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Galen Strawson
THINGS THAT BOTHER ME
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An eminent Oxford philosopher, acclaimed for his defence of freedom and responsibility and of a conception of ourselves as fundamentally embodied beings, has a precocious son. Gripped by puzzles of infinity and death from the age of four, the son winds up teaching philosophy at Oxford. What is he famous for? His strident attack on the possibility of freedom and responsibility and his insistence that introspection yields a sense of oneself as something distinct from the human being that bears one's name. His most notorious thesis: that it is no part of living well to find a coherent narrative in one's life.

The intellectual biography of Galen Strawson, whose father, P. F. Strawson, was the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy, has a bit more to it. He took a detour through Islamic Studies; he now teaches at the University of Texas; and he is equally known for his revisionary interpretation of David Hume and for advocating a "panpsychist" thesis that conscious experience is intrinsic to everything. But the caricature is not far from the mark. In *Things That Bother Me*, Strawson presents essays on narrative, free will, the sense of self, the nature of consciousness, and death, all written for a general audience. The essays are consistently personable, enjoyable and thought-provoking, with an enlightening range of literary reference. They are a model of how to write philosophy for non-philosophers, though philosophers will want to read them too.

For me, the most compelling theme is narrativity. Strawson dissects what he calls "a fallacy of our age", finding two fallacies conjoined: that we are prone to dictate our lives to ourselves in narrative form and that "a richly narrative outlook on one's life is a good thing, essential to living well". He protests on behalf of those, like him, who have no interest in narrating their lives, yet seem as vital, fulfilled and morally decent as anyone else. "I don't think everyone stories themselves", he writes, "and I don't think it's always a good thing."

What begins as a plea for psychological diversity ends up rather grudging to its narrativist foils: they are "really just talking about themselves" and while self-narration "may be the best ethical project that people like them can hope to engage in", it is one that "the best lives almost never involve". As Strawson admits, however, he is not quite sure what it would mean to live one's life narratively, so the object of his scepticism is obscure. What is involved in the psychological conjecture, nicely verbed by Strawson, that we story ourselves?

It cannot just mean that we make plans and act in ways that are intelligible to us in light of them. That would trivialize the view. It is equally inadequate to say that we aspire to understand ourselves. Why must that involve narration, as opposed to knowledge of one's character, one's values, or one's social role? To live a narrative must be more than this. Your self-understanding must draw on the history that made you who you are. There must be enough consistency and connection in what you are doing and experiencing over time for patterns of intelligibility to extend through significant stretches of your life, binding them together as chapters in a unified tale. The relationship between the events of chapter one, youth, and those of chapter five, middle age, must be more than causal or consecutive: the later chapter should make sense as a thematic sequel to the first, not an unrelated episode in what happens to be the life of a single human being. At least, that is how you must try to represent yourself.

If this is what makes for self-narration, why should it belong to a life well lived? Strawson hardly stops to ask, impatient to argue that it doesn't. But the question is worth pressing, if only to echo his perplexity. Much of what we value in narrative will be hard to exploit in narratives of ourselves: dramatic irony, opacity, polyphony, the unexpected twist. Self-narrative threatens to be pedestrian, limited and linear, its satisfactions merely those of making sense. "Not equipped with a novelist's tools to create plots and maneuver pacing, to speak omnisciently or abandon an inconvenient point of view, to adjust time's linearity and splice the less connected moments," writes the novelist Yiyun Li in a recent memoir of depression, "the most interesting people among us, I often suspect, are flatter than the flattest characters in a novel."

When you make a narrative of your life, do you look backwards or forwards? Do you tell the story of your life so far, how you came to be this person in this place and time? Or do you proclaim what is to come, aiming to enact a future past? The latter seems oddly egoistic, an exercise in self-involved prolepsis, living for what will have been. Like Strawson, I find it hard to see the appeal. A unified history may emerge from my decisions as a by-product; it is not what guides them in the present.

But Strawson overlooks some reasons to narrate your past. Responding to Paul Ricoeur, "the leading philosopher of narrative", he asks "why on earth, in the midst of the beauty of being, it should be thought to be important to do this". One answer is that we don't always find ourselves in the midst of beauty, but in the aftermath of chaos or catastrophe. Self-narrative can help redeem the past: it can help us understand how what is good in the present would not have been possible without the failures and frustrations by which it is marred. When I think of the stories I tell myself, they often play this reconciling role.

