**Introduction**

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This book aims to bring out the continuing relevance of Sir Peter Frederick Strawson’s (1919–2006) work. Strawson was one of the most influential British philosophers in the second half of the twentieth century. He was elected to the British Academy in 1960 and received a knighthood in 1977. He never aimed at a comprehensive, integrated system, but he contributed to a wide range of debates in the philosophy of language and logic, metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, the history of philosophy, and philosophical methodology. His writings were discussed by the world’s leading philosophers, including Bertrand Russell, Wilfrid Sellars, Hilary Putnam, W. V. O. Quine, Donald Davidson, J. L. Austin, and Saul Kripke.

Strawson was born in London and went up to Oxford in 1937, where he studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE). Immediately after having finished his studies, he was called up to the army in the summer of 1940. He attained the rank of captain and defended putatively delinquent soldiers facing court martial, an experience that may have triggered some of the ideas in his influential paper ‘Freedom and Resentment’. After the war, Strawson was elected to the post of Assistant Lecturer in Philosophy at Bangor, in Wales. He won the prestigious John Locke Prize in Oxford in 1947 and impressed Gilbert Ryle, one of the examiners, who recommended him to University College. Strawson was elected a Fellow there in 1948 and remained in Oxford until his retirement in 1987. It did not take long before he achieved international fame through the influential criticism of Russell and Austin, two leading philosophers at the time.

Strawson’s paper ‘On Referring’ (1950a), published in *Mind,* criticizes Russell’s Theory of Descriptions. Russell’s theory analyses sentences involving definite descriptions by capturing the logical form of such sentences in the language of first-order predicate logic. According to Russell, sentences such as ‘The king of France is wise’ are to be interpreted as expressing (1) the claim that there is a king of France, (2) the claim that there is at most one king of France, and (3) the claim that something that is a king of France is wise. In the language of first-order predicate logic, this means that sentences of the form ‘The F is G’ are analysed as having the following logical form: ∃*x*(*Fx* & ∀y(*Fy* → x=y) & *Gx*). This analysis allowed Russell to hold that sentences involving non-referring definite descriptions (such as ‘the king of France’) are both meaningful and false.

Strawson agrees with Russell that sentences involving non-referring definite descriptions are *meaningful*, but he disagrees that these sentences must be either true or false in all circumstances of use. Strawson criticizes Russell for failing to consistently distinguish between (a) the meaning of a word or sentence and (b) the object referred to by making *use* of a word or the truth or falsity of the statement made by *using* a sentence. This failure is the clearest, he thinks, in Russell’s theory of logically proper names, where the meaning of such a name is identified with the object the name refers to. By clearly separating talk about *meaning* from talk about *reference*, Strawson argues that a sentence such as ‘The king of France is wise’ can be meaningful even though statements made by using that sentence can fail to have a truth-value (e.g., a use of that sentence at a time *t* where there is no king of France). Against Russell’s analysis, Strawson argues that a speaker does not *assert* but rather *signals* or *presupposes* that there is a king of France when using ‘The king of France is wise’ to make an assertion. On occasions where such presupposition is not fulfilled (e.g., at times when there is no king of France), the speaker fails to make a statement with a truth-value even though the sentence is meaningful, which for Strawson means that there are certain general rules and conventions governing the proper use of the sentence on particular occasions.

