Priory of Physical Objects", *Nous,* v, 1971, pp. 139-55.

any of these things. The meaning given to the term basic is strictly in terms of particular-identification. (p. 50)

He states that he feels the term "ontological priority" may be fairly used to describe this relation of basicness.

Does this limited relation deserve the label? It seems to me that in his concern to avoid reductionism, Strawson has not mentioned the most natural and traditional meaning of "ontological priority", where "as are ontologically prior to bs" means "bs cannot exist unless as exist". This is the relation of priority that holds between individual people and the city they comprise, between Aristotelian substances and accidents, between Leibnizian monads and well-founded phenomena.

Questions of ontological priority in this more traditional sense have occupied philosophers since the Greeks. Perhaps the most pervasive and continuing discussions of this sort have been the classic problem of universals and the question of the relation of God to the world. Claims on ontological priority in this sense need not have reductionist consequences; Aristotle would not say that only substances exist.

This traditional relation needs more precise description. What is said above is only a general description for a family of relations. Traditional metaphysics has been concerned to show what kinds of dependencies exist among what kinds of things, and varying answers have been given. A second problem is that according to our description as it stands above the relation seems often symmetrical. Substances are prior to accidents. Yet it is also true that no Aristotelian substance can exist without possessing some accidents, so accidents can also be said to be prior to substances. The priorities involved, however, are of different kinds; there is no single symmetrical relation. Accidents need support; substances need determination. Further, Aristotelian substances have an essential nature which limits what accidents they can receive. What may seem a simple relation of priority becomes the complicated skein of relations Aristotle sketches among "substance", "form", "matter", "essence", "the universal", and "the accidents". These form a set of interlocking conditions which make it possible for things to be as they are. Julius Moravcsik comments on both the problems I have just mentioned.

Any claim of ontological priority must have attached to it a specification of the relation(s) with respect to which the dependency is claimed to hold. Inasmuch as there may be an

infinite number of such necessary relationships between any given types of entities, one can never make a claim of ontological priority *simpliciter* (unless one can show that a certain dependency, running one way, excludes the possibility of any dependency running the other way). . . . The realization of this helps us toward a better understanding of the history of philosophy. For in this light we can see not only the conflicting claims of priority made, but also that many of these claims are based on different dependence relationships.[5]

None of the examples mentioned seem identical with Strawson's sense of "ontological priority". Nor do the relations pick out the same items. A boulder and a lopped-off tree branch would be Strawsonian primary particulars but not Aristotelian substances; the immaterial movers of the heavenly spheres would be substances but not primary particulars. Aristotle finds no difficulty asserting both that the movers are substances, indeed the most perfect substances, and that we can know of them only through difficult arguments, and refer to them only by reference to the material spheres they move.[6] (In what follows I will use subscripted S and T with words such as "priority", "primary", "dependence" to indicate their Strawsonian and traditional senses, respectively.)

How are these two kinds of priority related? It is hard to find a clear answer in Strawson. Priority$_T$ is not among the meanings he explicitly discusses when excluding reductionist senses from priority$_S$. Yet it seems clear that he does not mean that the two kinds are identical.

It is not easy to make entirely precise the connections between Strawson's argument and questions of ontology. . . . It is certain that he is not concerned with one sort of 'ontological priority' that philosophers have discussed. . . . Strawson holds that the identification of 'theoretical' particles in physics depends on the identification of macroscopic material bodies (p. 44), but he presumably does not think that there could

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[5]Julius Moravcsik, "Strawson and Ontological Priority", *Analytical Philosophy, Second Series,* edited by R. J. Butler (Oxford, 1965), pp. 106-119. Later in this article Moravcsik tries to show that the kind of dependence Strawson talks about must also be a network of relations instead of priority *simpliciter*. In particular he tries to show a mutual dependence for identifiability between material bodies and events. Moravcsik's arguments are discussed and elaborated by W. G. Lycan, "Identifiability-Dependence and Ontological Priority", *Personalist,* 1i, (1970), pp. 503-13.

[6]This Aristotelian example helps remove the temptation fostered by the later examples from Leibniz to assume that any primary$_T$ entities there must be some knower for whom they are primary$_S$.

not be any particles unless there were macroscopic material bodies.[7]

If these two priorities are not identical, how are they connected? For they must be connected if Strawson's program is to succeed. In the next sections I will discuss why this is so, and what arguments Strawson might be using to defend his enterprise.

