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Ockhamist Comments on Strawson

Despite admiration for his brilliant rhetoric and his ontological seriousness, I am very much opposed to Galen Strawson's panpsychism or even to what he calls 'micropsychism'. He calls himself a real physicalist but from my point of view he is not really a physicalist. He holds that 'experiences' should count as a primitive term of the vocabulary of physics. This, to me but not to him, smells a bit like what Russell called the advantage of theft over honest toil (Russell, 1919, p. 71). Still, I do not deny that experiences exist. I believe that experiences are brain processes and since brain processes exist so must the relevant experiences. What I deny is that experiences have non-physical properties (qualia). Let us say that the experience of seeing a red tomato involves having a red sense datum. The experience is not red. It is just the sort of experience that I have when a red tomato is before my eyes, illuminated in bright sunlight. What I deny is that experiences have (in my sense) non-physical qualities. (There may be a sensible sense of 'quale' used by cognitive scientists whereby a quale is a point on a similarity space or something like that but I shall ignore this because it is obviously harmless to my sort of physicalist.)

Strawson has his use of 'physicalism' because he simply adds on 'experience' to the terms of physicalism. His use of the word 'experience' does not fit into physics in the way that 'brain process' does. There are physical and chemical theories of nerve transmission and of how neurons behave like switching devices and so on. Nothing like that with qualia.

It seems that in philosophy there are rarely knock-down arguments (Smart, 1993). So though Strawson's speculations seem bizarre to me I do not aspire to convince him, though if I do so much the better. The reason why there are hardly ever completely knock-down arguments, except between very like minded philosophers, is that philosophers,

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unlike chemists and geologists, are licensed to question everything, including methodology. There are even philosophers who question the law of non-contradiction, and bizarre though this may seem to most of us, one can admire the way that they develop a dialethic logic which prevents the denial of the law of non-contradiction from trivializing proof. Of course, in philosophy knock-down argument may be possible when there is already a fair amount of agreement between the proponents. Failing this we may end by trading off plausibilities. Even this may not work and we end up with a restrained (no cheap debating tricks allowed) rhetoric and there is no doubt that Strawson is a fine rhetorician.

One mistake that I see in Strawson is that he is too empiricist. In claiming knowledge of the properties of experience he can get into disastrous metaphysics. One must remember Mach and the logical positivists who tried to reduce this great universe of ours to actual and possible sense data. I do not mean to say that Strawson is reductionist in the way Mill (who said that matter is a permanent possibility of sensation) or the logical positivists were. Indeed quite the reverse. But about the nature of experience he is like them in being too empiricist. In some respects F.H. Bradley had a better epistemology of science than had Mill. We need elements of a coherence theory of knowledge (but emphatically *not* of truth).

For lack of space I cannot give a full defence of my position, nor would it be appropriate here to do so, but I will indicate why I think differently and why others should think more or less in my way and differently from Strawson. In particular we should be very suspicious of intuition and of phenomenology. I use this last word in the sensible way that Strawson might (see the second paragraph of his 2006 article) and not as the name of a school of unintelligible German philosophers.

In physics we test our theories by experiment and observation. However it would be wrong to say that we test them by our experiences. We test them by experiment and observation. Let us adopt David Armstrong's account of perception as coming to believe by means of the senses (Armstrong, 1993). Unimportantly for present purposes he came to prefer to talk of information rather than belief. We come to believe about the blue and white bird on the gatepost, not about our experience. On the higher order theory of consciousness developed by Armstrong, Rosenthal, Lycan and others we can perceive without consciousness, that is, we can be on 'automatic pilot' and aware of events, for example a car approaching us on the wrong side of the road, but not be aware of our awareness. We can think of consciousness as awareness of awareness. We can think of the second

order awareness as the coming to believe by one part of our brain about a process in another part of our brain. Since the brain is part of our body, Armstrong has compared inner sense with kinesthesia. The awareness of the awareness is not awareness of a quale. The bird on the gatepost may be blue and white, but not our experience of it. In this sort of way I would deny the existence of any (for me mysterious) qualia. The understanding of experience will come from neuroscience, not from inner sense.