In the same year as the above paper, the essay ‘Truth’ (1950b) was published, in which Strawson attacks Austin’s correspondence theory of truth. Strawson criticizes ‘Austin’s account of the two terms of the truth-conferring relation’, as well as his ‘account of the relation itself’ (Strawson 1950b, 129). For instance, Strawson agrees with Austin that it is *statements* that are properly said to be true, but he disagrees with Austin that such statements are to be understood as historic speech-episodes. And he agrees with Austin that it is *facts* that are what make statements true, but he criticizes Austin for assimilating facts to worldly events or things. The year before, Strawson had already published an essay with the same title (the 1949 paper ‘Truth’) where he develops his own account of truth. In this 1949 paper, Strawson defends an updated version of Ramsey’s deflationary theory of truth while at the same time criticizing what he calls the ‘meta-linguistic’ or ‘semantic’ theory of truth. According to Strawson, the deflationist is right in claiming that to say that a statement S *is* *true* does not add any assertive content to S itself. Nevertheless, the linguistic occasions where it is appropriate to say that *S is true* are often quite different from the occasions where it is appropriate to say that *S*. To make this point, Strawson compares the use of ‘true’ with the use of ‘yes’ and ‘ditto’ to emphasize its typical *confirmatory* use; i.e., its use to confirm or underwrite a statement already made by another speaker. Strawson further argues that an analysis of the actual use of ‘true’ shows that it is not used as a device to talk *about* sentences at all. According to Strawson, ‘[t]he phrase “is true” is not *applied to* sentences; for it is not *applied to* anything. Truth is not a property of symbols; for it is not a property’ (Strawson 1949, 84). Just as ‘yes’ or ‘ditto’ underwrite another speaker’s statement, one of the main uses of ‘true’ is to *confirm* rather than *talk about* a sentence uttered by another speaker. According to Strawson, meta-linguistic theories about truth mistake truth for a property because they are tempted by grammatical constructions in which ‘. . . is true’ is a grammatical predicate, which leads them to the idea that ‘. . . is true’ is used to make a statement about a sentence rather than just confirming a statement that has, for instance, already been made by another speaker.

Strawson’s first book, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (1952), not only serves as a useful introduction to standard logic, but also contains original philosophical discussions of some of the central concepts in the philosophy of logic, such as the concepts of logical necessity, logical form, and entailment. Furthermore, the book contains careful descriptions of the differences between the meaning of the truth-functional connectives and their counterparts in ordinary language, as well as a defence of traditional syllogistic logic. The latter was described by Quine as ‘the best way of defending the traditional syllogistic’ (Quine 1953, 439). The main methodological lesson Strawson teaches us in *Introduction to Logical Theory* is that formal logic is a sort of idealized abstraction, which does reveal certain fundamental features of our language and thought, but which also has some important limitations and therefore cannot do justice to the complexities of ordinary language use. These ideas were already in the background of Strawson’s criticism of Russell’s Theory of Descriptions. The thought that ordinary language use has a precise logic, or that the ordinary language counterparts of logical connectives have a precise logic (as Grice believed), often leads to philosophical confusion and misrepresentation.

In 1954, Strawson reviewed Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations,* published posthumously one year earlier, for *Mind.* Strawson’s lengthy review is critical of Wittgenstein at certain points (more so than many of his contemporaries, but less so than many philosophers today), especially when it comes to the alleged impossibility of doing philosophy in a systematic way, but he does not hesitate to call Wittgenstein ‘a philosopher of genius’ (Strawson 1974a, 147), and he ranks him, with Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, among the greatest philosophers of all time (Strawson 1995, 18).

The conflict between so-called ‘ideal language philosophers’ and ‘ordinary language philosophers’ became a central methodological debate in the 1950s and 1960s. In his ‘Carnap’s Views on Constructed Systems Versus Natural Languages in Analytic Philosophy’, which was written in 1954 but published in 1963, Strawson discusses Carnap’s method of explication, which aims at *replacing* our ordinary concepts by more exact concepts. Strawson contrasts this method with the method of *describing* the different, actual uses of our ordinary concepts. Given that Strawson thinks that philosophical problems arise through a failure to acknowledge the many different uses and purposes of the everyday concepts that we philosophize about, he argues that Carnap’s method of explication cannot, in itself, be a sufficient method to solve philosophical problems. A Carnapian explication, after all, simply *replaces* the ordinary concepts that gave rise to the problem. By doing so, the same paradox or perplexity might indeed not arise anymore, but neither will the origin of the air of paradox or perplexity have been explained. This can be done only, Strawson argues, by giving a description of the actual uses of the concept or set of concepts that led to our philosophical puzzlement in the first place. Hence the idea that ‘laying down the rules of use of exact and fruitful concepts’ does not ‘solve the typical philosophical problem’ but simply ‘change[s] the subject’; it is ‘like offering a text-book on physiology to someone who says (with a sigh) that he wished he understood the workings of the human heart’ (Strawson 1963, 505).Strawson’s ‘changing the subject’ objection to ideal language philosophy has recently received renewed attention in the context of debates about conceptual engineering (Pinder 2020). Another remarkable achievement by Strawson in the 1950s was ‘In Defence of a Dogma’ (1956), co-authored with his former tutor H. P. Grice and published in *The Philosophical Review*, in which Strawson and Grice defend the analytic-synthetic distinction against Quine’s famous attack on analyticity in ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’.