III

Some correlation between the two kinds of priority is essential to descriptive metaphysics. It is essential, first of all, for the success of his attacks on revisionary metaphysics. We can see this if we look more closely at the example introduced by Williams. There are objects we ordinarily refer to in groups, because our ordinary objects are made up of them. We refer to them by also referring to some ordinary object, as in "the atoms comprising the pen I hold in my hand". (The sense in which I am holding both a pen and an aggregate of atoms may be difficult to make precise, but it clearly differs from the sense in which I could be holding both a pen and a flower.) We may refer to a single atom, but even here we usually refer by way of other objects, as in "the atom of copper causing this disturbance in the pattern" or "the atom at the tip of this pen". None of these references violates Strawson's principles of primacy$_s$, yet this does not stop us (nor Strawson) from asserting that atoms have primacy over pens in another sense.

Now what is to hinder the revisionary metaphysician from making parallel claims? Consider Leibniz: does he not say (a) we usually refer to monads in groups, though on occasion we may refer to a single monad, (b) we make such references by way of references to ordinary objects, as in "the monads comprising this pen" (the relation between monads and the pen differs from that between atoms and the pen, but not so radically that Leibniz did not consider them rivals), (c) these references do not violate Strawson's principles of primacy$_s$, (d) nevertheless, monads are primary$_T$ entities in very important ways. Included among these is the fact that *God* can refer to monads as primary$_s$ particulars. But the primacy$_T$ of monads does not consist in the fact that God can refer to them without referring to phenomena; it stems from their simplicity, their internal law of change, their independence—the features which make them serviceable explanatory entities. The point is not that they are

[7]Bernard Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

micro-entities. Spinoza's Substance is not a micro-entity, yet it, like monads, plays an explanatory role. The entities of the revisionary metaphysician provide the conditions that make possible the world as we experience it. Why should we presuppose that this primacy$_T$ necessarily disrupts the relations of primacy$_S$ which Strawson has been at pains to establish?[8]

The difficulty becomes clearer if we look at more of Strawson's attack on Leibniz. He tells us that Leibniz's scheme

> could not possibly be the primary conceptual scheme of any
> non-divine monad. . . . An ontology which could be taken
> seriously only by God is not to count as a possible ontology.
> (p. 124)

As Strawson interprets Leibniz, monads are to replace both material bodies and persons as the primary$_S$ particulars and the only legitimate logical subjects. This is impossible because we cannot make independent identifying references to monads; hence they cannot be our primary$_S$ entities. Leibniz, however, could grant Strawson's claim that we cannot use God's complete concepts to refer directly to monads. But for the purposes of explaining the world as we experience it, Leibniz does not have to be able to use God's language to make references; he has only to be able to describe its ontology. What we possess akin to God's knowledge is our ability to analyze the necessary relations among concepts and to perceive first principles. This enables us to know something about God's conceptual scheme, and so about reality. Thus Leibniz could accept Strawson's analysis of the priorities$_S$ in identification and reject Strawson's criticism of his monadology. If there are flaws in Leibniz's program, they do not lie in a proposal that we are to make use of impossible primary$_S$ entities.[9] Strawson's statement that "an

[8]Throughout this essay I am playing on the resemblances between traditional metaphysics and scientific theories, in order to offset the view which compares classical metaphysics with positivist reductions to sense-data or discussions of reducing classes to their members, etc. Metaphysics does not equal the listing of "ontological commitments". The metaphysician's entities play some explanatory role; they do not merely lengthen or shorten a list of admitted entities.

[9]In fact, because the monads form a world of spatio-temporal phenomena in which each point corresponds to a unique monadic point of view on the whole, we *can* refer to individual monads by using our ordinary apparatus of spatio-temporal coordinates. Strawson rightly notes that the possibility of our doing so depends on the operation of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles which prevents the "massive reduplication" of points of view elsewhere in the universe. He also correctly claims that, despite Leibniz's statements, the principle cannot be derived from the principles of identity and contradiction. He then concludes that the identity of indiscernibles is not a "logical" principle but an ad hoc device brought in to save Leibniz's theory of reference. This is an error. The identity of indiscernibles can be

ontology which could be taken seriously only by God is not to count as a possible ontology" begs the question against Leibniz by dogmatically asserting that primary$_T$ entities must be capable of serving as primary$_S$ entities as well. Unless Strawson has some argument either linking the two kinds of priority or reducing the traditional sense to his own, his analyses will simply bypass the revisionary metaphysicians. They will be effective only against those revisionary metaphysicians, such as sense-datum theorists, who already agree with him that primacy$_T$ can be determined by studying primacy$_S$.