They play a different role when I am asked to account for myself to others. Strawson may be opposed to self-narration, and he may not be alone, but he must encounter the request for narrative: "Where are you from? What do you do? How did you get into that?" He may resist the Oedipal story with which I opened this review, but its appeal is evident. Self-narration makes us legible to others. So there is reason for it, on occasion, even if there are associated risks. The use of narrative to redeem the past or to connect with other people does not quiet Strawson's fear that the "tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature". Self-deception may not be inevitable, but it is easy to suspect that in telling the story of one's life, one is an unreliable narrator.

By his own account, Strawson is not merely "non-narrative" but "transient". He does not experience himself, considered as a self, as having existed in the further past or as having any prospect of existing in the further future. The qualification "considered as a self" is crucial. Strawson is perfectly aware that the human being, Galen Strawson, was born in 1952. But he has a sense of himself as an "inner mental entity" distinct from this, of what the philosopher Mark Johnston calls "the mental 'bed' in which the stream of consciousness flows". Strawson is convinced that everyone shares his sense of self. I worry that, like the advocate of self-narration, he over-generalizes from his own case. When I reflect on my own introspection, it can seem an open question what I am. My capacity to think of myself as "me" does not settle whether I am a human being, a purely mental substance, or something else. But to leave this question open is not to answer it as Strawson does. When he writes that "the self is obviously thought of as distinct from the human being considered as a whole", it is not obvious to me.

Obvious thoughts are a refrain in Strawson's writing. He gives the impression that philosophy is much easier than philosophers habitually make it. Confronted with his scepticism about freedom and ultimate responsibility, "they will ask what this ultimate responsibility is supposed to be"; Strawson replies that it is "very clear to most people". Philosophers may pretend incomprehension, but they must know what he means. Strawson's incredulity peaks in the most acerbic essay in the book, "The Silliest Claim", which derides philosophers who, according to Strawson, deny the reality of conscious experience.

You may doubt that there can be such philosophers, but Strawson names names, including Daniel Dennett and Richard Rorty. They may deny their denial, but Strawson helpfully informs them that they are self-deceived. When they claim to save the reality of consciousness by explaining it in other terms, a programme of reduction not elimination, Strawson compares them to proponents of the pizza theory of consciousness, on which consciousness is really just pizza. If you hold this theory, and you believe in pizza, you can say that you believe in consciousness; but you are fooling no one.

You may doubt that matters can be so simple. There must be some subtlety in how consciousness is being conceived. What is it that the deniers are apt to deny? For Strawson, the "answer is easy. Anyone who has ever seen or heard or smelt anything knows what it is . . . Conscious experience is private subjective experience with a certain qualitative character". It is absurd to deny the reality of conscious experience or to say that it merely appears to be real, he contends, since the appearance would be an instance of the very thing denied. But the paradox is deceptive. There is a real question whether conscious experience acquaints us with intrinsic mental qualities, as Strawson believes, or represents qualities that are not essentially mental. There is no paradox in the idea that experience can misrepresent non-mental qualities, such as colours, as being instantiated in a mental realm, as when you look into the kaleidoscope of your own closed eyes.

It is Strawson's belief in intrinsic mental qualities, combined with his materialism, that leads him to panpsychism: for Strawson, conscious experience is "quite literally part of the stuff of which the brain is made". If that seems surprising, you should read the chapter in which Strawson claims that instant, painless, unforeseen annihilation is no worse for you than continuing to exist. When he asks himself whether he'd rather be dead or alive tomorrow morning, he finds that he has no preference either way and he argues that you should be the same.

It is tempting to draw lines between Strawson's transience, his rejection of ultimate responsibility, his distinctive attitude to death and his panpsychism: to make a narrative of the chapters of this book. Strawson ignores or frustrates that temptation. He begins with a fear of death that is untouched by the conviction that he would lose nothing if he died. He ends with an autobiographical essay that takes us from the age of fifteen to twenty or twenty-one. The essay starts in Strawson's schooldays before shivering into fragments: taking LSD, travelling from Turkey to Iran, listening to Bob Dylan and to Berg's *Lyric Suite*, filling a blue Mini with beech leaves. The writing is sparse but eloquent, emotionally honest, bright with sensation. What do these episodes have to do with one another? In the midst of beauty, it feels unimportant to ask.