Strawson’s second book, *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics,* appeared in 1959. It ambitiously addresses ‘the question of what the most basic or primitive or fundamental objects of reference, or subjects of predication, are’, and Strawson argues that they are ‘relatively enduring space-occupying individuals’ such as people, animals, and inanimate material objects (Strawson 1998, 9). In the introduction to *Individuals,* Strawson coins the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics: ‘Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure’ (Strawson 1959, 9; on this distinction, see Haack 1979 and Snowdon 2008). Strawson conceives of himself as a descriptive metaphysician in the tradition of Aristotle and Kant, attempting to reveal the overall structure of our conceptual scheme, of our way of thinking about ourselves and the world. Especially the first half of the book, with chapters about bodies, sounds, and persons (including arguments against scepticism about other minds), has been widely discussed (Ayer 1963; Evans 1980; Ishiguro 1980; Williams 1973) and generated a range of essays on similar issues in descriptive metaphysics (Campbell 1994; Evans 1982; Wiggins 1980). Strawson’s use of the term ‘metaphysics’, innocent as it may sound today, sets him apart from the then-influential anti-metaphysical and anti-theoretical pronouncements of Austin and his followers, but the extent to which Strawson departs from metaphysics as traditionally conceived is a matter of dispute (Glock 2012; Hacker 2003).

Strawson wrote two papers on moral philosophy in the early 1960s. In ‘Social Morality and Individual Ideal’, he distinguishes between the region of the ethical (‘a region of diverse, certainly incompatible and possibly practically conflicting ideal images or pictures of a human life’) and the sphere of morality (the sphere of ‘rules or principles governing human behaviour which apply universally within a community or class’) (Strawson 1971a, 33), and he outlines how both domains are related. In contrast to this relatively neglected paper, ‘Freedom and Resentment’ (1962) is Strawson’s most-cited paper today. In it, he discusses the threat of determinism to our practices of holding each other morally responsible. These practices are marked by what Strawson calls ‘the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships’, including resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, and many other attitudes (Strawson 1974a, 10). Strawson believes that the truth of determinism cannot threaten moral responsibility, but there is a great deal of disagreement about the reconstruction of his argument(s). Classic discussions include Bennett (1980), Wallace (1994), and Watson (1987). Interpretations tend to emphasize Humean (Russell 1992), Kantian (Allais 2014), or Wittgensteinian (Bengtson 2019; De Mesel 2018) strands in the paper. Heyndels (2019) argues that ‘Freedom and Resentment’ is best understood as an application of Strawson’s own philosophical methods; De Mesel (2022) shows that it can profitably be read in the light of some later remarks by Strawson. Many relevant papers are collected in McKenna and Russell (2008) and Shoemaker and Tognazzini (2014). The influence of ‘Freedom and Resentment’ on contemporary discussions of moral responsibility can hardly be overestimated.