The foregoing shows that Strawson's attack against revisionary metaphysics will fail unless some strong correlation of the two kinds of priority is provided. Such a correlation is also needed to give philosophical weight to his positive conclusions. Without this, it becomes unclear just what he has established. If I tell you that a city cannot exist without individual persons existing, I probably mean more than that in order to refer to a city I must refer to a group of human beings. I am trying to say something about how a city exists, or what it means for a city to exist, or what the conditions for city-existence are. When Strawson tells us that material bodies and persons are primary, is he only telling us that they are needed for identifying reference? Or is he also claiming that events, processes, ideas, consciousness, etc., depend for their own existence on the existence of material bodies and persons? The second is the more exciting conclusion, but if we take him at his word he means to say only the first.

> Strawson never really produces an argument to show that basicness in identification is the only, or the chief . . . criterion [of "reality" or "primacy"]. Yet he needs such an argument, if the statement that basic particulars are primary is to be more than the simplest tautology, and he clearly does not intend it to be that.[10]

[10]Bernard Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

derived from the principle of sufficient reason, as Leibniz does in his fifth letter to Clarke. Sufficient reason is demanded in every divine creative decision. Thus while not "logical" in the sense Strawson mentions, the identity of indiscernibles is "logical" in the sense that it is true in every creatable (possible) world. The appeal to reasons for divine decisions is not itself an ad hoc device but an integral part of Leibniz's program of accounting for a totally intelligible world that preserves some form of human and divine freedom.

In the absence of a clear correlation of these two kinds of priority, Strawson's descriptive metaphysics becomes a questionable enterprise. If it tells us nothing about priority$_T$ is it a "metaphysics" at all? If not, the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics disappears, along with Strawson's demand that the metaphysician limit himself to either describing or replacing ordinary language. If metaphysics discusses priority$_T$, and there is no correlation of priority$_T$ with priority$_S$, then it is unclear what it would mean to present a *the* metaphysics of ordinary language. For we could have many differing beliefs about priority$_T$ and express them in our common language, as indeed we do.

IV

What Strawson needs is some argument linking the two kinds of priority. There are several such arguments hinted at in *Individuals,* but none of them is successful.

(1) As Julius Moravcsik points out, Strawson seems to relate the two through the notion of reference.

> The connection seems to be the following: If the identifiability of *b*s depends on reference to *a*s, then it also depends on the existence of *a*s, provided that we accept the claim that the existence of *a*s is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of reference to *a*s.[11]

Moravcsik then goes on to argue correctly that Strawson's conception of identifying reference in the hearer-speaker situation allows the identification of believed-in but non-existent objects, such as the batch of phlogiston in this candle as opposed to the batch in the fireplace over there. With the argument so weakened, it only shows that the identifiability of *b*s depends on the asserted or believed-in existence of *a*s, not on their actual existence. In any case, even if we were to accept the argument in its strong form, it would not give us a link between the two kinds of priority. At most, this argument would show that the *identifiability* of *b*s depends on the existence of *a*s, not that the *existence* of *b*s so depends. That is, it would show that priority$_S$ has metaphysical consequences, but it would not prove that priority$_S$ and priority$_T$ are correlated or identified.

(2) Strawson seems at times to be asserting that if a revisionary metaphysician declares that certain entities are primary$_T$,

11Julius Moravcsik, *op. cit.,* p. 108, cf. also p. 112.

this entails that he is asserting they must be $primary_s$. (Cf., for example, pp. 24-5, 70-1, 103.) But this would only be true if the offending metaphysician held two additional principles: (a) that his revisionary metaphysics was to replace ordinary language rather than explain how it is possible, and (b) that in the replacement all $primary_T$ entities must be $primary_s$ as well. The first of these principles runs afoul of historical counterexamples, and the second begs the question by asserting the very correlation in dispute. (We might ask why Strawson thinks all revisionary metaphysicians are out to replace ordinary language? Perhaps it stems from a one-sided diet of examples drawn from the positivist tradition where ontology and replacement do go hand in hand.)