Nearly fifty years ago I used the words 'topic neutral' to denote neutrality between materialism and dualism. I borrowed the words from Gilbert Ryle, who had used them in a more general sense. Ryle used them to denote logical words such as 'if', 'and', 'not', 'all', 'because'. If you heard only such words in a conversation you would have no idea of the topic of discourse. In my restricted sense the neutrality is between dualism and materialism or physicalism (in my sense of the latter word, not Strawson's). The topic neutral idea is absolutely vital to the identity theory of mind (Smart, 1999). Since otherwise we would be landed with property dualism. I believe that Strawson with his extended sense of 'physical' conceals this. Some people think that the identity theory has been supplanted by functionalism, but there is little ontological difference between them since most functionalists would be happy to say that the categorical bases of the functional states and processes are purely physical brain states and processes.

What needs to be done now is to discuss Strawson's appeal to phenomenology. His qualities of experience seem to me to be the same as properties of what used to be called 'sense data' or of mental images. Having a mental image is the brain putting itself through similar motions that occur in having a sense datum: it is a sort of pretence seeing. Now a brain process cannot be red, white and blue as is a union jack. One might talk of a red, white and blue sense datum, but I contend that there are no such thing as sense data and mental images. There is only havings of them. The having of a red, white and blue sense datum is the functionally described process that typically occurs when a union jack is before the eyes of a normal human percipient in clear light. 'Normal human percipient' can be defined without circularity. Colours themselves are very disjunctive and idiosyncratic physical properties of the surfaces of objects. Some easily made epicycles have to be made to deal with such things as radiant light and the colour of the sun at sunset. So anthropocentric and disjunctive, probably of no interest to denizens of other planets elsewhere in the universe. Maybe not quite as disjunctive as I thought since David R.

Hilbert has argued for at least approximately identifying the colours of surfaces with reflectances. Reflectances are well defined physical properties (Hilbert, 1987). The above considerations enable me to avoid phenomenology and provide what I contend is a much more plausible alternative to Strawson's speculations. In some ways Strawson's panpsychism reminds me of Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, for neither of them are the experiential properties 'emergent': on the contrary they are universal. Like Strawson I distinguish a harmless sense of 'emergence' (which Strawson illustrates well with the existence of liquidity) from a highly dubious sense of this word. The ability of a radio to tune in the BBC is emergent in this harmless sense (Smart, 1981). The functioning of the receiver can be explained by physics plus wiring diagrams and the physics of the various components. In the same way I regard the biochemical core of biology to be physics and chemistry plus generalizations (not laws) of natural history, even though these generalizations of natural history may be known only with sophisticated apparatus. C.D. Broad in his *The Mind and its Place in Nature*, mentioned by Strawson, espoused the dubious sense when he said that no amount of knowledge of the properties of sodium and chloride would explain the properties of sodium chloride, seemingly unaware that scientists were busy working on the theory of the chemical bond. Strawson's *qualia* have presumably always existed and so in a temporal sense they cannot have emerged (though I wonder about the milliseconds after the big bang) but in an atemporal sense they might be thought to have emerged in the dubious sense of this word.

A root of my disagreement with Strawson about the value of phenomenology comes from my assertion of the topic neutrality of ordinary talk about experience. In any case the notion of experience is itself elusive (Farrell, 1950). We can certainly say that we have experiences and I say that they are physical in my narrower sense of 'physical' with no need for Strawson's extended sense of this word. There can be metaphysical illusions (Smart, 2006; Armstrong, 1998). I hold that for there to be a metaphysical illusion there must be in addition a mistake in logic, but there must be a strong psychological pressure to make it.

I apologise for so many references to my own ideas but I think that the only way to criticize Strawson's bold speculation is to indicate, if only briefly, an alternative that may appeal to some readers as more believable. I am not clear that I have sufficiently understood Strawson and if I have not I expect that he will put me right in his Response.

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