Strawson began to lecture on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason,* ‘the greatest single work of modern Western philosophy’ (Strawson 1998, 12), in the early 1960s. Strawson had studied Kant as an undergraduate (the only two options for PPE students specializing in philosophy in the late 1930s were logic and Kant; Strawson took both) and tutored students who chose to work on Kant. Strawson’s lectures led to the publication of his third book, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason,* in 1966. Strawson describes the aim of his book as being:

to separate Kant’s brilliant and profound account of the structure of necessarily connected ideas and concepts which form the limiting framework of all human thought about the world and experience of the world from the overarching theory which he [Kant] saw as the explanation of the possibility of any such account; and at the same time to explain that explanation and to show why it should be rejected’. (Strawson 1998, 12)

The explanation that Strawson rejects is Kant’s transcendental idealism, which involves the idea that the nature of things as they really are is necessarily unknown to us. Strawson’s work on Kant was impactful at the time (Harrison 1970; Matthews 1969); it is generally seen as crucial to the development of analytic Kantianism, and continues to be discussed (Glock 2003; Gomes 2016, 2017a, 2017b; and a special issue of the *European Journal of Philosophy* on the fiftieth anniversary of *The Bounds of Sense*,published in 2016). Strawson returned to Kant in some of his later essays (Strawson 1997). Among other things, *The Bounds of Sense* sparked a renewed interest in so-called ‘transcendental arguments’ (Rorty 1971; Stern 1999; Stroud 1968), which some take to have anti-sceptical implications, because they show that the sceptic’s position presupposes the truth of claims which the sceptic claims to doubt.

In 1968, Strawson succeeded Ryle as Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at Magdalen College. His concern with language as an instrument of human communication took central stage in his inaugural lecture, ‘Meaning and Truth’ (1970), in which he discusses the ‘Homeric struggle’ between ‘theorists of formal semantics’ and ‘theorists of communication-intention’ (Strawson 1970, 132). The former group analyses the notion of meaning in terms of truth-conditions, and the latter group argues that an elucidation of the notion of meaning is impossible without reference to the interaction between a speaker and a hearer, which includes the speaker’s audience-directed intentions to communicate information. Strawson sides with the latter group, arguing that ‘we know nothing of human *language* unless we understand human *speech*’ (Strawson 1970, 145).

Strawson returned to reference and predication, issues that were at the centre of his philosophical interests throughout his career, in his fourth book, *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974b). His aim in this book is twofold: ‘first, to explain the foundation of the basic combination of predication on which our logic rests and, second, to reveal the general character of any adequate explanation of the grammatical structure of any type of natural language’ (Strawson 1974b, ix). Also in the 1970s, Strawson wrote an influential paper on perception, ‘Perception and Its Objects’ (1979). In this paper, Strawson argues that our ordinary perceptual experiences are always already mediated by concepts, and that our ordinary perceptual judgements would be incorrectly described as being ‘inferred from’ or ‘interpretations of’ what sensible experience actually presents us with. Furthermore, he holds that we are pre-theoretically committed to a realist understanding of the nature of perception where we take our perceptual experiences to be causally dependent on independently existing physical objects.Lastly, he reconciles strong scientific realism about perception with commonsense realism by recognizing a certain relativity in our conception of the real properties of physical objects. Something may be a green leather table-top relative to the human perceptual standpoint, and nothing but a congeries of electric charges relative to the scientific standpoint**.**

Strawson delivered the Woodbridge Lectures at Columbia University in 1983. A book based on them was published in 1985 as *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties.* In the first chapter about scepticism, inspired by Hume and Wittgenstein, Strawson develops an anti-sceptical line of argument whose relation to his earlier Kantian, transcendental arguments is still being debated (Stern 2003; Callanan 2011). Strawson argues that the attempt to combat sceptical doubts by rational argument is misguided, ‘for we are dealing here with the presuppositions, the framework, of all human thought and enquiry’ (Strawson 1998, 17). In subsequent chapters about morality and perception, the mental and the physical, and meaning, Strawson’s target is a kind of reductive naturalism, which tends to ‘discredit, or somehow to reduce to more scientifically acceptable, physicalistic terms, whole regions of ordinary human thought, language, and experience’ (Strawson 1998, 17). His own form of realist naturalism is of another, ‘humanistic’ or ‘liberal’ variety that has been popular at Oxford. Snowdon and Gomes (2021) call it ‘a *relaxed* realism that does not set its face against the claims of natural science, but rather refuses to take them as calling into question the legitimacy of our ordinary ways of thinking about the world’.