(3) Strawson may be trying to establish that the only $primary_T$ entities which we can consistently affirm are those that are $primary_s$ as well (cf. p. 24-5). Consider the following argument: the concept of a "mind", if it is to be the concept of an entity which we can identify at all, must be the concept of something that depends on a Strawsonian person. Minds cannot then be said to exist by themselves as they must if they are to be $primary_T$, for this would be to assert that what depends on a person does not depend on a person. Thus we cannot say that minds are $prior_T$ to persons.

But this is ambiguous. Does the argument presuppose that minds $depend_s$ or $depend_T$ on persons? If the former, it does not prove its conclusion; if the latter, it begs the question. We have already seen that Leibnizian monads are $dependent_s$ yet $primary_T$. To take an analogous example (due to Allan Gibbard): to identify "fathers" we must identify "sons" and men do depend on their sons in order to be said to be "fathers"—but none of this says that men $depend_T$ on their sons in order to exist at all. The above argument is plausible only because minds, unlike fathers, seem to have no characteristics other than those which make them part of persons. If we consider the claims that while persons may be $primary_s$, atoms, or monads, or Brahman are $primary_T$, the above argument has no force because these entities never were part of the concept of a person to begin with. If the above is typical of Strawson's argument, it is plausible only against positivistic and some Cartesian positions such as sense-data theories which use as part of their evidence the claim that we could totally describe our experiences while referring only to the "immediate" parts of the concepts of material bodies and persons. If such theories make any onto-

logical claims at all, they too presuppose that primacy$_T$ can be decided by surveying primacy$_S$.

(4) As far as I can determine, Strawson thus has no arguments that prove a correlation of the two kinds of priority. But there are traces of an argument of a different kind, one which aims to do away with talk of priority$_T$ altogether and replace it with talk of priority$_S$. Most revisionary metaphysicians make some distinction between primary and secondary senses of existence. Thus Aristotle tells us that substances are what primarily exist, and Leibniz that material bodies have the derivative reality of "well-founded phenomena". Strawson very explicitly excludes such levels of existence from his notion of priority$_S$. Later, near the end of the book, he takes up the question of the concept of existence. He notes that the process of replacing the subject of a subject-predicate expression by the apparatus of existential quantification (from "Fa" to "∃xFx") has "the makings of a completely general, formal, and univocal concept of existence" (p. 248). This conception "allow[s] that particulars can be said to exist without committing ourselves to the incoherent attempt to construe existence as a predicate of particulars" (p. 248).

> [This conception of existence] is in no way restrictive as regards the categories of things which can be said to exist; for, as I remarked at the beginning of this chapter, there is nothing of which we can speak which cannot appear as a logical subject. (p. 249)

This concept of existence seems to underlie Strawson's disavowal of any reductionist implications of the phrase "ontological priority". In addition, since it is a univocal concept of existence, it seems to provide no room for assertions of primary and secondary senses of existence. Everything which can be a logical subject can be said to exist in the same sense. Thus if it is true that revisionary metaphysicians do make distinctions of primary and secondary senses of existence, their statements are rendered logically suspect.

But the assertion of different senses of existence need not be reductionistic. Strawson's univocal concept of existence does not bar assertions of priority$_S$. Why is this so? Because the predicates involved, such as "can be referred to without reference to other types of particulars", are not identical to the concept of existence. They pick out subclasses within the class of logical subjects, without dividing the meaning of the larger

concept into primary and secondary senses. But why cannot we say the same about the claims of the revisionary metaphysician? An examination of the examples offered above, and others, will show that what are called "primary and secondary senses of existence" turn out to be existence qualified in various ways: as necessary vs. contingent, independent vs. dependent, simple vs. complex, etc. There would be no problem in treating these just as we would the predicates that establish relations of priority$_s$. They can be formalized as additional predicates and/ or modal operators, thus letting the existential quantifier remain "completely general, formal, and univocal". Thus the univocity of the concept of existence need provide no bar against the assertions of priority$_T$.

Strawson has attempted to show that there are parts of our ordinary conceptual structure which cannot be changed without destroying the possibility of communication as well. Assuming his analyses are correct, he has shown that we cannot take away the priority$_s$ of material bodies and persons. This result is important; it is enough to wreck the program for a sense-datum language which tries to make different entities prior$_s$. But Strawson's results do not amount to *the* metaphysics of ordinary language. He shows that the philosopher must include material bodies and persons in his ontology, but not that they must be prior$_T$. This leaves the door open for many competing theories.

V

I have been unable to find in *Individuals* any satisfactory solution to the problem of relating the two kinds of priority. Yet descriptive metaphysics should not be simply dismissed as a muddled program. Argument (4) in the last section points the direction Strawson must go, though he does not seem fully aware of it in this book. (He is much clearer about it in *The Bounds of Sense,* as we will see in the final section of this essay.) Despite his modest avowals that descriptive and revisionary metaphysics can coexist, Strawson is really out to replace the latter by the former. If it should turn out, as it does, that descriptive metaphysics is not metaphysics, then Strawson is moving towards replacing metaphysics by a type of transcendental philosophy.

When Strawson talks in general about the distinction of the two types of metaphysics, he suggests the picture of many competing conceptual schemes, one of which we happen to be

using. Since this scheme is adequate, we have no need of another. This is why the revisionary metaphysician is someone "with whom we do not wish to quarrel, but whom we do not need to follow". This picture resembles the one drawn by Austin's aphorism "ordinary language is the first word", and his claim that "our common stock of words" will prove more sound and subtle "than any that you or I are likely to think up in our arm-chairs of an afternoon".[12] If Strawson's practice followed this picture, we would see him showing how our present conceptual scheme accomplishes our purposes better than its leading rivals.

But Strawson does no such thing. He does wish to quarrel. He deals with revisionary schemes, not to show that they are inferior candidates, but to show that they cannot really be suggested at all as candidates. The "no-ownership" theory of experiences is "not coherent" and presupposes the use of the concept of a "person" (p. 92). The Cartesian is equally incoherent (p. 96). Leibniz's monadology cannot account for identifying references without ad hoc devices (Chap. IV). Hume's problem of the unity of the self "does not exist" (p. 132); "there is no mind-body problem" to be solved by other schemes (p. 112); the problem of other minds is not a problem (p. 109). Quine's proposal of a language without names for particulars "is exposed to . . . [the] charge of circularity" (p. 202). An *Aufbau*-like scheme of space-time points or place-time volumes "is impossible to think" without the use of our ordinary scheme (p. 231). Sceptical doubts about our scheme need not be heeded because "they amount to rejection of the whole conceptual scheme in which alone such doubts make sense" (p. 24).

These are not descriptions of alternative schemes to which our present one happens to be superior. Far from following the Austinian picture suggested by his Introduction, Strawson believes that our conceptual scheme is the only possible one. "The whole process of reasoning only starts because the scheme is as it is; and we cannot change it even if we would" (p. 24). Our scheme is *the* necessary condition for communication and language. It is not surprising that Strawson describes his arguments as "transcendental" (p. 30). However difficult it may be to characterize the variety of methods and arguments labelled "transcendental" in the last century and a half, in their Kantian homeland they seek (1) unique necessary limiting conditions for experience and knowledge (2) which are *neither* laws of logic

[12]J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: 1961), pp. 130, 133.

(3) *nor* metaphysical statements about what kinds of beings are capable of existing, and so of being known or talked about.

We could outline Strawson's overall argument as follows:

(a) We do communicate successfully in hearer-speaker situations.

(b) It is a necessary condition for the possibility of this successful communication that we are able to make identifying references and ascribe experiences to subjects of consciousness.

(c) The structures discussed in descriptive metaphysics (the priority$_s$ of material bodies and persons, etc.) provide the unique necessary conditions of the possibility of our making identifying references and ascribing experiences to subjects of consciousness.[13]

Yet Strawson does speak of other possible schemes that we might have used "had the nature of our experience been fundamentally different" (p. 18, cf. p. 105). In his chapter on the No-Space world, Strawson hesitates over whether what he is describing is a real possibility or not (compare pp. 53, 55, 80). But in other places he does suggest different kinds of experiences: the group-mind, where all experiences are ascribed to the collectivity (as in "we won the game", cf. p. 110), and the disembodied individual or "former person" (pp. 112-3). It is very significant that none of these alternatives are schemes *we* could adopt, for they are not alternative philosophical interpretations of experience but alternative experiences.