Strawson’s last book, *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy*, was published in 1992. From 1968 until his retirement in 1987, Strawson gave a series of introductory lectures in philosophy under the same title, and the book largely preserves the content of these lectures. It was published first in French in 1985 as *Analyse et Métaphysique.* In the second chapter, Strawson distinguishes between reductive and connective analysis, and he declares the latter ‘more realistic and more fertile’ (Strawson 1992, 19) than the former. Reductive analyses aim to reduce problematic concepts or explain them in terms of other concepts which are felt to be more perspicuous. Strawson, however, believes that philosophically important concepts ‘tend to remain obstinately irreducible, in the sense that they cannot be defined away, without remainder or circularity, in terms of other concepts’ (Strawson 1995, 16). Thus, another kind of analysis, connective analysis, is called for. Connective analyses aim to reveal the function of a concept ‘by grasping its connections with the others, its place in the system’ (Strawson 1992, 19). Strawson practices the method of connective analysis (whose relation to the method of descriptive metaphysics remains somewhat elusive) in subsequent chapters about experience and material objects, the inner and the outer, truth and knowledge, meaning and understanding, causation and explanation, and freedom and necessity.

In ‘My Philosophy’ (1995), Strawson summarizes his general philosophical aim as follows:

. . . it is possible to distinguish a certain number of fundamental, general, pervasive concepts or concept-types which together constitute the structural framework, as it were, within which all detailed thinking goes on. To name a few at random, I have in mind such ideas as those of space, time, object, event, mind and body, knowledge, truth, meaning, existence, identity, action, intention, causation, and explanation. I take the philosophical aim to be that or making clear, or elucidating, the character of such concepts as these and their interconnections. (Strawson 1995, 13–14)

**Overview of Contributions**

This volume opens with two chapters on Strawson’s philosophy of language. In the first chapter, Anne Bezuidenhout develops and defends Strawson’s view of presupposition, drawing on materials from ‘On Referring’ (1950a) and *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974b). She connects Strawson’s observations to recent work in linguistics and the philosophy of language. In the second chapter, Ian Rumfitt focuses on ‘Meaning and Truth’ (1970), Strawson’s inaugural lecture at Oxford about the conflict between truth-conditional approaches and communication-intention theories of meaning. Rumfitt draws on recent work on the speech act of telling in order to criticize Strawson’s argument in favor of the latter.

Chapters three to five deal with Strawson’s ambitious project in *Individuals* (1959). Paul Snowdon scrutinizes and criticizes the first chapter of *Individuals*, where Strawson moves from claims about the nature of reference to the idea that material bodies are basic. Snowdon argues, contra Strawson, that understanding reference should not be analysed in terms of identification, and that it is not clear that material objects are the basic objects of reference for us. Quassim Cassam engages with Strawson’s epistemology, and specifically with his account of the knowledge of other minds. He connects ideas from *Individuals* to Strawson’s later *Scepticism and Naturalism* (1985) and argues that Strawson’s account of the grounds for ascriptions of mental states to others is too narrowly focused on behavioural criteria. By looking at the various grounds on which a biographer ascribes mental states to a deceased biographical subject, Cassam argues that *empathy* plays a crucial role in ascriptions of mental states to others as well. In the fifth chapter, Michelle Montague explores the second part of *Individuals* (which has often been neglected), where Strawson argues that there is a level of thought that is more fundamental than our thought about material bodies. According to Montague, a ‘stuff ontology’ most naturally corresponds to this fundamental level of thought.

Strawson’s relation to Kant and his book *The Bounds of Sense* (1966) are at the heart of chapters six and seven. Hans-Johann Glock explores the relation between concepts and experience, which is central to Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics and to his analytic Kantianism. Glock argues that Strawson rightly believed that there are limits to the concept of a possible experience, but wrongly suggested that any conceivable experience must be conceptual. The insights offered by descriptive metaphysics are best conceived as conceptual truths of a special, mediated kind, not as synthetic a priori. Anil Gomes is also concerned with the status of Strawson’s claims, specifically in relation to the status of Kant’s claims in the *Critique of Pure Reason.* Gomes argues that Strawson did not understand and should not have understood Kant’s claims as analytic. Rather, Strawson seems committed to our possessing non-analytic but a priori knowledge. Gomes extracts a model for understanding such knowledge from G. E. Moore’s early writings on Kant.

Chapters eight and nine concern Strawson’s naturalism and his response to scepticism. Lilian Alweiss compares Strawson’s account of perceptual experience, as developed in ‘Perception and Its Objects’ (1979), with that of Edmund Husserl. Strawson defends a naive realist theory of perception, but why think that perceptual experiences represent the world as it is? Alweiss argues that Strawson’s adherence to a Humean form of naturalism makes it difficult for him to dispel sceptical concerns about perception, while Husserl shows that we have evaluative reasons, and not merely natural ones, for sidestepping scepticism. Giuseppina D’Oro shows that Strawson’s anti-sceptical arguments occupy an intermediate logical space between truth-directed transcendental arguments aimed at refuting the sceptic and naturalist-quietist responses of Humeans who decline to take up the sceptical challenge. Strawson’s response to scepticism is neither quietist nor confrontational. It seeks to show primarily that the sceptic is not a genuine partner in conversation.

Chapter ten is concerned with the philosophical methodology defended and developed by Strawson in his last book, *Analysis and Metaphysics* (1992). A. P. Martinich defends Strawson’s conception of philosophy as connective analysis, according to which individual concepts are properly understood only by grasping their connections with others. Because connective analysis is not susceptible to the same criticisms as other forms of analysis, it should not have declined along with them.

Strawson did not see himself, at least not primarily, as a moral philosopher. It is somewhat ironic, then, that ‘Freedom and Resentment’ (1962) has become his most famous and widely discussed paper. In chapter eleven, Paul Russell asks whether Strawson’s naturalism about moral responsibility is vulnerable to a genealogical critique of the kind that Bernard Williams presents. Lucy Allais, in chapter twelve, examines the key moves and claims in ‘Freedom and Resentment’, and discusses responses in the literature which go in different directions on these key points. She argues that the text is compatible with different interpretations and presents philosophical considerations in favor of one particular interpretation. In the final chapter, Victoria McGeer addresses Strawson’s basic distinction between agents who are fit targets of our reactive attitudes and those who are not. She indicates how reactive attitudes may sometimes be appropriately directed to some types of non-responsible agents, and suggests that her elaboration of Strawson’s view is congenial with his general approach to the problem of responsible agency.

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*Selected Articles by Strawson*

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*Videos*

There are some interesting videos featuring Strawson on YouTube.

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‘P. F. Strawson and Gareth Evans on Truth (Part 1 of 2)’.

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‘Gareth Evans and P. F. Strawson—Philosophy of Language’.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZXJ-aIHxt4](about:blank)

‘Donald Davidson and Sir Peter Strawson in Conversation’.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hE71QAOYav4](about:blank)

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‘In Conversation: Peter Frederick Strawson (1992)’.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clo2FReysBI](about:blank)

The television discussion between Strawson and Gareth Evans on truth from 1973, linked to above, is discussed in several essays, commissioned by Huw Price and published here: <https://www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/.c/flickering-shadows-truth-in-16mm-edited-by-huw-price>. The series contains essays by Crispin Wright, Ian Rumfitt, Anil Gomes, Amie Thomasson, Nikhil Krishnan, Mark Schroeder, Simon Blackburn, Paul Horwich, Cheryl Misak, and others.

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