Strawson actually uses a two-pronged approach to this question of alternative conceptual schemes, and this is not always clear to himself. He deals with alternative *philosophical* schemes by trying to show that they contravene transcendentally necessary conditions of our successful communication with each other. If we were to use them as our primary conceptual schemes we should be unable to reidentify particulars or ascribe experiences to subjects, all of which are a necessary part of communication as we know it. I have argued that this "transcendental argument" begs the question by presupposing that all

[13]Statements (a) and (b) may seem unproblematic, but they conceal an additional difficulty. Most of the criticisms of *Individuals* have concentrated on (c) and asked if indeed descriptive metaphysics gives a unique set of necessary conditions for the identification of particulars and the ascription of experiences. But we may also ask whether Strawson's concepts of "experience" and "ascription of experiences" and "particulars" as well as his account of reference are not too theory-laden to make (b) a statement of the unique necessary conditions for communication. Should this be so, there is a sense in which Strawson would be methodologically as far removed from ordinary expressions as is Leibniz. That distance then invites the philosopher to judge between rival interpretations of ordinary language, not to repel a usurper in the name of our ordinary conceptual scheme.

alternative philosophical schemes intend their relations of priority$_T$ to supply new relations of priority$_s$ which replace those of ordinary language.

On the other hand, Strawson wishes to join to this "Kantian" approach a second reminiscent of *one* theme in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. It is possible that were certain very general facts of nature other than they are we would not employ the concepts which we in fact do. For instance if the universe did not contain reidentifiable material bodies (cf. Chap. II), or if there were no actions which involved characteristic patterns of typical bodily motions (p. 108), we might not use the concepts of material bodies or persons. This would not be because we had found a new way to identify particulars or ascribe experiences, but because we were doing something else entirely. On the outline above, we would have new structures under (c) only because we had stopped doing the activities described in (a) and (b). The alternative schemes Strawson sees as dimly possible are not comparable with the Leibnizian monadology or sense-datum theory, but with Wittgenstein's wonder about what we would do if the numbers we had written changed on the page, or his example of the tribe who sell lumber stacks priced according to base area instead of volume.[14]

But now the problem of the "we" in "our conceptual scheme" becomes acute. Can "we" even grasp the possibility of such alternate experiences? If these possible "others" are not identifying particulars or ascribing experiences, would they be doing anything "we" could recognize as communicating? It seems unlikely that we could ever consider such beings part of our "we" (which is, after all, constituted by the possibility of mutual communication). Still less would we deliberate about adopting their "conceptual schemes". Thus, in the end, there is but one conceptual scheme at our disposal.[15]

[14]Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II, xii, p. 230ᵉ. The examples are from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, I, secs. 142-50, and V, sec. 40. Note that such "Wittgensteinian" explanations of how we are *able* to play a certain language game do not show that we *must* play just this one in our given world.

[15]Cf. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", Presidential Address, APA 1973.

In the language of Davidson's discussion, my point would be that the revisionary metaphysician is not proposing a "new conceptual scheme" at all, but is advancing a theory about certain relations and conditions—a theory which requires no more—and no less—difficulty of understanding than other theories. But it is not the mysterious wholesale change Davidson or Strawson discuss, though Strawson confused the two. (On the "we" in "our conceptual scheme", cf. W. A. Berriman, "Strawson's *Individuals* as Descriptive Metaphysics", *American Journal of Philosophy*, xlv (1967) pp. 276-292, and E. A. Burtt, "Descriptive Metaphysics", *Mind* lxxii (1963) pp. 218-239. Both these authors use versions of the Whorff hypothesis to attack Strawson, but it seems to me that their attacks are open to the kind of Davidsonian rejoinder given above.)

This second branch of Strawson's argument is not explicit, but it seems to be the only way to make sense of his statements that (a) our present scheme is one of many alternatives, and (b) our present scheme is the only possible one for us. This may also help explain why Strawson never clears up the question of priority$_T$. Though in fact priority$_T$ has slipped out of Strawson's arguments by a *petitio,* this second argument *seems* to have taken care of it. While the "Kantian" transcendental arguments purport to give us necessary relations within our conceptual scheme, the other *Investigations* argument tells us how the world makes it possible for us to use that scheme at all. It is tempting to construe the second argument so that

(a) We could not use a conceptual scheme that makes material bodies prior$_s$ unless there were material bodies present in sufficient richness and number,

is read as

(a') We could not use a conceptual scheme that makes material bodies prior$_s$ unless material bodies were prior$_T$.

But this will not do. Statement (a) would presumably be admitted by revisionary metaphysicians like Leibniz or Spinoza who would deny (a'). Strawson also seems to deny (a') when talking about atoms and other scientific entities, yet he needs to affirm it or something like it when arguing against the revisionists.

VI

I would like to conclude with some brief remarks concerning Strawson's next book, *The Bounds of Sense,* which may be read as an attempt to improve the arguments in *Individuals* as well as a commentary on Kant.[16] The central position Strawson gives to the distinction between universal concepts and particulars (p. 47 BS and *passim*), the basic role he assigns to singular subject-predicate propositions (pp. 81-2 BS), the interpretation given to the Analogies and Paralogisms (pp. 118-176 BS), the presence of an argument from *Individuals* as an argument Strawson wishes Kant would have used (p. 125 BS)—all these and more show that the *Individuals* "Kantian" argument is here being traced back, and perhaps read into, its source.

[16]P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: 1966). Page references will be incorporated into the text with an added "BS" to distinguish them from references to *Individuals.*

Strawson's main enemies remain those Cartesians and empiricists who try to build up experience from private particulars. He tries to show that their concept of "experience" is "incoherent" unless placed within a larger conceptual structure which is substantially the descriptive metaphysics of *Individuals* (p. 19 BS). This is spoken of as a "limiting framework for all our thought about the world" (p. 15 BS). "We can form no coherent or intelligible conception of a type of experience which does not exhibit those features" (p. 271 BS). The "we" of "we can form" and "our thought about the world" seems the same as that of *Individuals* and can be elucidated in the same way.[17]

In *The Bounds of Sense* the transcendental argument no longer starts from our successful communication with each other, but from our possession of a conception of our experience as "experience".[18] Though the stages of the argument have become more complex, the identification of particulars and the ascription of experiences remain central to it, and their mutual necessity has become much clearer.

Thus we proceed from the necessity of conceptualization to the self-reflexiveness of experience—to objectivity and the potentiality of self-consciousness—to the distinction between objective time-relations and time-relations between subjective experiences—to the idea of a persisting framework within which objective time-relations hold—to the idea of re-identifiable particular objects—to that of causal law or regularity— to that of law-governed objects in space. (p. 272 BS)

In this discussion we hear little about ordinary language and nothing about priority$_s$. The distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics is replaced by the more Kantian distinction between an analysis of our conceptual scheme and dogmatic assertions that violate the "principle of significance". Priority$_T$ now is treated explicitly: it is a condition of our possessing a concept of "experience" that we think of experience as containing persistent identifiable spatio-temporal objects which act under causal laws and are prior$_T$ to the changing qualities they possess.

[17]Speaking of the "experience" of infants and animals, Strawson says "Any description we can give, any thought we can entertain, of *their* experience must be in terms of concepts derived from ours" (p. 273 BS, cf. also pp. 150-2 BS where Strawson discusses a possible different experience).

[18]There is an interesting parallel between the relation of *The Bounds of Sense* to *Individuals* and that of the first *Critique* to the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*. In each case the first book starts from the analysis of the concept of experience while the second starts from our successful use of certain kinds of propositions.

C

Even with these changes, there remains a version of the ambiguities found in *Individuals*. As Richard Rorty has shown, Strawson not only gives us necessary relations within our conceptual scheme, he also tries to show conditions in the world (more precisely, in the empirical characteristics of the temporal stream of appearances) which are necessary for us to possess the concept of experience. This is a reappearance of the *Investigations* argument of *Individuals,* but it is here out of place. Rorty points out that the only conditions Strawson should validly conclude to are those of the form "in order to use concept X we must be able to use concept Y".[19]

To put the ambiguity another way: Strawson is not yet Kantian enough. To have the concept of "experience" we must be able to use the concept of "objects". Strawson defines this notion of "objectivity" as follows:

> To know something about an object, e.g. that it falls under such-and-such a general concept, is to know something that holds irrespective of the occurrence of any particular state of consciousness, irrespective of the occurrence of any particular experience of awareness of the object as falling under the general concept in question. Judgments about objects, if valid, are objectively valid, valid independently of the occurrence of the particular state of awareness, of the particular experience, which issues in the judgment. (p. 73 BS)

Much of Strawson's argument is designed to show that the concept of "experience" must include the concepts of "objects" in this "weighty" sense. But there is an ambiguity here. Does the "independence" mean "independent of any particular state of consciousness, i.e. not arbitrary but following a rule valid for all consciousnesses" or does it mean "independent of any act of consciousness at all"? These two meanings of "objectivity" (roughly what Kant would call transcendental idealism and transcendental realism) lead to two different kinds of conclusions about priority$_T$:[20]

(b) It is a necessary condition of our having the concept of "experience" that we *think* such-and-such kinds of objects as prior$_T$ to such-and-such other kinds of objects.

[19]Richard Rorty, "Strawson's Objectivity Argument", *Review of Metaphysics* xxiv (1970), pp. 207-244.
[20]This is not exactly the ambiguity discussed above, but it is more or less identical to the one Barry Stroud found in the anti-sceptical parts of *Individuals*. Cf. "Transcendental Arguments", *Journal of Philosophy* lxv (1968), pp. 241-256.

(b′) It is a necessary condition of our having the concept of "experience" that such-and-such kinds of objects *be* prior$_T$ to such-and-such other kinds of objects.

Transcendental idealism denies that (b′) can be asserted in the second sense of objectivity mentioned above.[21] Strawson talks at times as if only (b) were a legitimate statement (cf. p. 262 BS) yet the thrust of his attack on transcendental idealism and of the conclusions Rorty examines is to seek statements like (b′).

In order to safeguard the philosophical importance of his analyses in *Individuals,* Strawson needs a way to deal with contrasts of the two kinds of priority ("While such-and-such kinds of objects are prior$_S$, such-and-such other kinds of objects are prior$_T$"). He must find a way to bind the two kinds of priority into a tight correlation, or to forbid talk of priority$_T$, or else he must give up attacking the revisionary metaphysician who talks about priority$_T$. But he does not seem to do any of these things. In *The Bounds of Sense* a different but related problem occurs. Strawson must find a way to avoid contrasts between (b) and (b′) ("While such-and-such kinds of objects must be thought of as prior$_T$, such-and-such other kinds of objects are prior$_T$ independently of our thought").[22] Unlike the one just above, this second contrast fairly cries out for Kantian therapy. This is a measure of the advance from *Individuals* to *The Bounds of Sense.* In this case Strawson can eliminate the alternative (statements like (b′)) by unambiguously adopting a suitable linguistic version of transcendental idealism, i.e. the principle that the limits of our language are the limits of our world. In this way he could forbid talk of other relations of priority$_T$ than those which his analyses have shown are necessary for our conception of "experience". The price for a *the* metaphysics of ordinary language is some such descendant of transcendental idealism. Even in *The Bounds of Sense* Strawson does not unambiguously pay this price. This may be due to a continuing confusion between the "very general features of the world" that explain how we are able to do what we do and the transcendental conditions that say what we must think in order to do what we do.

[21]Cf. on this subject H. Allison, "Transcendental Idealism and Descriptive Metaphysics", *Kantstudien* lx (1969), pp. 216-233; and H. E. Matthews, "Strawson on Transcendental Idealism", *Philosophical Quarterly,* xix pp. 214-220.

[22]A weaker and safer version of the contrast would be "while such-and-such kinds of objects must be thought of as prior$_T$ in our ordinary scheme, such-and-such other kinds of objects must be thought of as prior$_T$ in scheme S, and scheme S is to be preferred as a picture of reality$_T$". This is similar to the position of Wilfrid Sellars where the prior$_T$ entities of the "manifest image" are to be replaced by those revealed by a Peircean ultimate physics.

These are two different kinds of conditions which make possible
a language we can use for communication among ourselves.
Investigating them leads to two different sorts of philosophical
studies. Each is important and valuable, but neither of them is
doing ontology in the traditional sense. If they are to replace
ontology, more argument is needed than Strawson has given.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO