



Trinity College Dublin  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
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# *Against Revision*

*Strawson on Analysis and Metaphysics*

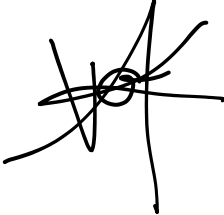
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(Philosophy)  
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## Declaration

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*To my parents and sister, Cuauhtémoc, Elizabeth and Isaluna*

*What we have to renounce is determined by what we are anxious to keep.*

- Peter Frederick Strawson

## Abstract

### **Against Revision: Strawson on Analysis and Metaphysics**

This dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic account of Peter Frederick Strawson's contributions to philosophical methodology, particularly in the realms of analysis and metaphysics. Despite his significant influence since the 1950s, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding Strawson's metaphilosophical approach, particularly in relation to semantics and the philosophy of language. While there exists one other doctoral thesis that directly addresses Strawson's philosophical method, my work emphasizes how his thoughts on language and semantics inform his broader metaphysical project.

The primary objectives of this research include: (1) offering a unified overview of Strawson's views on analysis and metaphysics, highlighting the interconnections between his philosophy of language and his project of *descriptive metaphysics*; (2) reconstructing Strawson's philosophical method as it pertains to language and ontology; (3) dispelling standing misconceptions surrounding his work; and (4) presenting descriptive metaphysics as a viable and productive avenue for contemporary ontology.

The dissertation is structured in two parts. Part 1 includes four chapters that examine analysis through the lens of the philosophy of language. The second part consists of two chapters dealing with analysis in the context of ontology and metaphysics.

**Chapter 1** reconstructs Strawson's critique of classical and constructivist forms of analysis, countering the notion that he opposed system construction.

**Chapter 2** explores Strawson's prospects for a logic for ordinary language, refuting claims that he dismissed the possibility of a systematic theory of meaning.

**Chapter 3** elaborates on the prior chapter by delving into Strawson's criteria for a semantic theory and the aim of a *perspicuous grammar*.

**Chapter 4** focuses on his conception of semantic content, portraying him as a proto-contextualist and debunking the accusation of conflation between semantics and pragmatics.

**Chapter 5** examines Strawson's view on the semantics of proper names, challenging the accusation that he adhered to traditional descriptivism.

**Chapter 6** discusses his method of descriptive metaphysics, arguing against the idea that it solely addresses our conceptual scheme without offering insights into the nature of reality.

**Chapter 7** synthesizes the prior material and argues against *radical conceptual revision*, setting the boundaries of *conceptual engineering* and positioning descriptive metaphysics as an essential framework for any revisionary proposals.

Overall, a central conviction underpinning this research is that neglecting the deep interconnections within Strawson's work across various subjects results in an incomplete understanding of his philosophy. This oversight obscures critical elements essential for grasping the aims of his general project of philosophical elucidation. By highlighting the fundamental coherence of his work, I aim to provide an interpretation that accurately reflects and clarifies Strawson's doctrine, ultimately restoring its essential sharpness and undeniable ingenuity.

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## Introduction

Although tradition should not be regarded as having absolute authority, either in philosophy or in any other sphere, it is entitled to respect and consideration (Strawson, 1994b, p. 33).

In philosophy to illuminate the past is to influence the future (Strawson, 1960b, p. 389).

I wasn't concerned to defend common sense as such. I was concerned, rather, to elucidate the general structure of our conceptual scheme, i.e. the most general structural features of our thought and talk about the world and ourselves. This work of conceptual elucidation— whether undertaken in limited areas or, as in this case, more generally— seems to me the essential philosophical task. The aim is to achieve a kind of reflective conceptual self-consciousness (Strawson, as quoted in Pyle, 2002, p. 38).

Peter Frederick Strawson (1919-2006) stands as a prominent figure in the later phase of post-war philosophy at Oxford.<sup>1</sup> He made significant contributions to the fields of philosophical logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophical methodology, articulating austere and abstract arguments with “characteristic elegance, economy, and profundity” (P. M. S. Hacker, 2003, p. 65). A remarkable figure who was “content to lead his intellectual life in the media atmosphere of the more mundane—of what, in another tradition, has been called ‘*expérience vécue*’” (Strawson, 1990a, p. 177) and who believed with conviction that the proper domain of philosophy is “human thought in general” (Strawson, 1994b, p. 28). His early works are associated with the ‘Ordinary Language’ tradition, as they critique the orthodoxies of logical analysis by bringing back attention to ordinary usage.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, his later writings took a

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<sup>1</sup> See: “The leading figures at Oxford exhibited a variety of viewpoints united primarily by agreed meta-philosophical and methodological ideas, as well as a commitment to clarity of expression, perspicuity of argument, and detestation of obfuscation” (P. M. S. Hacker, 2013, p. 941).

<sup>2</sup> Cf: “As Ryle pointed out, the term “ordinary” in the phrase “ordinary language philosophy” is intended to contrast with “non-standard” rather than with “technical” (Ryle 1953, 315–16)” (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 216).

more constructive and comprehensive approach, channelling *linguistic philosophy*<sup>3</sup> into the realm of metaphysics along Kantian lines.<sup>4</sup> During his final years, Strawson sought to blend his descriptive approach to metaphysics, reminiscent both of Aristotle and Kant, with a ‘soft naturalism’ inspired by Hume and the later writings of Wittgenstein.

Despite the evolution of Strawson’s thought, two enduring philosophical concerns remain central to his work. First, the description of the most general and pervasive features of human thought about the world. Second, the defense a non-reductive form of conceptual analysis, which he terms “connective analysis”. These core preoccupations are evident in his steadfast defense of abstract objects and intensional notions against the reductive tendencies of nominalist and positivist philosophies (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 217).<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, the primary aim of Strawsonian philosophy is to achieve a clear understanding of our fundamental working concepts. As Strawson notes, “our essential, if not our only, business is to get a clear view of our most general working concepts [...] and of their place in our lives. *We should, in short, be aiming at general human conceptual self-understanding*” (2003, p. 12, my emphasis). This pursuit of “general human conceptual self-understanding” is inherently valuable, as it enables us to scrutinize the framework through which we interpret our experiences and fosters a reflective approach to the concepts we often take for granted, illuminating their roles and implications in shaping our understanding of the world. Moreover, such conceptual self-awareness becomes especially important when we recognize that:

“logical truisms, arithmetical facts, well-established theories of science, or persuasive, but already philosophical, generalities about human nature can, if their point and sphere of

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<sup>3</sup> Noteworthy, the expression ‘the linguistic turn’, which later came to designate a broadly construed conception of philosophy whose distinctive approach involved an emphasis on linguistic analysis, was introduced by Gustav Bergmann in his review (1960) of Strawson’s *Individuals*.

<sup>4</sup> Beaney, for example, credits Strawson as having “restored metaphysics to analytic respectability after the positivist savaging” (2013a, p. 48).

<sup>5</sup> See also: (Brown, 2006; H. Glock, 2001; H.-J. Glock, 2012, 2022; P. Snowdon, 2001, 2008; P. F. Snowdon, 2008).

operation are not clearly understood, lead us into absurdity and paradox, into apparent head-on collision with what we know very well to be the facts” (Strawson, 1955b, p. 364)

Strawson’s characteristic attitude in the face of this philosophical perplexity involved, to a considerable degree, a sort of *return to the ordinary*, to the familiar platitudes accessible both to the reflective thinker—though, curiously, he more than others tends to forget them<sup>6</sup>—and the common man; the objective is straightforward and modest: to achieve clarification and understanding, while resolving paradoxes and conflicts of meaning through a thorough analysis of our discourse and the concepts that shape our speech. In Strawson’s own words:

If we are to elicit the principles of a practice, it is that practice we must study, in the form in which it is most readily available to us. The form in which the practical mastery of concepts most perspicuously displays itself is the use, in speech and writing, of the linguistic expressions for those concepts. Hence, it may be concluded, it is in the ordinary non-philosophical *use* of the words which express the problematic concepts that we are to find the clue to philosophical understanding. Here is the germ of what used to be called ‘ordinary language philosophy’—certainly a philosophical method if ever there was one and, in its day and in its way, a very fruitful method, especially in dissipating nonsense and exploding empty pretensions (Strawson, 1995, p. 15, italics in the original).

The key strength of Ordinary Language philosophy lies in its capacity to *identify and overcome hallucinations of sense*.<sup>7</sup> Through this process, we are able to not only clarify our epistemic perspective, but also deepen our understanding of the shared conceptual framework that underpins our collective human experience.<sup>8</sup> Here, Strawson notably diverges from traditional Oxford philosophy, as his work demonstrates an undeniable quest for patterns and structures,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf: Likely having to do with “the tendency of philosophers to raise a dust and then complain they cannot see” (Strawson, 1998k, p. 170).

<sup>7</sup> The phrase is from Baz (2012, p. 73, my emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> It is also a continuous process, and one with no apparent end in sight, for “[p]hilosophical anxieties are like Horace’s Nature: expel them with a fork (an argument), yet they continually return (Strawson, 1994a, p. 12).

reflecting a broad vision characterized by a tendency towards system-construction. As he asserts “the desire for generality is ineliminable from philosophy” (Strawson, 1960c, p. 75). On that account, philosophy transcends mere passive collection of *quotidian* remnants and the resolution of conceptual puzzles; it actively engages in the construction and organization of a theory that faithfully represents the structure of our thought about reality, of what Strawson calls *our conceptual scheme*.

Ultimately, philosophy should “lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure.” However, these features are not fully visible in the diverse aspects of our linguistic practices; a deeper and broader exploration is required to reveal them. This leads to a second significant departure from the Oxford tradition: *while ordinary usage may well be the first word in philosophy, it is by no means the final one*.<sup>9</sup> Linguistic analysis has its limitations; thus, we must embrace a comprehensive, non-reductive approach that goes beyond simply examining the usage of our words to uncover the deeper connections between our concepts.<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, philosophy cannot align itself with, nor be reduced to, science, as its concerns are too expansive and inclusive to conform to the rigid categories of scientific inquiry. In this regard, Strawson’s ethos is antireductionist; it maintains that a specific mode of existence cannot be dissected into simpler properties or facts.<sup>11</sup> Equally significant is Strawson’s anti-revisionist stance: *attempts to abandon or replace the fundamental structures that shape our understanding and engagement with reality are ultimately nonsensical*.

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<sup>9</sup> See Austin (1956, p. 11).

<sup>10</sup> Cf: “Full conceptual understanding demands the exposure of structural features of our thought—connections, analogies, and distinctions—which do not readily display themselves on the linguistic surface” (Strawson, 1990b, p. 184).

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting, however, that many scientific theories are supremely general, at least in certain respects, e.g. physics, mathematics.

In line with this view, Strawson endlessly defended what he considered to be two irreducible aspects of our experience of the world from the constant revisionary readings of logical positivism, scientific philosophy, and other reductionist projects:

the first is the reality of subjective experience in all its richness and complexity or, as one of our most distinguished contemporaries expressed it, in all its ‘heady luxuriance’—the phrase is Quine’s; the other is the inescapable presence in our thought of abstract intensional objects. Both [...] are easily misunderstood, prime sources of the generation of ‘pictures to hold us captive’. But neither should for that reason be downplayed or denied the character it actually has in our experience or our thought (Strawson, 2003, p. 12).

By affirming the richness of subjective experience and acknowledging the role of abstract concepts, Strawson challenges the tendency of certain philosophical movements to oversimplify the complexities of human thought. Moreover, by attesting the interconnection between the different elements that constitute our framework of thought, Strawson proposes an inclusive, thorough conception of philosophy as an interrelated system that brings together metaphysics, logic, and epistemology.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, Strawson’s work prominently explores two crucial themes: the role and limitations of formal logic within philosophy and semantics, and the nature of two fundamental functions of human thought and language: *reference and predication* (H.-J. Glock, 2023, p. 302). The connection between these themes underscores the pivotal role that Strawson’s philosophy of language plays in his general conception of philosophy, particularly in his project of *descriptive metaphysics*, which seeks to outline the structure of our universal conceptual framework, from the starting point of our capacity to direct thought and language

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<sup>12</sup> Cf: “ontology, or the theory of being, of what fundamentally exists; epistemology, or the theory of knowledge; and logic, or the general theory of judgment or the proposition, the theory of those (generally linguistically expressed) things which are bearers of truth-value, capable of truth or falsity [...] at a very fundamental level, these three are interlinked as just three aspects of a single unified enquiry (Strawson, 1994b, p. 42).

towards objects in the world. This focus naturally leads to a deeper investigation into how these concepts manifest in our understanding of language and reality.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the grammatical distinction between subject and predicate naturally recalls the other, functional distinction, between reference and predication, a fundamental platitude in Strawson's philosophical analysis. On these grounds, Strawson's programme proposes a metaphysical investigation aimed at revealing the ontological distinctions underlying these grammatical and functional differences.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, his process of elucidation goes from the nature of words and concepts to the nature of the world, and back again, in order to show how our concepts are ultimately grounded in the world.

## Aims

This dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic account of Strawson's contributions to philosophical methodology, particularly in the realms of analysis and metaphysics. Despite his significant influence since the 1950s, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding Strawson's metaphilosophical approach, particularly in relation to semantics and the philosophy of language.<sup>15</sup>

The primary objectives of this research include:

(1) Offering a unified overview of Strawson's views on analysis and metaphysics, highlighting the interconnections between his philosophy of language and his project of descriptive metaphysics.

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<sup>13</sup> Such an approach, however, admits of no strict proof: "Its tenability must derive from its ability to give a unity to the diverse fields of philosophy. To speak plainly, the assumption is expected to serve as a general, first principle according to which beliefs in the different fields can be *coherently* explained" (Tse, 1998, p. 376)

<sup>14</sup> Cf: "[T]he duality of subject and predicate must reflect some fundamental features of our thought about the world" (Strawson, 1974e, p. 20).

<sup>15</sup> While there exists one other doctoral thesis that directly addresses Strawson's philosophical method, i.e., Heyndels (2020), my work emphasizes how his thoughts on language and semantics inform his broader metaphysical project.

- (2) Reconstructing Strawson's philosophical method as it pertains to language and ontology;
- (3) dispelling standing misconceptions surrounding his work; and
- (4) Presenting descriptive metaphysics as a viable and productive avenue for contemporary ontology.

As Strawson conceived of his philosophy of language and logic as interlinked with his approach to metaphysics, one of my aims is “make clear exactly what these connections” are (Magee, 1971, p. 124).<sup>16</sup> What I am arguing is that, when it comes to Strawson's philosophy, what is needed is a bigger, more comprehensive picture, one that traces the major links between his works and shows how they are, if not structurally unified, at least “intimately and, indeed, vitally connected”.<sup>17</sup> So, just like Strawson did with Kant (Strawson, 2003, p. 8), I have tried to preserve and present systematically what I took to be the major insights in Strawson's work regarding his conception of conceptual analysis and his connection both to the prospect of a theory of linguistic meaning and the project of descriptive metaphysics, while pointing at the structural links between them, which, if disregarded, can lead to some of the common misconceptions that have now formed around Strawson's philosophy.

Understanding Strawson's contributions also requires contextualizing his work within contemporary philosophical debates. Hans-Johann Glock (2017, pp. 222–226) distinguishes four important shifts behind the reestablishing of metaphysics as a respected endeavour in contemporary analytic philosophy: (1) Quine's naturalistic project of discerning ontological commitments (see Quine, 1948); (2) Strawson's programme of descriptive metaphysics; (3) the essentialist metaphysics of Kripke and Putnam (see S. A. Kripke, 1972; Putnam, 1974); and (4)

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<sup>16</sup> Cf: “[Strawson's] theory as a whole can very well be regarded as an argument for the necessary connexion between logic and language on the one hand and ontology on the other” (Tse, 1998, p. 381).

<sup>17</sup> As Strawson himself put it in relation to Kant's work, to sever these connections is to kill the patient.

the ‘truth-maker’ approach of Austro-Australian metaphysics. Of these four trends, Strawson’s one is currently, by far, the least fashionable. In response to this, my dissertation engages in a reconstruction of Strawson’s basic lines of argument in order “to make them more acceptable to those schooled in our contemporary analytic tradition” (Brown, 2006, p. 94). In essence, I seek to revitalize and partially vindicate Strawson’s unique approach to metaphysics.

## Sources

Since the 1950s, Peter Strawson has significantly influenced research across various philosophical disciplines, including logic, metaphysics, the philosophy of language, ethics, philosophy of mind, the history of philosophy, and aesthetics. This broad impact results from his remarkable and continuous output of ideas through papers, lectures, and books. Over his lifetime, Strawson published nearly one hundred papers and articles, along with almost eighty book reviews. Many of his individual essays have been compiled into four separate volumes.<sup>18</sup> However, his most substantial contributions are found in his six monographs: *Introduction to Logical Theory* (1952), *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (1959), *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (1966b), *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* [sic] (1985c), *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974e), and *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy* (1992).<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Strawson’s ideas have sparked numerous engaged responses throughout the English-speaking philosophical community, evidenced by five collections of essays edited

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<sup>18</sup> Namely: *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (1971b), *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (1974b), *Entity and Identity* (1997a), and *Philosophical Writings* (Strawson, 2014) (this last one published posthumously).

<sup>19</sup> Technically, Strawson published one more book: *Analyse et Métaphysique* (1985a), a French-language version of *Analysis and Metaphysics* that appeared a few years before its English version.

in his honour during his lifetime<sup>20</sup> and three additional volumes published posthumously.<sup>21</sup>

This research project draws on these diverse sources to provide a comprehensive account of Strawson's views on analysis and metaphysics.

## Method

Paraphrasing Strawson himself, my doctoral project is *an attempt to re-recruit Strawson to the ranks of the analytical metaphysicians, while discarding those misconceptions which refused any such absorption* (Strawson, 2003, p. 9). To achieve this, I employ standard techniques of description, clarification, commentary, and critical assessment.

A primary hermeneutic challenge of this research is the task of reconstructing the philosophical doctrine and methods of a thinker who once confessed, “though I am a philosopher, I am not Descartes or Spinoza or Kant. In other words, I have no comprehensive, integrated doctrine, no single unified system, to offer” (Strawson, 1995, p. 1).<sup>22</sup> Thankfully, Strawson's thought is marked by metaphilosophical reflection, directly addressing questions about the nature, scope, and goal of philosophical inquiry.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, his work demonstrates remarkable consistency despite its extensive and diverse nature, which spans over half a century and encompasses a wide array of philosophical issues. There is a perceptible unity achieved through his engagement with a dual question: How can we account for the way our

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<sup>20</sup> These are: *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P.F. Strawson* (Van Straaten, 1980), *The Philosophy of P.F. Strawson* (Sen & Verma, 1995), *The Philosophy of P.F. Strawson* (Hahn, 1998) and *Strawson and Kant* (H.-J. Glock, 2003b). I said “the English-speaking world”, but, in fact, the second collection of essays about Strawson was published in Spanish *Ensayos sobre Strawson* (Caorsi, 1992). Unfortunately, there is no English translation yet.

<sup>21</sup> These are: *P.F. Strawson – Ding und Begriff/Object and Concept* (Conrad & Imhof, 2010), *Free Will and Reactive Attitudes: Perspectives on P.F. Strawson's “Freedom and Resentment”* (M. P. Russell & McKenna, 2012), and *P.F. Strawson and His Philosophical Legacy* (Heyndels et al., 2023). Of course, there are a few hundred papers that have been written in response to or addressing Strawson's ideas (some of them quite influential in their own right, like Grice's *Logic and Conversation* (1975)) that are not comprised in these volumes.

<sup>22</sup> See also: “I was not conscious of employing any particular codifiable method. In fact, I would go further and say that I am conscious of not employing any particular codifiable method or procedure” (Strawson, 1995, p. 13).

<sup>23</sup> His methodological views are themselves also exemplified in his own philosophical arguments, providing additional material for this critical reconstruction.

experience, thought, and language are directed towards the world? Conversely, how do we account for the influence that the world exerts on our experience, thought, and language? These questions are not only central to Strawson's philosophy but also serve as the foundation for this reconsideration of his work.

My interpretation will explore the integral continuity present across seemingly disparate fields—metaphilosophical criticism, epistemology, philosophy of language, logic, and metaphysics<sup>24</sup>—focusing on Strawson's core concerns. These include (i) the nature of analysis, (ii) the scope and limits of formal logic, (iii) the foundations of semantic theory, (iv) the prospect of a universal grammar, and (v) the aims and methods of metaphysics. At the same time, I aim to dispel misunderstandings and erroneous attributions related to Strawson's work, such as his perceived (1) anti-systematic approach, (2) skepticism about systematic theories of meaning, (3) conflation of semantics and pragmatics, (4) descriptionism regarding names, and (5) metaphysical deflationism and conservatism.

A central conviction of this research is that neglecting the deep interconnections within Strawson's work across various subjects brings forth an incomplete understanding of his philosophy. This oversight obscures crucial elements necessary for grasping the aims of his overarching project of philosophical elucidation.<sup>25</sup> Thus, my approach involves not merely philosophical “pruning”, but rather a form of philosophical “rooting”, tracing and uncovering the foundational connections “in order to uncover a healthy and elegant theory beneath”

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<sup>24</sup> Even though Strawson's ideas developed progressively and consistently throughout his career with minimal conflict, some believe that, as a reaction to Barry Stroud's paper on “Transcendental Arguments”, there was an important shift with *Skepticism and Naturalism*, in particular, regarding his understanding of the scope of descriptive metaphysics as originally formulated in *Individuals* (see Callanan, 2011; D'Oro, 2023; Putnam, 1998; P. Snowdon, 2008). I believe this change, though substantial, did not involve any revision or rejection of prior doctrine, but simply a recontextualization of it. I will touch upon this point again in Chapter 6.

<sup>25</sup> To paraphrase Gomes' question: *is it mischievous to say that those who consider Strawson as a reactionary, unsystematic philosopher have not been assiduous in studying Strawson's own minor (and even the major) works?* (Gomes, 2023, p. 383). If your overall conception of Strawson as a metaphysician and philosopher of language starts and ends with ‘On Referring’ and ends with *Individuals*, then I am afraid there is a lot you are missing.

(Ganeri, 2006, p. 51). In this context, I consider Strawson's later retrospective essays as a guide to put together his philosophical doctrine.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, by highlighting the fundamental coherence of his work, I aim to provide an interpretation that accurately reflects and clarifies Strawson's views, restoring their essential sharpness and undeniable ingenuity.

Strawson's career has coincided with one of the most transformative periods in the history of philosophy. Like many original thinkers in such dynamic times, his thought now faces the challenges of simplistic categorisation, distortion, and, at worst, even caricaturing. To truly understand his work, then, we need to look at its historical context, especially the intricate philosophical cultures and traditions surrounding his ideas, which include, but are not limited to: classic analytic philosophy, Logical Positivism, Oxford philosophy, the later Wittgenstein's writings, American pragmatism, and the emergence of essentialist metaphysics. Therefore, the proper acknowledgment of his distinct contributions cannot be possible without recognition of the various external and internal pressures that shaped his position across the repeated dialogues, debates, and disputes he held with some of the most representative figures of twentieth century analytic philosophy, from Russell to Quine, and from Carnap to Davidson, only to name a few.

So, what follows has been structured to present Strawson's views by also attending, in a secondary way, to his interlocutors, be them the object of Strawson's criticism, or themselves the subjects of critiques against Strawson.<sup>27</sup> However, this dissertation does not provide a comprehensive history of the criticisms directed at Strawson throughout his career, nor does it delve into extensive comparisons of his views. Neither will it provide an in-depth analysis of how other philosophers have influenced Strawson's method. While these influences are

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<sup>26</sup> See: Strawson (1990a, 1994b, 1995, 1998a, 2003, 2011c).

<sup>27</sup> Cf: "Such adverse criticism is a form of compliment. It is only the very best with whom it is worth while to differ." (Strawson, 1998a, p. 247).

evident and will be referenced from time to time, a comprehensive overview is out of the scope of this work.

A key advantage of this approach is its recognition of Strawson's subtle and accommodating perspective regarding both the strengths and weaknesses of his own philosophical outlook, as well as the potential for cooperation and collaboration among viewpoints and traditions typically conceived as thoroughly incompatible. As a notable trait of his philosophy, Strawson's tendency to compatibilism, to the finding of common ground, "will advocate a peaceful coexistence [...]: a truce in a war between two apparently irreconcilable points of view" (Brown, 2006, p. 11).<sup>28</sup>

In the end, my research emerges from deep admiration for Strawson's thought, but this admiration is not blind; it acknowledges perceived flaws when relevant.<sup>29</sup> As my role is primarily expository and reconstructive of Strawson's stance, I do not pretend nor do I attempt to motivate or justify his views, although, in most cases, hiding my sympathy for them was almost impossible. Moreover, while I frequently reference various debates between Strawson and his contemporaries, I do not claim to resolve, either in favour or against, the disagreements between these differing perspectives. My interpretative criticism is mainly a matter of careful and attentive reading, which has been my underlying concern.

## Structure

To explore these ideas thoroughly, the thesis is organized into two main parts. The first part is assembled around the subject of linguistic analysis from the perspective of the philosophy of language, broadly construed. The second part is arranged, again, in relation to conceptual analysis, but this time from the standpoint of metaphysics in an Strawsonian key. These two

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<sup>28</sup> Cf: "Let us settle, for the time being, for "accommodation." This is a blessedly diplomatic word. It allows for mutual recognition, respect, a treaty, even some trade. We may, and perhaps must, be finally content with this" (Strawson, 1998l, p. 67).

<sup>29</sup> In Strawson's own words: "We must take the man whole and shan't fully appreciate the best in him unless we see it steadily in the context of the worst" (1975b, p. 169).

outlooks are not in opposition, on the contrary, they prove to be fundamentally complementary, as I argue that one of the limitations and sources of distortion in standard approximations to Strawson's work is precisely an emphasis on one of these two aspects (either language or metaphysics) in isolation of the other. For this reason, and due strictly to the character of Strawson's take on these subjects, it is very hard to disentangle metaphysics from the philosophy of language, epistemology, and logic. Being interdependent, they mutually inform each other, so, my separation into two different parts, though not arbitrary, is by no means rigorous or definite; considerations steaming from both parts run through the entire work.

Chapter 1 reconstructs Strawson's critique of both classical and constructivist forms of analysis. Contrary to the view that he rejected the idea of system-building, this chapter demonstrates how Strawson acknowledged the value of systematic approaches within appropriate limits.

Chapter 2 explores Strawson's vision for a logic tailored to ordinary language. It refutes claims that he dismissed the feasibility of a systematic theory of meaning, illustrating how he actually maintained a hopeful outlook on developing a semantics for natural language.

Chapter 3 builds on the previous chapter by elaborating on Strawson's criteria for a semantic theory and the production of a 'perspicuous grammar' through his proposal of a *Research Programme in Non-Empirical Linguistics*.

Chapter 4 centres on Strawson's conception of semantic content, positioning him as a proto-contextualist in the landscape of contemporary philosophy. It debunks the accusation that he conflated semantics with pragmatics by illustrating how he distinguished between 'what is said' and 'what is conveyed'.

Chapter 5 examines Strawson's perspective on the semantics of proper names, challenging interpretations that label him a traditional descriptionalist regarding the meaning of names, contending that Strawson consistently argued that proper names do not have linguistic meaning.

Chapter 6 focuses on Strawson's method of descriptive metaphysics, countering the notion that it merely addresses our conceptual scheme without providing insights into the nature of reality by arguing that, given Strawson's realist stance and the validating aspect of descriptive metaphysics, his ontological method yields significant insights into the structure of the world beyond our conceptual framework.

Finally, Chapter 7 synthesises the material offered in the preceding chapters and presents an original argument against *radical conceptual revision* that purports to delineate the boundaries of *conceptual engineering*. Moreover, it positions descriptive metaphysics as an essential propaedeutics for any revisionary proposals, reinforcing its value as a guiding framework for future ontological investigation. In contrast to the preceding chapters, this one takes a step further which might seem to go beyond the *letter* of Strawson's text, but I present my reasons to believe it is ultimately true to the *spirit* of his descriptive metaphysics.

**PART ONE**  
**ANALYSIS**

The theory of being, the theory of knowledge, and the theory of statement are not truly separable; and our duality necessarily appears in all three, under different forms. In the first, we cannot avoid the distinction between particular items and the general kinds or characteristics they exemplify; in the second, we must acknowledge the necessity of our both possessing general concepts and becoming aware in experience of things, not themselves concepts, which fall under them; in the third, we must recognise the need for such linguistic or other devices as will enable us both to classify or describe in general terms and to indicate toward particular cases or classifications or descriptions are being applied

(Strawson, 1966b, p. 47)

# Chapter 1

## “Against Revision”

### Strawson’s Critique of Analysis

I was concerned to combat what I saw as the illusion that formal logic, perspicuous and powerful as it is, is a sufficient instrument for revealing clearly all the most general structural features of language as we use it. Rather, formal logic is a sort of idealized abstraction, revealing, certainly, and with beautiful clarity, certain quite fundamental structural features of discourse and hence of thought, but abstracting from, or leaving out, others. So any attempt to represent it as a wholly adequate tool for the analysis of the functioning of language in general is bound, or likely, to result in misrepresentation (Strawson, 1995, p. 3)

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I reconsider Strawson’s critique against classical analysis and the *system-construction method* in philosophy (Strawson, 1956a, p. 33), that is, the view that philosophical problems are to be solved by means of, on the first hand, conceptual analysis aided by logical regimentation, and, on the other hand, constructed models that purport to clarify or explicate our ordinary concepts, which, due to its inherent defectiveness, generate philosophical confusion in the first place. Clarifying Strawson’s long standing critique against formal analysis can offer us an entry point to his general philosophical view by setting the ground for further disputes in the fields of semantics and metaphysics which inform the content of this dissertation.

My role is purely expository and explanatory, and as such, my main goal is merely to present a coherent reconstruction of his position against classical analysis and Constructionism without aiming to motivate or justify his views. For that reason, even though I allude to certain debates between Strawson and some of his contemporaries whom he identified as representatives of

the classical analysis school and the tradition of ideal language, at least, sympathetic to the such programmes, I do not pretend to adjudicate between these opposing approaches.

A crucial benefit of such general reconsideration is the acknowledgement of Strawson's nuanced and conciliatory attitude towards what he recognised as the virtues and vices of the philosophical approach of analysis. In the subsequent chapters, it will become evident how this comprehensive outlook makes room for some of the tools and techniques of the system-construction method in his own philosophical project. Once Strawson's objections have been spelled out, it will be easier to identify some of the reasons for the common misconception which paints Strawsonian philosophy as anti-formalist and anti-systematic, while making room for a more accurate picture of his work and the crucial role that system-construction itself plays in it.

The outline of this chapter is as follows: First, I present Strawson's notions of *philosophical paradox*, *philosophical analysis*, and their importance in philosophy. Second, I delineate Strawson's critique of philosophical analysis. Third, I offer an overview of the method of *linguistic description* (Strawson, 1967a, p. 80) which he himself endorsed and opposed, to a degree, to the method of linguistic construction. Finally, I show their points of convergence and emphasise how Strawson conceived of them not as entirely incompatible, but as potentially complementary. In conclusion, I present a more detailed picture of the Strawsonian critique of the formalist project in philosophy to show that it is more nuanced than what is usually considered: a formal system is a tool of great utility both in the study of language and in the general project of philosophy, but its boundaries and limitations should be made clear from the start in order to prevent it from becoming the sole method for either linguistic or philosophical clarification.

## **Strawson on Philosophical Paradox and Linguistic Analysis**

### *Strawson's Notion of Philosophical Paradox*

Strawson believed throughout his life<sup>30</sup> that one of the main tasks of philosophy was conceptual clarification via analysis: philosophical confusion arises when, reflecting on a particular concept, we arrive at a certain paradox or perplexity:

Sometimes, instead of just setting our concepts and speech-forms to work in the ordinary way, we reflect upon them, or with them, at a level of unusual generality; and when we do so, we may find ourselves driven towards conclusions not simply bizarre, not simply shocking to common sense, but somehow intrinsically unacceptable; and intrinsically unacceptable because at variance with the ordinary use, and hence with the ordinary meaning, of the very words in which we are tempted to express them. Yet such conclusions may seem, though unacceptable, inescapable. In this situation, some conceptual distortion has taken place; and, in general, the distortion is the consequence of an undue pressure exercised by some only of the features of the language in which we express the concept in question, to the temporary exclusion of others (Strawson, 1956a, p. 35).

For example, consider the concept expressed by 'pain':

- (a) Prima facie, it seems that the word 'pain' names or describes a sensation or an experience.
- (b) Names and descriptions can be misapplied, so there's a possibility of error in their application.
- (c) Regarding her own pain, a speaker can maybe lie when uttering "I am in pain", but she cannot err about it. If she is sincere, she cannot be wrong about it.

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<sup>30</sup> See "My Philosophy" (Strawson, 1995)

- (d) But if, from a first-person perspective, there is no possibility of error when it comes to the word ‘pain’, then ‘pain’ cannot be a name nor a description.<sup>31</sup>

So, we started on the assumption that ‘pain’ is a name or a description and ended up with the paradoxical conclusion that it is not. “To correct the distortion, we must clearly expose the full logical workings of the distorted concept, and perhaps of others too; and locate, if we can, the source of the distorting pressure” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 35). To dispel this philosophical puzzle, we need to analyse the problematic concept and recognise how it is actually used.<sup>32</sup> The philosophical analyst, then, *investigates and describes our uses of words to clarify the concepts behind them*. To solve a philosophical problem, then, is to resolve the *conceptual imbalance* produced by a certain puzzling concept (Pinder, 2020, p. 70).<sup>33</sup>

### *Strawson’s History of Classical Analysis*

According to Strawson’s view on the history of analysis, *sentences* pertain to linguists and grammarians; *thoughts* and *beliefs*, to psychologists; policemen and lawyers deal with *statements*; but philosophers work with *propositions* (Strawson, 1956a, p. 31). Though in later chapters I will expand on Strawson’s notion of a proposition, for now it should suffice to understand

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<sup>31</sup> This toy-example is roughly reconstructed from Strawson’s critique of Wittgenstein’s argument about names for private sensations (Strawson, 1954, p. 167). Curious that some of Strawson’s finest counterarguments to revisionary proposals are directed towards the latter Wittgenstein.

<sup>32</sup> Cf: “The producer of philosophical paradox, or the sufferer from philosophical perplexity, is temporarily dominated by one logical mode of operation of expressions, or by one way of using language, or by one logical type or category of objects, or by one sort of explanation, or by one set of cases of the application of a given concept; and attempts to see, to explain, something which is different in terms of, or on analogy with, his favoured model. [...] “In this situation the critical philosopher must not only restore the conceptual balance which has somehow been upset; he must also diagnose the particular sources of the loss of balance, show just how it has been upset” (Strawson, 1967a, pp. 85–86).

<sup>33</sup> For Strawson, addressing paradoxes is a fundamental task for philosophy in general and merits initial mention because much of philosophy is actually rooted in identifying and resolving paradoxes. However, as he makes it clear: “it would itself be a paradox to represent the whole task of philosophy as the correction of philosophical mistakes” (1956a, p. 35). So, even though philosophical clarification is at the core of philosophy, it is not its sole aim and labour. See also: “So the philosopher may undertake a more detailed examination, a more systematic ordering and description, of speech-forms, of types of discourse, of types of concept, than would be necessary simply to relieve the pressures of paradox” (Strawson, 1956a, pp. 35–36).

‘proposition’ as *what a particular sentence says when used (uttered or inscribed) in a particular context*. For example, the sentence “snow is cold” expresses the proposition that *snow is cold*. Propositions are, then, the proper object of philosophical analysis.

In that regard, the method of analysing propositions for philosophical purposes, also known as *linguistic analysis*, gained prominence in the English speaking world at the beginning of the twentieth century with the work of Frege, Moore, and Russell, who examined a number of linguistic expressions and constructions in an attempt to dispel philosophical confusion by offering a clearer look at the propositions expressed by them: “the general conception of analysis was that of a kind of translation, or, perhaps better, a kind of paraphrase [...] from a less explicit to a more explicit form, or from a misleading to an unmisleading form” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 31). In the case of Frege and Russell, this paraphrasing was achieved with the use of artificial languages designed with a view to precision and perspicuity (e.g. predicate logic) into which sentences of ordinary language would be recasted free of ambiguity and vagueness.

Moreover, the proponents of classical analysis assumed that each sentence in ordinary language could, in principle, be completely decoded into a final form revealing all of its semantic intricacies through basic logical components. Some analyses, however, were taken not to reduce an ordinary sentence into its simple elements, but to reformulate the original sentence entirely into a paraphrase that would make manifest the actual logical affinities of the proposition expressed by it (Strawson, 1956a, p. 31).

For Strawson, the prestige of the method of analysis arose from two reasons: Firstly, after close examination of our actual linguistic practices, a number of centuries-old philosophical theories began to look overly simplistic and error-prone.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, the revelation of the intricate nature of our conceptual and linguistic capabilities provided an

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<sup>34</sup> Like the problem of reference to non-existent entities.

exciting reward in exchange for the houses of cards upon which a lot of traditional philosophy seemed to be built (Magee, 1971, p. 116).<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, the impetus of traditional analysis eventually started to wane as ordinary speech appeared to resist the simplifications it was being forced into:

It seemed that one could only achieve a translation by sacrificing all or part of the meaning of the expression which one was trying to analyse. What was intended as analysis turned out to be falsification; or, if the original meaning was successfully conserved, fidelity was secured only at the cost of circularity (Strawson, 1967a, p. 80)<sup>36</sup>

After all, it started to look like paraphrase and regimentation could in fact the original meaning one was hoping to elucidate, and so efforts in analysis often resulted in distortion rather than clarity.

Ultimately, after the decline of the original analytical framework, two parallel descendants of this tradition would try to continue its work while trying to deal with some of its complications: *logical construction*, commonly associated with the name “Ideal Language Philosophy”, and *linguistic description*, often referred as “Ordinary Language Philosophy”.

The first approach, championed in America and exemplified in the work of Carnap and Quine, entails moving away from everyday linguistic structures while retaining many

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<sup>35</sup> Cf: “In the philosophy of logic, and of language in general, I did think that it wasn’t simply a matter of dispelling illusions: there were genuine theoretical problems to be solved, a certain amount of theoretical construction was necessary, the data had to be systematically ordered. But in the other sphere, the sphere of traditional theory of knowledge and metaphysics, I did conceive the task rather as destructive: not that of solving real problems, but of exposing problems which were spurious; not that of building theories, but blowing up bad and unnecessary theories” (Magee, 1971, p. 117).

<sup>36</sup> In that regard, “[e]ven Russell’s earlier brilliant glosses on the structure of ordinary sentences, in terms of the syntax of the new formal logic, began in the end to seem a little queer” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 32). See also: “[Russell’s] ‘Theory of Descriptions’—was ingenious and elegant. It was described by Frank Ramsey as a ‘paradigm of philosophy’. But it seemed to me then—in 1950—and still does, that the theory, though it may fit some cases, *misrepresented the true character and function of these phrases, these expressions, as we actually use and understand them—at least for the most part; and that it did so by neglecting pragmatic, contextual and communicative aspects of their use*” (P.F. Strawson, as quoted in Pyle, 2002, p. 39, my emphasis).

aspects of the traditional analytical framework.<sup>37</sup> The other approach, pursued mainly in England by the likes of Austin and Ryle, requires maintaining a focus on ordinary speech, coupled with a significantly broadened understanding of the methods and purposes of analysis (Strawson, 1956a, p. 32). Below, I will address and compare these philosophical movements as understood by Strawson.

## Logical Constructionism

The *locus classicus* of Strawson's critique of Logical Constructionism is "Analysis, Science, and Metaphysics" (1967a),<sup>38</sup> where he contrasts the methodology of what he calls "the programme of linguistic constructionism" to that of the "description of ordinary usage" typical of post war Oxford philosophy (p. 80).

Logical Constructionism is a philosophical enterprise whose goal is to create a perspicuous language that leaves no room for philosophical confusion—or, in its most radical take, for philosophical thought itself. It is important to notice from the beginning that although logically minded philosophers were definitely interested in semantic notions, their attention was directed towards artificial languages like those used in logic and mathematics, as it was a common belief at the time that ordinary language was too unruly to be formalised.<sup>39</sup>

According to this system-construction method, "we are to construct clear models of language in which all the essential logical relations of our concepts can be made plain, while the irrelevant tangles of actual usage are cut away". Evidently, there is need for some preliminary remarks connecting the newly constructed concepts and the concepts to be

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<sup>37</sup> Cf: "Atomists and Positivists alike accepted the skeleton language of the new mathematical logic as providing the formal structure of the ultimate and penultimate statements" (Strawson, 1956a, p. 30). It seems that Strawson takes the "Atomists" to be dealing with classical analysis, whereas the "Positivists" are engaged in logical constructionism.

<sup>38</sup> Which covers, and elaborates on, themes and material previously presented in "Construction and Analysis" (Strawson, 1956a) and in "Carnap's Views on Constructed Systems v. Natural Languages in Analytic Philosophy" (Strawson, 1963).

<sup>39</sup> So, for example, Carnap distinguishes between "pure semantics", the "construction and analysis of a semantical system", and "descriptive semantics", the study of meaning in natural language (1942).

replaced in order to guarantee some form of philosophical clarification. “But once these points of contact are made, the system stands on its own, a precise and rigid structure to which our ordinary conceptual equipment is a rough and confusing approximation” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 33). It is for this reason that the Constructionist holds that the “system of formal logic is itself the greatest of all achievements of this kind, as well as being the prerequisite of others. For it reveals the underlying structure of all our thinking” (idem).<sup>40</sup>

For Strawson (1967a, pp. 82–83), such a linguistic model has two main characteristics: first, it's inherently clear because its central concepts are defined precisely and definitively, unlike the ordinary concepts it aims to clarify, which, by assumption, lack such exact and fixed character. Second, some of the central concepts within the system closely resemble, in some relevant ways, the ordinary concepts they intend to elucidate.<sup>41</sup> This is so because, if the main virtue of clearly defined constructed concepts is to elucidate the issues arising from the vague functioning of unconstructed concepts, then it is crucial to make clear both the connections and differences between the revised and the unrevised concepts (1967a, p. 84).

Carnap's (1956, §2) conception of *explication* is then crucial to understand the Constructionist revisionary project, which involves “making more exact a vague or not quite exact concept used in everyday life [...] or rather of replacing it by a newly constructed, more exact concept”. In other words, a pre-scientific concept is considered clarified or explicated when it is replaced by one that is both more precise and more productive, in short, more

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<sup>40</sup> Cf: “[For the Constructionist] [f]ormal logic is the model for other philosophical models, as well as the framework on which the others are to be built” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 33).

<sup>41</sup> Cf: “If one adopts the most rigorous and most highly developed form of the [constructionist] programme, one will construct a formal system which uses, generally, the apparatus of modern logic and in which the concepts forming the subject matter of the system are introduced by means of axioms and definitions. The construction of the system will generally be accompanied by extra-systematic remarks in some way relating the concepts of the system to concepts which we already use in an unsystematic way. This is the method of ‘rational reconstruction’” (Strawson, 1967a, p. 80).

“fruitful”, according to Carnap, in its utility in generating logical theorems or supporting the establishment of empirical scientific laws (Strawson, 1967a, p. 81).<sup>42</sup>

As a result, Strawson argues, Constructionism *does not clarify but instead explicates our concepts* (1967a, p. 82), i.e., it artificially replaces them with stipulative definitions made to fit the rigour of scientific theory (ibid, p. 84-85). This task of conceptual revision and replacement, which Strawson also calls “rational reconstruction” (Strawson, 1963, p. 503), can take two forms: (a) “the introduction, for scientific purposes, of scientifically exact and fruitful concepts” (p. 504), or (b) the construction of a formal model in which “at least some of the key concepts [...] are, in important respects, very close to the ordinary concepts which are to be clarified”(p. 511).

Pinder (2020)—drawing on from Schupbach (2017)—usefully characterizes the first form as *Carnapian explication*, which “seeks to build precise explicata that are as fruitful in the service of the (empirical or logicomathematical) sciences as possible”, and the second one as *Oppenheimian explication*, which in turn “seeks to build precise explicata that are, in relevant respects, as similar to the explicanda as possible” (Pinder, 2020, p. 62). A Carnapian-like explication could, for example, attempt to replace our ordinary concept of ‘pain’ with the scientifically precise concept of ‘stimulation of C-fibres’. But the thing is, for Strawson, this will not clarify our confusion but merely change the subject under discussion.

For example, if we substitute each occurrence of ‘pain’ in our argument above with ‘stimulation of C-fibres’ we will soon find out that premise (c) turns out false, for I can definitely be wrong when I say, “I am in [a state of] stimulation of C-fibres”. But, if (c) is false, then we are no longer compelled to accept conclusion (d): that since there is no possibility of

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<sup>42</sup> Cf: “The partisan of constructionism may well concede that introducing exact concepts for scientific purposes is one thing, and clarifying ordinary concepts is another. He may also concede that the latter task is the peculiarly philosophical one. Conceding all this, he may still maintain that the latter task will be best fulfilled by system-construction” (Strawson, 1967a, p. 82).

error when honestly stating one's own pain, then 'pain' cannot work like a name. Nonetheless, the paradox about pain is not resolved; it just does not arise anymore! Thus, Carnapian explication does not solve the philosophical problem, it merely sweeps it under the rug of science.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, Oppenheimian explication, in as much as it is at least concerned with establishing a certain degree of similarity between our ordinary concepts and their constructed replacements, avoids the charge of changing the subject. Still, whatever limited explanatory power such a model may have, it relies on the labour of the linguistic analyst and her descriptions of unconstructed concepts, as they provide the points of connection between the system and the ordinary language it so tries to explicate: "in so far as the purpose of a constructed system is philosophical clarification, the extra-systematic remarks, so far from being [...] comparatively unimportant trimmings, are just what give life and meaning to the whole enterprise" (Strawson, 1963, p. 513), for "we do not come to understand the use of a logical symbolism simply by gazing at the symbols. It has to be explained to us in terms not belonging to the symbolism" (Strawson, 1956b, p. 440).

Essentially, Strawson challenges here the Constructionist fundamental assumption that ordinary language use inherently leads to the distortion or blurring of the concepts it conveys. For him, this is an ungrounded belief, given that "common speech is subjected to the severest of all tests for efficiency, as a medium for the expression and communication of our thoughts—the test of constant use" (Strawson, 1956a, p. 34). Hence, the shortcomings of classical analysis to everyday language do not lie in our language itself, but in an overly rigid and narrow view of analysis: it is too rigid because it erroneously assumes that there are precise, almost definitional relationships between different categories of concepts; it is too narrow

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<sup>43</sup> However, for the Constructionist, the fact that the paradox does not arise anymore might constitute in itself a merit of their approach.

because it fails to consider various important aspects of ordinary language use. These neglected features, which include the nuanced ways in which natural language operates across different contexts, are not tangential but in fact essential to understand and resolve philosophical problems. “And the programme of system-construction suffers from just these same limitations. For it, too, confines itself to exhibiting quasi-definitional relations between constructed concepts”. (idem).

In addition, the productions of Constructionism usually enshroud the actual structure of human language and thought with “a formalizing mystique: the belief that the model systems embody the *real* structure of our concepts, hidden from us by the untidiness of our actual practice” (Strawson, 1963, p. 518):<sup>44</sup>

For the paradoxes and perplexities in question had their root in a vivid, but imperfect, picture of the working of the concepts concerned—in a kind of caricature of their logical features. The only fully rational method of correction here is to replace the caricature with an accurate delineation of those features, which will show how the caricature distorted, what it exaggerated, and what it missed out. And it is in the actual use of the linguistic expressions for the concepts concerned, and nowhere else, that we find the data from which we can draw this accurate picture. A simplified diagram from which the puzzle-generating features are, perhaps, absent, is here no substitute, though it may be a help (Strawson, 1956a, p. 37).

This is why the assumption that ordinary language is hopelessly hazy and muddled is untenable: if it were true (ignoring for once how far we have managed to get with this “crippled” tool), it is far from clear how fabricating new concepts, or even a whole new language, could illuminate the defective notions of our original language. Therefore, the Oppenheimian Constructionist is thus forced to concede that either (a) natural language is incurably obscure, and so even a

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<sup>44</sup> For particular examples of this problem see (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 218; and Tse, 1998, p. 379). It should be noted again that this claim technically does not apply to Quine, for he was not after our actual conceptual scheme, but *the best conceptual scheme* for science.

perfect language cannot offer any clarification for it, or (b) that some clarification is indeed possible, but no substantial explication is at hand, for a logical system is no replacement for natural language. Ultimately, it is “not a matter of prescribing the model conduct of model words, but of describing the actual conduct of actual words” (Strawson, 1963, p. 503).

### **Ordinary Language Philosophy and the Project of Linguistic Description**

In contrast to both the original programme of analysis and its successor, the Constructionist project, Strawson points to the method of linguistic description or analysis as carried out by the members of the Ordinary Language tradition (Strawson himself one of its most eminent representatives):

So, for the old, limited and theory-ridden programme of analysis, we are to substitute a different aim: that of coming to understand philosophically puzzling concepts by carefully and accurately noting the ways in which the related linguistic expressions are actually used in discourse. Of course, not all features of the use of these expressions will be relevant to the philosopher's task. It is his special skill to discern *which* are relevant, and *how* they are relevant (Strawson, 1956a, p. 34, original emphasis).

That is, while Constructionist methods may be suitable for refining concepts for scientific application, using such techniques to clarify pre-theoretical, ordinary discourse for philosophical purposes is fundamentally misguided: to understand an animal's behavior, say, a tiger, we should be observing it in its natural habitat rather than “constructing a clock-work model from an engineer's designs and then studying that” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 34).

System-construction, concerned with formalising concepts to fit into scientific frameworks, might strip away the nuanced, contextual meanings essential for understanding ordinary language and human experience that philosophy often seeks to address. For this reason, philosophical inquiry requires a deeper, more interpretive understanding of concepts as they are used in real life, not just as abstract or scientifically categorized entities. “If we want

to know how [our concepts] work, we must watch them at work” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 34). Thus, applying a rigid, scientific framework to such philosophical explorations can lead to misunderstandings and irrelevant conclusions, failing to illuminate the true essence of the concepts being studied.

### *Strawsonian Conceptual Analysis*

It seems a bit odd to talk about the systematic analysis of language and then state that *it cannot* and *it should not* be done by creating linguistic systems. However, this tension is only superficial. Clearly, there is a distinction between building a model-language language and methodically describing how a fragment of a natural language works. While the difference should not be overstated, recognizing patterns in ordinary speech is a challenging task and would be nearly unfeasible without some degree of regimentation, paraphrase and reduction.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, despite the apparent opposition between these two philosophical approaches they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Strawson, in a characteristic conciliatory attitude, would try to bring them together and show how they can complement each other:

“it is in fact not so clear that the philosophical builders of artificial languages, and the philosophical investigators of natural language, must necessarily be each other's enemies. Up to a point, at least, each method may be seen as the complementary of the other” (Strawson, 1956a, pp. 34–35)

So, it is not necessarily true that philosophers working on model languages and those concerned with natural language must be adversaries. Instead, these endeavors can enhance and inform each other. Logical models, with their elegantly structured and simplified constructs, provide a stark contrast to the intricate and often irregular patterns found in natural

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<sup>45</sup> Still, the distinction is neither trivial nor sterile: “The living creatures of language, even when mildly regimented, are still seen as performing a range of functions of immense diversity; whereas only a few of these functions can be imitated by the logical machines built by the constructionist” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 37).

language. This contrast can highlight complexities in ordinary language use that might otherwise remain obscured, and as such, it offers insights into linguistic structures and functions that are less apparent without such juxtaposition.

Conversely, a deep understanding of natural language, with all its nuances and complexities, is crucial for the successful design of a constructed model. Consequently, “it might seem that the situation calls for cooperation rather than competition” (Strawson, 1956a, pp. 34–35).<sup>46</sup>

Nonetheless, there needs to be a hierarchy, or more properly, a priority or order of application between these two methods: the precise, explicit, and clear descriptions of the conceptual analyst provide the material that can later be systematised and formalised by the Constructionist. In this regard, system-construction “must remain ancillary—and limited”, for although it is true that artificially constructed models can offer some valuable insights into the nature of our linguistic practices, “*it is dogmatism to maintain that the construction of model objects is the best or the only means of achieving such understanding*” (Strawson, 1967a, pp. 88-89, my emphasis).<sup>47</sup>

And although philosophy’s detailed reformulation of concepts and language can indeed provide benefits beyond its own field, offering valuable resources for progress in mathematics and other scientific disciplines, this is not its only, not even its primary, task. Such a view of philosophy echoes the creative conjectures of traditional metaphysics, and, in that sense, “[w]hat begins as metaphysics may end as science. *But this is not its only justification*, and it is time to drop the prim pragmatism which pretends that it is” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 38, my emphasis).

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<sup>46</sup> However, Strawson would still state his preference for the method of linguistic description: “Yet I am partisan enough to want to upset a little the symmetry of this friendly picture—or perhaps I should say, cautious enough to want to delimit spheres of influence” (Strawson, 1956a, p. 35).

<sup>47</sup> Based on Carnap’s original response (1963) to Strawson (1963), De Mesel observes, however, that it is open to debate whether Strawson’s criticism is grounded on an accurate understanding of Carnap’s position (De Mesel, 2022 fn 35).

Ultimately, for Strawson, the main problem with Logical Constructionism is not that it constitutes an unnecessary extra step on top of linguistic analysis and conceptual clarification,<sup>48</sup> but that, if taken on its own and without the necessary propaedeutics of analysis, it risks of coming up with concepts that have no real connection with those notions one was supposed to explicate in the first place. As Strawson puts it with his distinctive eloquence: “living, linguistic beings have an enormous diversity of functions, only some of which can be reproduced by the computer-like machines which the constructionist can build” (1967, p. 85).<sup>49</sup> In short, the Constructionist move can only get off the ground on the shoulders of the clarificatory project already carried on by the Ordinary Language philosopher (Strawson, 1963, pp. 512–513).<sup>50</sup>

In this regard, there is a valid objection to some of the criticisms that Strawson levelled at Russell, Carnap and Quine and their alleged contempt for ordinary language: First, Carnap—who avowed attempting to reform natural language—ultimately denied that the Constructionist project paid no attention to ordinary language, contending instead that the Constructionist “[l]ooks upon the verbal analyst as a valued and respected, if inexplicably hostile, ally.”<sup>51</sup> Second, Strawson himself acknowledged much later in his career that:

Neither Quine nor Russell is in the least interested in the question that concerned to me and that concerns, or should concern, all theorists of general linguistics, viz. the question of how language actually works in communication between those who speak or write and those they

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<sup>48</sup> As Kuusela (2019) seems to argue.

<sup>49</sup> See also: “I should not want to deny that in the discharge of this task [i.e., philosophical elucidation], *the construction of a model object of linguistic comparison may sometimes be of great help*. But I do want to deny that the construction and contemplation of such a model object can *take the place* of the discharge of this task” (Strawson, 1967a, p. 84 my emphasis). As well as: “It is only when the claim to exclusiveness is made on behalf of the constructionist method, and of particular constructions, that one must begin to query the enlightenment [that conceptual engineering may offer].” (Strawson, 1963, p. 518). The same point is stressed by De Mesel (2022) and much earlier on by Putnam (1969).

<sup>50</sup> Based on Carnap’s original response (1963) to Strawson (1963), De Mesel observes, however, that it is open to debate whether Strawson’s criticism is grounded on an accurate understanding of Carnap’s position (De Mesel, 2022 fn 35).

<sup>51</sup> As quoted in Rorty (1967, p. 15).

address. Russell and Quine are so far removed from concern with this question that if those views were seen as attempts to answer it, then, as Professor Haight amply demonstrates, those views would look like travesties of the facts. Russell and Quine have less earth-bound aims. They have higher theoretical game in their sights (1998e, p. 214).

Stemming from this, Strawson's original attacks on Quine and Russell (Strawson, 1950 and 1959 Part II) on the basis of their supposed attempt at a reform of ordinary language are misplaced. With regard to Russell, because Strawson criticised him qua classical analyst, only later on review him as some kind of Carnapian constructionist. Regarding Quine, because Strawson took him to be interested in Oppenheimian explication, when he seemed to have had no real concern with ordinary language.

### **Strawson the System-Constructionist**

Evidently, the linguistic analysts' ilk of systematisation differs from that of the constructionists both in scope and degree, but it is present, nevertheless. A plausible explanation for this overstated characterisation of anti-schematisation might be related to the ambiguity of the name 'Ordinary Language' itself. As Glock makes clear:

It can either mean the everyday use of a term; or it can mean its established use, whether it be in common parlance or in technical forms of discourse with a tightly regimented vocabulary (Ryle 1971: ch.23). Conceptual analysis does not extol the virtues of the mundane everyday over the sophisticated specialized employment of a term. Nor does it prohibit the introduction of technical terminology in either science or philosophy, as the case of Austin makes patently clear (2008, p. 99).

Thus, Oxford linguistic analysis also focused on words in their technical—though not philosophical uses—and itself deployed specialised metavocabulary.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> In this light, Schroeder's (2006, p. 238) claim that Ordinary Language philosophers were averse to schematisation, systematicity and rational reconstruction requires urgent reconsideration. The more schematic inclinations in Oxford philosophy have been dutifully noted by Glock (2017, p. 220) and De Mesel

Furthermore, as foreseen by the publication of *Introduction* and later becoming a staple of his philosophical method in *Individuals*, systematicity plays a central role in Strawson's philosophy. As he notices in "My Philosophy" (1995), one will not find a lot of the "usual methodology of Oxford analysis" in his work.<sup>53</sup> One of the main breaks with the Oxford tradition is precisely his appeal for systematicity, schematisation and deployment of technical notions created specifically for philosophical purposes. On account of this, Strawson describes his conception of philosophy as a threefold systematic inquiry into the structure of our conceptual scheme that reveals the interconnection and conceptual unity between logic, epistemology, and ontology (Strawson, 1992 Ch. 4). Accordingly, he qualifies the descriptive enterprise of the conceptual analyst with the addendum that description itself needs to be supplemented with a theoretical framework that specifies the sort of interpretation one is looking for and how it is to be put to use in the general task of dispelling philosophical illusions (Strawson, 1963, p. 518). For this reason, "the metavocabulary of description and classification should [...] be made as systematic as possible" (Strawson, 1963, p. 513). Briefly, *pace* Kuusela (2019, p. 228), the descriptive work of conceptual analysis requires a methodical and systematic approach underpinned by a theoretical framework that guides the interpretation of the data to be described.<sup>54</sup>

In connection to the subject of systematicity and schematization, Glouberman was prompt to identify in Strawson's work a tension "between *doctrinal naturalism*, which rates the introduction of specialized or technical concepts as a changing of the subject, and *methodological antinaturalism*, which shows no reluctance to enlist "unnatural" or artificial simplifications and

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(2022). For example, Strawson's own technical jargon includes terms like: 'truth-value gap', 'identifying reference', 'presupposition', 'transcendental argument', among others (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 220).

<sup>53</sup> The existence of a definite methodology common to all members of the Ordinary Language tradition is contested at best. See (Beaney, 2012; Dainton, 2004; Hanfling, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> Cf: "Unless [the ordinary language philosopher] is to be content with the production and juxtaposition of particular examples, he needs some meta-vocabulary in which to describe the features he finds" (Strawson, 1967a, p. 81).

schemata in the course of investigation” (1976, p. 365).<sup>55</sup> The general idea being that Strawson is, at least in doctrine, a realist and a naturalist “on account of the strong realistic associations of [our] natural conceptual apparatus” (ibid., 382), yet his methodology is *unnatural* in the sense that he makes constant use ‘creatures of the understanding’, i.e., elements in “the analysans or conceptual explanans which have no status in the analysandum or explanandum” (ibid., 378).

These constructed elements are the products of conscious schematisation whose goal is the simplification and systematisation of the—otherwise too complex and unruly—phenomena under investigation.<sup>56</sup> Although ultimately explanatory, such constructions entail no substantial doctrinal/metaphysical commitment and are always confined to the metalanguage of the theory: they are deployed not to replace our ordinary concepts, but to handle the data obtained from and constituted by our ordinary conceptual scheme. Examples of these methodological schemata are the various technical notions Strawson appeals to in his philosophical elucidations: ‘identifying reference’ (Strawson, 1959), ‘feature-placing sentences’ (Strawson, 1961b), ‘reactive attitudes’ (Strawson, 1962b), among others.

Likewise, De Mesel also emphasises Strawson’s penchant for schematisation in remarking that: “simplification and idealisation, the importance of problem-relativity and the idea that philosophers provide poles of description or pictures, which Kuusela [(2019)] finds lacking in ordinary language philosophy, are all present in Strawson’s work” (2022, p. 7). However, based on this recognition of similarity between Strawson and the Constructionist philosopher, he further proposes that “Strawson’s ordinary language philosophy should be

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<sup>55</sup> This aspect of Strawson philosophy is further examined by Glock in his article “Strawson and Non-Revisionary Naturalism” (2022): “So far Strawson’s “non-reductive naturalism” comes across as primarily anti-eliminativist rather than non-reductivist, and as not all that naturalistic. It does not fit any of the standard categories of naturalism” (p. 449).

<sup>56</sup> Cf: “[It] is far from obvious how the very general and theoretical considerations advanced in the course of these arguments bear upon or reflect our actual speech procedure. It would be a task of enormous complexity to show how these general considerations are related to our actual procedures” (Strawson, 1959, p. 57) and also: “I am aware that in presenting the argument as I have done, neglecting the ever-interesting varieties of case, I have presented nothing more than a schema” (Strawson, 1962b, p. 20).

regarded as an extension rather than as a dismissal of ideal language philosophy” (ibid., p. 19). As I hope to have successfully argued above, it makes more sense, especially considering Strawson’s characterisation of linguistic analysis, to think of Ordinary Language philosophy as providing a fruitful framework for the Constructionist project conceived at least in his Oppenheimian version.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the reproach that Strawson’s philosophy lacks systematization and is incompatible with the schematic nature of system-building in philosophy is challenged by pointing out to his particular role in promoting a more constructive, comprehensive and systematic approach to philosophising than what was the standard at the Oxford of his time. In short, as such, this view supports my proposal that Ordinary Language philosophy can be reconstructed as a foundational basis for Constructionist endeavours. Together, these considerations “show how thin (despite appearances) may be the barrier which divides the philosopher who constructs systems from the philosopher who describes the workings of ordinary language” (Strawson, 1963, p. 507).

All things considered, Strawson’s nuanced stance acknowledges the utility of formal models and conceptual reconstruction yet contends that these should operate on the foundations laid by linguistic and conceptual analysis characteristic of his descriptive metaphysics. Therefore, he did not eschew formal constructs and engineered concepts; indeed, he made use of them, not to replace, but to clarify and schematise the elucidations of the Ordinary Language philosopher. In his perspective, a degree of formalism, schematisation, regimentation, and model-building is not only useful but necessary to effectively manage the

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<sup>57</sup> Glouberman also observes how Strawson’s methodological antinaturalism blurs the line between Oxford and Vienna, therefore forcing Strawson to admit, against his best effort to differentiate them, that “even the methods of his positivistic rivals may per accident shed light on natural concepts” (1976, p. 382). Again, as I argued, Strawson never contented that Ideal Language philosophy could not achieve any sort of philosophical clarification, what he argued, instead, was that Ideal Language philosophy could not do it without the work of Ordinary Language philosophy.

dense and intricate data unearthed through conceptual analysis.<sup>58</sup> These theoretical structures serve not to oversimplify and rigidify but to enhance our understanding of the rich tapestry of our linguistic and communicative practices, in this way ensuring that philosophical exploration remains grounded in the practical, engaged use of our ordinary concepts. Strawson's work itself exemplifies this balance, using formal tools not as ends in themselves but as means to deepen the insight gained from meticulous observation of natural language in action.

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<sup>58</sup> For example, see what he does in “Austin and “Locutionary Meaning”” (1976) where he develops a series of schemes to capture the Austinian notion of *locutionary meaning*.

## Chapter 2

### “The Logic of Ordinary Language”

#### Strawson on the Prospect of a Systematic Theory of Meaning

Well I've continued to work in philosophical logic, as I do all the time, an absorbing thing; and the philosophy of language generally. But, rather specifically, I've become interested in the newly systematic study of grammar; and by this I don't mean just the problems of providing a systematic grammar for a particular language, though those are interesting enough, but in the more general idea of supplying general explanatory foundations for grammar at large. Or, if you like, or as it's sometimes put, in explaining the common human capacity to master the grammar of whatever language the individual's initially exposed to

(P.F. Strawson as quoted in Magee, 1971, pp. 127–128)

### Introduction

Is there a logic of ordinary language? Strawson seems to be remembered as having answered this question in the resoundingly negative. In this chapter, I tackle the decades-long conception that Strawson was against the development of a systematic theory of meaning. As a result of such conception, I believe Strawson's persisting misattribution as a reactionary anti-formalist has cemented his dismissal by contemporary philosophers of language.<sup>59</sup> Though there are ideological and textual grounds to attribute such scepticism to Strawson, a closer reading of his oeuvre would show that this supposed animosity regarding formalism in semantics was in fact a cautionary attitude in the face of the dangers of oversimplification and the misguided primacy of formal logic over natural language, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Indeed, Strawson was wary of the philosophical approach to language carried by some of his contemporaries, as their reductionist tendencies clashed with his distinctive descriptive,

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<sup>59</sup> As noted by Glock (2017, p. 219).

anti-reductionist and anti-revisionary strategies. Nonetheless, honouring his compatibilist spirit and his own systematic inclination, Strawson would not deny the utility of certain forms of regimentation and model-building when it comes to the description and understanding of our linguistic practices, as long as such an enterprise be conceived against the larger and more complex backdrop of a theory of human communication, one that makes room for our common-sensical conceptions in the subject. All things considered, my aim is to make clear that, contrary to popular belief, *Strawson always had hopes for a logic of ordinary language, just not the narrow and exact logic favoured by some of his opponents.*

Moreover, I argue that Strawson's conception of semantics resonates with current theoretical projects advanced and defended by semantic contextualists who often claim an intellectual inheritance from the Ordinary Language tradition. On this basis, a reconsideration of his own systematic approach is long overdue in order to dispel some of the prejudices that have grown around Strawson's metaphilosophical picture. In this more positive light, a number of Strawson's insightful and still relevant ideas about the nature of language and its study can be brought back to the forum of philosophical semantics and the philosophy of linguistics. It is worth noting that, as the nature of this chapter is mostly expository and explanatory, my goal is to present Strawson's own vision on the matter without adjudicating between his views and those of his critics, or even those held by the targets of Strawson's criticism.

The outline of this chapter is as follows: First, I put forward a number of allegations against Strawson's stance in relation to formalism in natural language semantics. Secondly, I present Strawson's critique of formalism, distinguishing between two general targets often confused: the project of linguistic analysis, on the one hand, and the foundations of *formal semantics*, on the other, in order to address the accusations posed against him and show that they rely on a misapprehension of Strawson's work and goal. In conclusion, I present a more detailed picture of the Strawsonian critique of formal semantics to show that it is more nuanced than what is

usually considered: a formal system is a tool of great utility both in the study of language and in the general project of philosophy, but its boundaries and limitations should be made clear from the start in order to prevent it from becoming the sole method for either linguistic or philosophical clarification.

### **“Ordinary Language Has No Logic”: Strawson the Anti-Formalist**

The controversy over Strawson’s scepticism towards formalism in semantics and philosophy has raged for years, with logicians, linguists, and philosophers alike remarking on Strawson’s rather pessimist view on the matter. For instance, Tse writes: “It is known that Strawson has commented, mostly unsympathetically, to say the least, on Quine’s proposal of logical regimentation, Tarski’s formal semantics, Carnap’s linguistic constructionism, Chomsky’s transformational grammar, and others” (1998, p. 373). More recent examples can be found in Beaney (2012, p. 880), who argues that “a continual refrain in Strawson’s work is the gap between the complexity of the rules governing the use of ordinary language and the rules of formal logic, especially the predicate logic of Frege and Russell”.<sup>60</sup>

To dispel the shadows of this widely spread view, I will first present a series of claims made against Strawson, from early reactions to his work, to more recent accusations. I will address them and counter them later on. Although such a collection of objections and remarks is far from exhaustive, it constitutes a representative, if sketchy, sample. Consequently, I have arranged them not chronologically, but thematically, around a number of topics concerning

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<sup>60</sup> Similar remarks can be found in (Partee, 2016, p. 7), (Tensmeyer, 2012, p. 39), (Neale, 1992, 2019), and (Kuusela, 2019, p. 226). Gomes and Snowdon also point out that Strawson’s views on truth and logic “implied that centring an analysis of meaning on truth conditions and a search for logical forms in natural language expressible in the predicate calculus was not correct” (2022, p. 29) and so he concluded that “ordinary expressions do not have what might be called a precise logic” (ibid., p.13). Snowdon makes related observations in (P. Snowdon, 2008) and (P. Snowdon, 2001), but he does specify, at least in the 2001 paper, that “Strawson’s slogan anticipates recent and very fruitful ideas about language. However, Strawson himself did not embed this intuition in full theory” (p.340). Snowdon’s view in this matter is very much in line with my own.

the foundations of a theory of meaning.<sup>61</sup> The goal is to show that even if there is at least an element of truth in these charges, they ultimately distort or obscure Strawson's actual views on the matter, as they originate from and contribute to an uncharitable, narrow, and inaccurate reading of his work. Therefore, clarifying such views is a necessary step in the reconsideration of his philosophy, which is the overall goal of this dissertation.

### *The accusations*

The issue at the core of the dispute is Strawson's denial that "expressions of natural language have an exact semantics that can be captured using the devices of classical logic" (Neale, 2019, p. 51), which is taken as a manifestation of a deeper suspicion about the prospect of 'formal semantics', i.e., the use of formal tools (e.g., logico-mathematical models) in the study of grammatical meaning in natural languages. This conception of Strawson originates in response to and revolves around that famous original quote from "On Referring": *"Neither Aristotelian nor Russellian rules give the exact logic of any expression of ordinary language; for ordinary language has no exact logic"* (Strawson, 1950, p. 27, my italics).<sup>62</sup> This view is later echoed in his *Introduction to Logical Theory* from 1952:

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<sup>61</sup> Though most of these criticisms are aimed directly at Strawson, some concern him indirectly, either by association with Ordinary Language philosophy or with the approaches of Linguistic Philosophy in general.

<sup>62</sup> It is critical to consider that at the time Strawson was far from being the odd one out in expressing such an opinion. In fact, he seems to merely have voiced an old and widespread sentiment within the discipline: "I agree, however, with Mr. Strawson's statement that ordinary language has no logic" Russell stated in his response to the aforementioned paper (1957). In the same vein, when discussing the "linguistic wars" in philosophy, Partee observes: "[i]t is noteworthy that both sides [pro-formalists and anti-formalists] in this 'war' (as well as Chomsky) were in agreement that logical methods of formal language analysis did not apply to natural languages" (2016, p. 7), Chomsky even "arguing that the artificial languages invented by logicians were too unlike natural languages for any methods the logicians had developed to have any chance of being useful for developing linguistic theory" (ibid., 2016, p. 5). Moreover, we are reminded by Stanley (2008, p. 406) on how the logically minded fathers of analytic philosophy had a common disregard for ordinary language, with Frege thinking it was "too vague and context-sensitive to conduct scientific investigation" and Tarski holding that it was inconsistent given its "universal character"; even Carnap, whose "semantical systems were intended to be systems of analytic stipulations governing the meanings of the terms in the language", never intended to apply such tools to the field of natural language semantics.

[...]the expressions of ordinary speech, such as ‘if’, ‘and’, ‘not’, ‘all’, ‘some’, ‘or’, which figured so prominently as logical constants in the inference-patterns of early logicians, lack, as they are ordinarily used, not only the stability, but also the simplicity, of meaning which would make them the ideal candidates for the roles of constants in logical systems of the now desired kind. So their place tends to be taken by fabricated expressions to which are assigned just the kinds of meaning needed to meet the requirements of system. The logical uses of these fabricated expressions correspond in part with, and diverge in part from, some uses of some expressions in ordinary speech; [...] *The formal logician now aims at an exact and highly systematic logic, comparable in these respects with mathematics. But he cannot give the exact and systematic logic of expressions of everyday speech; for these expressions have no exact and systematic logic* (1952, pp. 57-58, my emphasis).<sup>63</sup>

And thirty years later, in his preface to Sommer’s *The Logic of Natural Language*, he boldly restates that:

Of more interest to the philosopher of language is the double claim that Sommers’s TFL [Traditional Formal Logic] is faithful to the semantic-syntactic structure of natural language and that MPL [Modern Predicate Logic] is not. There is, of course, no a priori presumption that at least one of these two systems must exhibit such ideal or perfect fidelity to nature; and in fact, I shall suggest, neither does. (*Indeed there is no reason to suppose that anything sufficiently integrated and economical to count as a unitary system of formal logic could match this ideal*) (Strawson, 1982b, p. 787 my emphasis)<sup>64</sup>

In essence, *Strawson challenges the notion that natural language can be precisely captured by a unitary system of formal logic*, thus sparking debate about the feasibility of formal semantics. It is argued that such scepticism arises from Strawson’s limited understanding of the systematic structure of

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<sup>63</sup> See also: “There are no precise rules determining, for ordinary language, what is nonsense and what is not” (Strawson, 1952, p. 32)

<sup>64</sup> See also: “[...] accomplishment of this task [the production of a perspicuous grammar] will not, if I am right, automatically reveal that some one particular system of formal logic embodies the logical syntax of the natural language concerned. *For there will be no such thing as a unitary logical syntax of a natural language*” (ibid., 1982b, pp. 789-790, italics are mine).

ordinary language, in particular, from a failure to distinguish between the semantic and the pragmatic aspects of linguistic communication.<sup>65</sup>

Curiously, what is perhaps the most notable critique regarding this matter<sup>66</sup>—and for some, the stake to the heart of Ordinary Language philosophy<sup>67</sup>—came from no other than Strawson’s own mentor and colleague, Paul Grice, who, in reaction to the method of analysis traditionally performed by Oxford philosophers (as well as the later Wittgenstein and his followers), famously accused his peers of conflating meaning with use, warning them that “the precept that one should be careful not to confuse meaning and use is perhaps on the way toward being as handy a philosophical vade-mecum as once was the precept that one should be careful to identify them” (H. P. Grice, 1989, p. 4).

On that vein, Strawson was directly accused by Grice of conflating meaning and use at least twice: first, in connection to his analysis of the word ‘truth’ (H. P. Grice, 1989, p. 9), and second, regarding his understanding of conditionals (H. P. Grice, 1989, p. 12). Strawson himself accepted the first criticism and acknowledged having committed that mistake in his early work on truth (Strawson, 2011, p. 217). However, he never stopped defending his own analysis of conditionals, even from Grice’s criticisms (Strawson, 1986c).

Briefly, Grice describes how the linguistic analysts would go about their philosophical elucidations in the following way (H. P. Grice, 1989, p. 3): first, they would draw attention to a certain range of expressions related to a certain philosophically puzzling word or concept.

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<sup>65</sup> The philosopher and semiotician Charles Morris coined the term “pragmatics.” Morris identified three branches in semiotics: syntax (formerly syntactics), focusing on the formal relations of signs; semantics, examining the relations of signs to their objects; and pragmatics, delving into the relations of signs to interpreters (Morris, 1938). I will not define semantics nor pragmatics at this point given that their definition is one of the contested issues in the interpretation of Strawson’s work that I am trying to clarify. However, I believe an intuitive understanding should be enough to follow the discussion.

<sup>66</sup> See (Snowdon, 2001, 340).

<sup>67</sup> See (Stanley, 2008) and Soames’ “Paul Grice and the End of Ordinary Language Philosophy”(Soames, 2009).

Take, for example, the word ‘true’. Now, noting how the use of this word would seem odd or pointless in some situations, as when someone says, “it is true that blood is red” or “it is true that it is raining”, they would then suggest that this is so because those situations fail to meet a certain condition or circumstance. For instance, it seems that we only use “it is true” when we endorse, confirm, or admit to something, as in “it is true that he stole the car” or “it is true that I love you”. When ‘true’ is used in different circumstances, it seems to be a bit redundant. In consequence, they would conclude that endorsing, confirming, and/or confessing are entailed (or implied, or assumed, or presupposed) by the meaning of ‘true’.<sup>68</sup>

On the whole, the problem with such an analysis, according to Grice, is that it does not distinguish between the purely *semantic* elements of a linguistic expression, and those extra-semantic or *pragmatic* elements that arise due to the interplay of the speaker’s intention, the context of utterance, and certain conventions that guide and inform rational conversation. Only the strictly semantic elements are to be assessed in the formulation of the *truth-conditions* of an expression, that is, of the circumstances under which a sentence is considered to be true. Oxford philosophers—in their otherwise careful attention to the uses of words—having no principled way of separating these two dimensions of meaning, the semantic and the pragmatic, would sometimes end up claiming that a mere pragmatic aspect of the use of an expression is in fact an essential part of its meaning. In short, while a sentence may convey different implied meanings depending on its use, these implications (or *implicatures*, as Grice calls them) do not contribute to the sentence’s truth-conditions, and hence they are not to be considered part of its *semantic content*.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Note that this is a mock example based on Strawson’s own analysis of ‘true’ (1948). “Grice himself rightly criticizes an early and ill-considered attempt of my own, long abandoned, to represent one particular use of the word ‘true’ as the complete account of its semantic function” (Strawson, 2011b, p. 217).

<sup>69</sup> Cf: “By organizing the intersection of the two domains in such a way Grice’s model actually enabled their strict separation; a separation that could be formulated as the thesis that *pragmatic factors had*

Moreover, Grice's perspective enabled a renewed pursuit of a systematic language theory (against the prevailing belief in Post-war Oxford and held by other followers of the late Wittgenstein that a theory of meaning could not achieve the level of systematicity required for it)<sup>70</sup> by proposing a way of defining and isolating the semantic elements which could in turn be captured by and computed with a formal system like predicate logic.

In this regard, Stanley further characterises Oxford's scepticism with regards to the orthodox approach to semantics:

[s]ince [according to Oxford philosophers] reference and truth-value are only properties of uses of expressions [and not of expressions themselves], they are inappropriate notions to use in the analysis of the linguistic meanings of expressions. In general, expression types in natural language do not have references or truth-values, only uses of them do. So employing the apparatus of semantic theory, which crucially avails itself of notions such as reference and truth, is not the right way to give a theory of meaning for natural language; the meaning of expression types is given by rules of use (2012, p. 888).<sup>71</sup>

Thus, according to Stanley, Ordinary Language philosophers rejected the project of formal semantics on the grounds that it is ill-conceived due to its reliance on the concepts of truth and reference, which only apply to uses of sentences, not to sentences and linguistic expressions themselves.<sup>72</sup> He further contends that the developments in semantic theory

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*no influence whatever on the truth conditions of what was said*" (Marchesan, 2018, p. 101, my emphasis).

<sup>70</sup> Cf: "But to suppose that an interpretation can be given which is a justified interpretation is to suppose that at least a part of ordinary usage (that part which contains the expressions into which the calculus is translated-or better that part which contains that restricted part of the usage of the expressions into which the calculus is translated) has a logic. And this means an exact logic in the sense in which Strawson denies that usage has an exact logic" (Jarvis, 1961, p. 82), and Grice: "My primary aim is [...] to determine how any such distinction between meaning and use is to be drawn, and where lie the limits of its philosophical utility. Any serious attempt to achieve this aim will, I think, involve a search for a systematic theory of language" (1989, p. 4).

<sup>71</sup> Stanley (2008) presents a similar interpretation in the section "Strawson and the challenge from ordinary-language philosophy".

<sup>72</sup> Here is another example of this view: "So the linguistic meaning of an expression should not be understood – as it is on the standard theory of how meaning and context interact – as a function from

brought about by Grice and his pragmatic/semantic distinction, on the one hand, and the intensional logics of Montague (1973) and Kaplan (1989), on the other, undermine the traditional Oxford position to the point that it now makes “perfect sense to speak of singular terms having reference, albeit *relative to a context*, and it makes perfect sense to speak of sentences having truth-values, also relative to a context” (Stanley, 2008, p. 417).<sup>73</sup> Essentially, appealing to the notions of truth and reference “allows us to give a considerably more explicit characterization of linguistic meaning than the ordinary language philosophers were capable of providing” (Stanley, 2012, p. 893).

A final example along similar lines is due to Heck, who proposes a *neo-Strawsonian* approach to semantics in his paper “Semantics and Context-Dependence”.<sup>74</sup> Despite his intentions, Heck goes on to claim that “Strawson’s own scepticism about the applicability of formal methods to natural language might reinforce [the] concern [that in rejecting reference as a word-thing relation one thereby rejects semantics]” (2014, p. 344). Consequently, he seems to tacitly ascribe to Strawson the following argument against semantics:<sup>75</sup>

(1) Semantics is about truth-conditions.

(2) Only utterances have truth-conditions.

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some specific set of contextual parameters to an extension. Travis’s version of the constructive project might therefore be regarded as a closer continuation of the spirit of classic ordinary language philosophy than DeRose’s in the respect that it aligns with the classic idea that the resources of systematic semantic theory are ill-suited for explaining ordinary use because ‘ordinary language has no exact logic’ (Strawson, 1950, p.344)” (Hansen, 2014, p. 559).

<sup>73</sup> A verbatim copy of this quote (and several other sentences in the text) can be found in Stanley’s later article “Intensional Semantics” (Stanley, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> Although I ultimately disagree with Heck’s proposal and with his overall characterisation of Strawson, for matters of brevity I am unable to offer a full critique of this paper. Nonetheless, some aspects of it will be addressed and challenged below. In all fairness, the paper is not concerned with hermeneutical reconstruction but is simply inspired by some Strawsonian ideas. Hence, its merit lies beyond its exegetical accuracy.

<sup>75</sup> Or at least seems to suggest that something along those lines could be reconstructed from the Strawsonian attitude towards semantic theory.

(3) Hence, a semantic theory must assign truth-conditions to utterances.

(4) Only a theory that incorporates a complete theory of human rationality could assign truth-conditions to utterances.

(5) So there is no such thing as a semantic theory (in anything like the usual sense) (ibid., 2014, p. 327)

Whether or not his own “Strawsonian” solution to this problem actually does justice to Strawson<sup>76</sup>, Heck—unintentionally?—delineates new contours onto the portrait of the Oxonian philosopher as a theorist in despair about the mere possibility of a systematic theory of meaning. Ultimately, the concerns of the Ordinary Language philosopher are intensified under this interpretation, for it is no longer a matter of the semantic apparatus of the formalist being inappropriate or insufficient: *it is impossible!*<sup>77</sup>

In parallel, Strawson’s apparent negligence of the semantic/pragmatic distinction also explains his general animosity against formal methods and constructionist approaches in philosophy (see Strawson, 1963), or so it is supposed by his detractors. For example, Searle criticizes Strawson’s initial work on truth (Searle, 1969, p. 137, footnote 2), labelling it as an

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<sup>76</sup> And I would argue it does not, but for matters of scope, I will have to leave that subject aside.

<sup>77</sup> Cf: ““A theory of speech acts must in principle be able to specify every feature of context that might affect the success or failure of a given speech act or that might affect what particular speech act an utterance effectively performed” (OD, 123). As far as I know, Culler’s definition is uncontroversial. I would assume that most literary critics today would agree that a theory must have explanatory power and be capable of predicting future occurrences. We can’t have a *theory* of speech acts, Culler notes, because context is infinite, always “open to further description,” always “unmasterable,” and “boundless” (OD, 123, 124, 128). Therefore, the only theoretically serious attitude is to acknowledge that there can be no theory of meaning. Now, Culler, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell actually all *agree* on this point. None of them believes that there can be a general theory of meaning” (Moi, 2017, pp. 79–80). Moi does not refer to Strawson in this text, yet one of the main points of this chapter is to show that although Strawson is traditionally identified with Ordinary Language philosophy, he does not share this view about a theory of meaning. Whether the other members of the Ordinary Language tradition also believed in the impossibility of a systematic theory of meaning is a claim open to dispute.

example of the ‘speech-act fallacy’,<sup>78</sup> “the fallacy of confusing the conditions for the performance of the speech act of assertion with the analysis of the meaning of particular words occurring in certain assertions” (Searle, 1969, p. 141).<sup>79</sup>

This same sort of objection against Strawson has reappeared more recently in the literature on semantics and the philosophy of language. Here are two prime contemporary examples of this line of criticism:<sup>80</sup>

When Strawson spoke of the connection between antecedent and consequent that is part of the “primary use” of an English conditional statement, he spoke of the *acceptability*, *truth*, or *reasonability* of a use of a conditional statement. This suggests that Strawson did not distinguish the *truth* of an utterance from the *acceptability* of that utterance (Stanley, 2012, p. 886, original emphasis).<sup>81</sup>

Thus, Stanley interprets Strawson's approach to conditionals as conflating their truth-conditions with their practical acceptability, therefore blurring the lines between semantic veracity and pragmatic usage. Equally faulty is Strawson's neglect of the compositional nature of linguistic meaning, or so argues Soames:

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<sup>78</sup> In addition, minor critiques along similar lines were posed against Ordinary Language Philosophers by Maxwell and Feigl (1961), Quine (1953, p. 441), and Geach (1963).

<sup>79</sup> As a corrective response he commends that “[a]ny analysis of the meaning of a word (or morpheme) must be consistent with the fact that the same word (or morpheme) can mean the same thing in all the grammatically different kinds of sentences in which it can occur” (Searle, 1969, p. 137). In other words, when conducting an analysis of the meaning of a word, it is crucial to acknowledge and uphold the consistency of its meaning across various grammatical structures and as deployed in a variety of speech acts.

<sup>80</sup> I have chosen these two examples because, first, they deal specifically with Strawson, and second, they are contemporary instances of a type of objection, the *Speech Act Fallacy*, that can be traced back to Geach's “Ascriptivism” (1960) and Searle's “Meaning and Speech Acts” (1962) (See also Geach, 1965 and; Searle, 1969), and which has its final form in Grice's “Logic and Conversation”.

<sup>81</sup> Let it be noted again that Strawson faced criticism regarding his views on conditionals as early as (H. P. Grice, 1978), yet he stood by his analysis throughout his career (Björnsson, 2008; Strawson, 1952, 1986c, 1990b).

Standardly, the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts. If this were not so, we could not explain how language users are routinely able to understand new sentences that they have never previously encountered. In order to account for this fact, we need a theory of the meaning of an individual expression that makes clear how it is able to systematically contribute to the meanings of larger linguistic compounds that contain it. Strawson's performative analysis of the truth predicate doesn't do this (Soames, 2009, p. 129).<sup>82</sup>

Here, Soames critiques Strawson for supposedly lacking a systematic account of meaning that explains how individual expressions contribute to the understanding of new, complex statements.

In sum, for his critics, Strawson's descriptive analysis represents a paradigmatic case of that idiosyncratic negligence of the Ordinary Language movement: *the pernicious conflation of pragmatics with semantics* (Stanley, 2008, p. 428).<sup>83</sup> Moreover, echoing a tenet of Logical Constructionism, Strawson's contemporary critics advocate for the view that words have fully determined meanings independently of their use, therefore, contrary to what Ordinary Language philosophy claimed, whether an expression is used in a philosophical context or in ordinary conversation, its meaning remains the same.

On the whole, it's a common but oversimplified narrative to paint Strawson as a hardliner against formal approaches. My goal is to deflate this narrative by highlighting a more sophisticated and accommodating engagement with formal approaches, underscoring Strawson's careful balance between the formal study of language and the intricacies of ordinary thought and speech.

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<sup>82</sup> Again, let it be noted that Strawson himself acknowledged such criticism with regards to his theory of truth and consequently abandoned it.

<sup>83</sup> In addition, Strawson is also mentioned, *en passant*, as guilty of this misidentification in Longworth (2017, p. 109).

## **Strawson and the Quest for a Systematic Theory of Meaning**

It is certainly undeniable that Strawson saw the different formal approaches to linguistic analysis of his contemporaries with suspicion: from Russell (as he first read him, i.e., as interested in the semantics of natural language) to Davidson, the attempts to fit or reduce the vastness of natural language into the pre-conceived iron moulds of a logical model betrayed the Procrustean character of formalisation. As a result, his philosophical work is indeed partly characterised by his opposition to this kind of blunt regimentation. Nonetheless, what was a candid concern seems to have been inflated by some into a demoralising panic. Now it is time to show that Strawson's position acknowledges and endorses the value of formal approaches in enriching linguistic analysis while advocating for a balanced methodology that prevents formal logic from becoming the dominant framework and obscuring the complex nature of language use across its various contexts and functions.

For this reason, one should be careful to differentiate between two targets of Strawson's warnings against unrestraint formalism: On the one hand, he stands against the Logical Constructionists, which he identifies with Carnap, the logical positivists (Strawson, 1956a, 1963, 1967a), and Quine (Strawson, 1959, 1961b, 1964a, 1970d, 1974d, 1979a, 1986d, 1990a). On the other hand, there are the formal semanticists whose ethos is exemplified in the works of Davidson (Strawson, 1970b, 1974c), and, to a degree, in the work of Grice (Strawson, 1986c, 1990b, 2011b) and Chomsky (Strawson, 1972, 1974f). A case apart is Russell, who, as a representative of the original brand of linguistic analysis, was first deemed by Strawson as engaged in a project akin to that of formal semantics (see 'On Referring' 1950) but was later on reconsidered as more of a Logical Constructionist (see Strawson, 1998i).<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> It is still debated whether the initial critique Strawson directed against Russell's Theory of Descriptions was somehow misplaced in the sense that Russell might not have been aiming towards a descriptive analysis of ordinary language but developing a novel logical calculus for the purpose of mathematical and philosophical clarification (see Russell (1957), Rorty (1967, p. 38), Behling (1998, pp. 120–121), Haight (1998, p. 206), Snowdon (2001, p. 337) and Neale (2005)). Wittily put by Behling,

For Strawson—clearly against what Heck argues—the only notion of formal semantics that “has ever been seriously advanced or developed, or needs to be seriously considered [...] rests on the notion of truth-conditions” (1970b, p. 176). The general idea at the core of this project is that “the syntactic and semantic rules together determine the meanings of all the sentences of a language and do this by means, precisely, of determining their truth-conditions” (ibid, p. 177). The main target of Strawson’s critique is Donald Davidson’s truth-theoretical semantics (see Davidson, 1967b, 1970), which purports to throw light on the concept of ‘meaning’ by specifying the desiderata and formal requirements for the semantics of a given natural language *L*; the idea being that in designing such a theory and discovering what meaning-in-*L* consists of, we thereby also reveal what linguistic meaning in general amounts to (H.-J. Glock, 2017, pp. 216–217)).

### *Meaning, Use, and Rules*

As we saw above, the problematic slogan at the core of the criticism against Strawson is that “ordinary expressions have no exact and systematic logic” (1952, p. 57). What Strawson means by this is that it is not possible to give natural language expressions an abstract meaning assignment that fully captures what is communicated in any possible context *independently of contextual considerations*.<sup>85</sup> This does not mean, however, that no assignment is possible, or that it should not be looked for, but merely that the belief in a single minimal semantic value which perfectly captures the semantic potential of an expression is not only misguided but potentially negligent, as it risks distorting and reducing its actual, multifaceted character.

In that vein, as observed and lauded by Quine, the main achievement of *Introduction to Logical Theory* (Strawson, 1952)—published only two years after “On Referring”—is to be

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“Russell does not *fail* to capture formally the nuances of ordinary-language usages; he does not *fail*, for he does not *try*!” (ibid., 121).

<sup>85</sup> Semantic values serve dual functions in a semantic theory. Initially, they define a truth-conditional meaning for a sentence by distinguishing circumstances where it is true or false. Additionally, they play a role in the compositional calculation of complex sentence meanings.

found in its effort to provide *the groundwork for a logic of ordinary language*.<sup>86</sup> Strawson thus writes in this regard:

[W]e might find ourselves able to frame classifications or disclose differences broad and deep enough to satisfy the strongest appetite for generality. What we shall not find in our results is that character of elegance and system which belongs to the constructions of formal logic. It is nonetheless true that *the logic of ordinary speech provides a field of intellectual study unsurpassed in richness, complexity, and the power to absorb* (1952, p. 232, my emphasis).

With this purpose, as early as the publication of “On Referring”, Strawson draws a fundamental distinction between (a) a sentence, (b) the usage of a sentence, and (c) the use (or utterance) of an expression (1950, p. 7): “sentences are meaningful in and of themselves, independently of the utterance situation. Utterances of meaningful sentences may be true or false, or, if here is a presupposition failure, they may be neither” (Ludlow, 2013, p. 383). In Strawson’s own words:

Meaning (in at least one important sense) is a function of the sentence or expression; mentioning and referring and truth or falsity, are functions of the use of the sentence or expression. To give the meaning of an expression (in the sense in which I am using the word) is to give *general directions* for its use to refer or to mention particular objects or persons; to give the meaning of a sentence is to give *general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions. Is not to talk about any particular occasion of the use of the sentence or expression. The meaning of an expression cannot be identified with the object it is used, on a particular occasion, to refer to. The meaning of a sentence cannot be identified with the assertion it is

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<sup>86</sup> Cf: “The long and perceptive passages in which Mr. Strawson traces out something like a logic of ordinary language have all the interest and value of an able philological inquiry” (Quine, 1953, p. 444) and “[t]he direct value of the book is very considerable, and lies in the realm of logical analysis of ordinary language” (ibid, p. 448). But note that Quine writes this from the perspective of a “constructionist” who has no interest in “the logic of ordinary language” (and hence would seem to raise doubts about its possibility). See also: “After his criticism of formal logic, Strawson made friendly and sincere suggestions for another kind of logic, the logic of ordinary language” (Wu, 1998, p. 220).

used, on a particular occasion, to make. For to talk about the meaning of an expression or sentence is not to talk about its use in a particular occasion, but about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use, on all occasions, to refer or to assert (1950, p. 9).

Therefore, for Strawson, *meaning has to do with the conventions and rules that guide the correct use of linguistic expressions in any given situation for the purpose of performing a variety of speech acts* (be it reference, assertion, interrogation, etc). Moreover,

[I]n the actual use of the meaningful, in the sense of linguistically functional, term, the actual use is added, and this actual use is the utterance of a particular person in a particular situation. This use, then, of the term would be the actual referring use, as opposed to the potential referring use. Such a use is over and above the meaning or function of the term. This distinction between the two senses of “use” is that between the notion of “use” as function—the potentiality of a term—and the notion of “use” actual utterance—the actuality of use. It is roughly the difference between Russell and Quine’s sense of “denotation,” which is an activity of *words*, and Strawson’s sense of “referring,” which is an activity of *people* (Haight, 1998, p. 209).

For this reason, the distinction between a sentence, its use, and its utterance, underpins Strawson’s acceptance of a truth-conditional approach for natural language semantics and clearly disproves Stanley’s accusations (2008, p. 417, 2012) that Strawson was opposed to it. In fact, as early as 1952 he would remark that “to explain the meaning of a statement-making sentence [...] is to say under what conditions someone who used it would be making a true statement: and let us call this ‘giving the rules of use’ of the sentence” (Strawson, 1952, p. 211). Later on, Strawson reaffirms the essential role of a truth-conditional framework when he argues that:

It is a truth implicitly acknowledged by communication-intention theorists themselves that in almost all the things we should count as sentences there is a substantial central core of meaning

which is explicable either in terms of truth-conditions or in terms of some related notion quite simply derivable from that of a truth-condition [...] If we suppose, therefore, that an account can be given of the notion of truth-condition itself, an account which is indeed independent of reference to communication intention, then we may reasonably think that the greater part of the task of a general theory of meaning has been accomplished without such reference. And by the same token, on the same supposition, we may think that the greater part of the particular theory of meaning of a particular language *L* can also be given, free of any such, even implicit, reference (Strawson, 1970b, p. 178).<sup>87</sup>

In short, communication-intention theorists like Strawson<sup>88</sup> tacitly accept that sentences generally have a central meaning, which can be elucidated by the notion truth-conditions, or some closely related concept, like that of assertibility conditions, in conjunction with particular contextual and pragmatic considerations. This is why Zapero makes sure to clarify that “[o]n Strawson’s understanding of the debates about the relation of meaning and truth, *the idea of a truth-condition is taken to be unproblematic. Both parties hold that the rules governing the meaning of a sentence can be explicated with the help of such a notion* (2018, p. 7, my italics).<sup>89</sup>

On this basis, much of the work needed to develop a comprehensive theory of meaning can be achieved upon the idea of a truth-conditional semantic framework. However, the concept of truth-conditions itself cannot be worked out without appealing to the notion

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<sup>87</sup> See also: “It is a generally harmless and salutary thing to say that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know under what conditions one who utters it says something true. But if we wish for a philosophical elucidation of the concept of meaning, then the dictum represents, not the end, but the beginning of our task” (Strawson, 1970b, pp. 188–189).

<sup>88</sup> He also makes sure to properly ascribe the same view to fellow Ordinary Language philosophers Austin (the notion of *locutionary meaning*) and Grice (the notion of *what is said*) (Strawson, 1970b, p. 178, fn 1, 1973a)

<sup>89</sup> Cf: “A theory of meaning must be, I have implied, a theory of understanding. It must not only show how the meanings of sentences are systematically determined by the meanings of constituent words and constructions. It must be able to show how we *understand* meanings as so determined. Understanding a sentence is knowledge of its truth conditions” (Strawson, 1976, p. 110).

of communicative-intention, or so Strawson argues in his seminal “Meaning and Truth” (1970b).<sup>90</sup> As he warns us again 27 years later in “Meaning and Context”:

Wearied, perhaps, with the complexities which beset us when we try to take account of communicated meaning in general, yet *committed to the belief in the possibility of a systematic semantic theory of a language, some linguist or philosophers of language have held that such a theory should be freed from all dependence on the concept of communication*. From the point of view of linguistic theory, they hold, a language is to be seen as a system of rules and devices for articulating, or expressing, beliefs and attitudes, but not essentially for communicating them (1997b, p. 230, my emphasis).

This perspective, of course, demands a clear explanation of how rules and conventions for expressing beliefs and attitudes can come through independently of the concept of communication, that is, without appealing to our essentially human practice of communicating beliefs and attitudes. Although mastery of a natural language indeed allows for expressing beliefs without intent to communicate, understanding this expression requires acknowledging the role of communicative-intention (Strawson, 1997b, p. 231).<sup>91</sup> In a nutshell: “We cannot hope to understand language as a theorist hopes to understand it unless we understand speech. We cannot hope to understand speech unless we take account of the aim of communication” (idem).<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Cf: “An account of speaker-understanding of the construction canonized in logic, the constructions with which Tarski’s own theory is concerned, would then presumably not constitute an overwhelming problem. Even Quine, holist as he is, seems prepared to offer such. As for other types of construction, it is very much an open question how useful the model provided by Tarski will prove. But, in principle at least a complete Davidsonian truth-theory for a language, if such existed, could thus be fleshed out into a systematic theory of language-understanding. Such a theory, however, to stand a chance of being true, must at least be credible” (Strawson, 1975a, p. 1383).

<sup>91</sup> Cf: “[The] rules determining the conventional meaning of the sentence join with the contextual conditions of its utterance to determine what the belief in question is [...]. And in determining what the belief in question is in such a case, the rules determine what statement is made in such a case. To determine the former is to determine the latter” (1970b, p. 181).

<sup>92</sup> But see Rumfitt (2024) for a solid argument against Strawson’s claim that appeal to communicative intention is indispensable.

### *Context and Referring-Rules*

In consequence, the recognition and identification of pragmatic factors permeating throughout our semantic theorising is crucial. It follows that considerations of context-sensitivity occupy themselves a primary role in the development of a systematic semantics. Thus, Strawson writes in *Introduction to Logical Theory*:

We cannot identify that which is true or false (the statement) with the sentence used in making it; for the same sentence may be used to make quite different statements, some of them true and some of them false. And this does not arise from any ambiguity in the sentence. The sentence may have a single meaning which is precisely what [...] allows it to be used to make quite different statements. So it will not do to identify the statement either with the sentence or with the meaning of the sentence. A particular statement is identified, not only by reference to the words used, but also by reference to the circumstances in which they are used, and, sometimes, to the identity of the person using them (1952, p. 4).<sup>93</sup>

In other words, a sentence can be employed to articulate a variety of true and false statements without being therefore ambiguous. In consequence, it cannot be equated with the statements it is used to make. *The specific statement made using a sentence is determined not just by the single meaning of words themselves but also by the context of their use.* Furthermore:

What in general is required for making a unique reference is, obviously, some device, or devices, for showing both *that* a unique reference is intended and *what* unique reference it is; some device requiring and enabling the hearer or reader to identify what is being talked about. In securing this result, the context of utterance is of an importance which it is almost impossible to exaggerate; and by 'context' I mean, at least, the time, the place, the situation, the identity of the speaker, the subjects which form the immediate focus of interest, and the personal histories of both speaker and those he's addressing ('On Referring' 1950, p. 19).

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<sup>93</sup> See also Strawson (1952, pp. 29–30).

Thus, the context of an utterance plays an important role in the determination of reference, and therefore, in most cases, it is crucial to correctly discern the content of a sentence as then uttered.<sup>94</sup> For this reason, and given how logic deals with declarative sentences as used on a concrete occasion, that is, as already having a concrete and determined meaning, the *entailment-rules* of the formal logician (as Strawson calls them) need to be complemented by the *referring-rules* of the ordinary-language logician in order to capture “the complete logical picture” (Behling, 1998, p. 113). The function and essential character of these rules is displayed by Strawson across Chapter 8 of *Introduction*, where he states that, basically, “[a] referring rule lays down a contextual requirement for the correct employment of an [referential] expression” (Strawson, 1952, p. 213).

Paradigmatic examples of referring-rules include the rules associated with the words ‘I’ (used by a speaker to refer to herself), ‘you’ (used to refer to the speaker’s addressee(s)), and ‘she’ (used to refer to a salient individual) among others, as well as rules related to the function of tenses and other verbal aspects in speech (idem.). In this regard, the elucidation of referring-rules is to be a serious and systematic matter whose aim is to produce *a logic of ordinary language*.

Nonetheless, as already mentioned, the factors to be considered in its production—contextual phenomena, broadly speaking—have to be “generously interpreted” due to their inherent complexity:

For evidently there is a difference between constructing a segment of artificial language and systematically describing the workings of a slice of natural language. One must not exaggerate the difference. *The task of tracing patterns in living language is difficult, and would be*

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<sup>94</sup> A possible exception might be the Quinean notion of eternal sentences, but then the questions becomes: is reference actually involved in this type of sentences? See “Reference and its Roots” (Strawson, 1986).

*almost impossible if one were not allowed to do a little regimenting* (Strawson, 1956a, p. 37, my emphasis).<sup>95</sup>

As a result, such logic will crucially differ from formal logic in its rigidity and precision, but it would nonetheless be essential for the task of regimentation.<sup>96</sup>

Notwithstanding, Behling—who, perhaps exaggeratedly, heralded Strawson as *the discoverer of pragmatics* (1998, p. 125)—reminds us that although we might succumb like Strawson to the folly of trying to tame ordinary language, logic and pragmatics are distinct *and ne'er the twain shall meet!* (idem.), for referring-rules “are not only not used by us, they are unknown to us! (ibid., 124). Strawson, with his characteristic elegance, responds: “given that most of us have mastered the correct use of indexical expressions, it must be an exaggeration on [Behling’s] part to say that referring rules are unknown to us in our street-talk” (1998j, p. 128). Thus, tables have now turned: Strawson, the notorious anti-formalist, is being reprimanded for no other reason than for trying to tame ordinary language with logic!<sup>97</sup> This criticism highlights a broader and currently quite pertinent debate within philosophy of language regarding the reconciliation of natural language’s fluidity with the precision of formal systems.<sup>98</sup> In this regard, Strawson further tackles context-sensitivity within a truth conditional framework:

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<sup>95</sup> Strawson’s notion of *regimentation* should be understood as locating a certain rule of use for an expression as its meaning. However, this rule is not to be taken as absolute and definite in abstraction of all contextual factors.

<sup>96</sup> Cf: “This fluidity in our rules, and this imposition in the distinctions they involve, are things we must be aware of if we aim at a realistic study of the logic of ordinary speech” (Strawson, 1952, pp. 230–231) and “the foundation of the logic of ordinary language consists in a sharp awareness of the diversified ways of the uses of ordinary language” (Wu, 1998, p. 221).

<sup>97</sup> In this regard, Tensmeyer proclaims: “Though Strawson claims that ordinary language has no precise logic, his theory implies that ordinary language combined with the context of our statements can yield very precise propositions. Whether he intended to or not, Strawson has retained many of the important assumptions of logical atomism [...] [and] resurrected the possibility of exactness that Wittgenstein vehemently maintained was an illusory goal” (2012, p. 41).

<sup>98</sup> See Zapero (2018).

The difficulty [of dealing with context-sensitivity in a truth-conditional framework], however, is quite easily resolved. All that needs to be said is that *the statement of truth-conditions for many type-sentences—perhaps most that are actually uttered in ordinary conversation—has to be, and can be, relativized in a systematic way to contextual conditions of utterance*. A general statement of truth conditions for such a sentence will then be, not a statement of conditions under which that sentence is a truth, but a general statement of a type of conditions under which different particular utterances of it will issue in different particular truths (Strawson, 1970b, pp. 179-180, my italics).<sup>99</sup>

Hence, almost foreshadowing Kaplan's (1989) revolutionary approach to indexical expressions, Strawson contends that the challenge posed by context-sensitive expressions to a truth-conditional semantic theory can be surmounted by tailoring truth-conditions to the specific context in which sentences are used. This means that the truth-conditions for any given sentence need not be absolute but may vary depending on the context of utterance. Accordingly, a general description of truth-conditions should reflect this variability, encompassing a range of conditions that correspond to the diverse potential uses and interpretations of the sentence in context. So, indeed, for Strawson it made "perfect sense to speak of singular terms having reference, albeit *relative to a context*, and it makes perfect sense to speak of sentences having truth-values, also relative to a context" (Stanley, 2008, p. 417).

Similarly, Heck's attribution to Strawson of radical pessimism about semantic theory is clearly uncalled for. When considering the role and tasks of a proper semantics for natural language, he writes that:

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<sup>99</sup> There already is an acknowledgment of the possibility of relativisation to context of utterance regarding formal logic and logical entailment in *Introduction*: "If, at some time, at some place, in the mouth of some speaker, the utterance of S results or would result in a true statement, then the utterance of S' at that time, at that place, in the mouth of that speaker, would result in a true statement" (1952, p. 212). Bach touches upon the same point and speculates: "[Strawson's] reason for saying [...] that 'an expression can be used, on different occasions, to refer to innumerable things' [...] leaves open the popular possibility that the expression refers to some one thing on each particular occasion of use" (2017, p. 57 fn 1).

[A]n account of the semantics of demonstratives need not tell us how the semantic value of a demonstrative is fixed. Semantics must tell us how the semantic properties of an utterance are determined by the semantic properties of its significant parts, as well as what sorts of semantic properties the parts have. But to do that, it need not tell us how it is determined exactly which semantic properties the parts do have (2014, p. 335).

While Heck's "Neo-Strawsonian" position adopts a kind of quietism about semantic and referential determination and its systematic inquiry, Strawson's actual concern was with the elucidation and systematisation of referring-rules and contextual requirements. Strawson indeed believed that such a project was far beyond the reach of formal logic and its system of entailment-rules, and, as such, it would constitute an endeavour of considerable effort and complexity. Yes, a very hard task to achieve, but not an impossible one. Thus, Heck's claim that "[s]emantic theory proper knows nothing about the circumstances of use" (ibid., p. 336) flies in the face of Strawson's plans for a proper semantics. If anything, such an attitude would characterise the formalist project Strawson was arguing against, not his own. For Strawson, a semantic theory that is indifferent to circumstances of use is a truncated, ill-conceived enterprise. Formal semantics is to be expanded to account for proper contextual requirements.<sup>100</sup>

Unfortunately, Strawson's exhortation that logic must be enhanced to mirror the structure of language, instead of continuing with a futile attempt to, like a procrustean butcher, reduce, cut, and dissect language to make it fit for the rigid forms of extensional, quantified logic, was,

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<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Bach (2005, p. 31) argues that intuitions about sentence meanings and speaker intentions are often muddled, as language-users tend to blur the line between a sentence's semantic content and its likely communicative intent. This confusion is exacerbated when a sentence is interpreted in isolation, which most of the time leads to generalised assumptions about context of utterance. Crucially, Bach contends that these intuitions are not purely semantic; rather, they are influenced by "pragmatic regularities". Such regularities encompass the extended uses of specific expressions, as well as efficiency patterns in communication, and the strategic manoeuvres of speakers alongside the inferential heuristics employed by attentive listeners: "So there is no need, at least not in general, to expect semantics to explain what people would normally mean in uttering a given sentence" (ibid, p. 32). It should be evident how this clashes with Strawson's view about semantics.

as we have seen so far, mostly ignored and ridiculed by many of his contemporaries—and now some of ours—working on the philosophy of language. In consequence, the pervasive character of context-sensitivity in natural language would have to wait for a bona fide treatment in formal semantics until the work of Prior (1967), Montague (1973), Lewis (1981), and Kaplan (1989).

Under this light, Strawson's preoccupation with formal semantics and its capacity to deal with context-sensitivity no longer seems exaggerated nor unjustified. It is a real issue that was either ignored or diminished by a number of his contemporaries in semantics and the philosophy of language at the time, and that only lately has gained the attention of both philosophers and linguists.<sup>101</sup>

### *On the Semantic/Pragmatic Distinction*

Strawson was more than aware of there being a distinction of radical importance between “what [is] actually asserted, and what [is] in one way or another additionally conveyed in the saying of what [is] said, whether or not such additions [are] conveyed by linguistic devices conventionally adapted to the purpose” (Strawson, 1997b, p. 228).<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, this distinction plays an essential role in the development of a more nuanced understanding of Strawson's work in the context of semantics and pragmatics. Thus he writes (and I quote in full given the relevance of the claim):

[T]here is some line to be drawn, in our studies of speech, between what falls within the bounds of linguistic meaning, strictly conceived, and what falls outside those bounds, though still within the broader domain of communicated meaning. It does not suppose a sharp continuous

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<sup>101</sup> Although some contextualists do credit Strawson as one of their intellectual grandfathers (see Zaperro, 2018), Wittgenstein and Austin have been the two historical figures at the forefront of the movement (see Marchesan & Zaperro, 2018).

<sup>102</sup> This text first appeared in partial form in 1970 as “Phrase et Acte de Parole” (Strawson, 1970c). It was not translated into English and published in its full form until 1997.

boundary; it allows for a certain area of indeterminacy, for cases which cannot be certainly located, at a given moment, on one side or the other of the border [...]; and perhaps it is a condition of understanding the growth and development of a language that such an area of indeterminacy should be allowed for. *Still, a border of some kind is supposed. Any linguist, who hopes that a systematic semantic theory of a language is possible, must have an interest in this supposal; so must any philosopher who aims, in his own way, at systematic comprehension of our habits of thought and speech.* The problem, of course, is to trace the border in the right place, along the lines that best accord with the demands of the system and the respect for facts (Strawson, 1997b, pp. 228–229, emphasis added).

Therefore, contra Searle (1969, p. 137), Grice (1989, pp. 9, 12) and Stanley (2012, p. 886), Strawson holds that a distinction is to be made between *strict meaning* and the broader domain of *conveyed meaning*. But this division, like natural language itself, is not rigid, for it can—and should—allow for some uncertainty in classifying certain cases. The theorist of language must grapple with the task of defining this border accurately, aligning it with our formal and systemic requirements while respecting empirical evidence. In short, the theorist of language should be able to distinguish between meaning, what is said, and what is implicated.

Moreover, Strawson also recognised the problematic tendency of some of his fellow linguistic philosophers to locate pragmatic features of certain philosophically interesting expressions into their semantic or conventional content. In his own words (and again I quote in full):

And here it is worth mentioning one temptation to which (English-writing) philosophers—partly, though not only, under the influence of Wittgenstein—have been recently exposed and against which other (English-writing) philosophers have, still more recently, issued corrective warnings. In their zealous and entirely proper study of the *uses* to which philosophically interesting expressions may be put—of the purposes such expressions may serve in the total enterprise of communicating meaning and of the *conditions* under which they may naturally

serve these purposes—philosophers may mislocate or overlook that which is in fact the key to understanding the uses they study. For it may be that such an expression in fact possesses a unitary linguistic meaning and that the variety of uses and of conditions of use which engages philosophical attention—or some central and typical use which threatens to monopolize philosophical attention—can be *explained* as the result of an interplay between that unitary linguistic meaning on the one hand and certain characteristic purposes of speech, or features of speech-situations, on the other. A philosopher who ignores this possibility throws away, therefore, the chance of gaining enhanced comprehension and control of his material (Strawson, 1997b, p. 229)

Acknowledging the influence of Wittgenstein, Strawson concedes, *pace* Soames (2009, p. 129), that the linguistic analyst misplaces her focus on the conditions of *use in communication* of a given expression, and in doing so risks overlooking the unitary linguistic meaning of such an expression, *for it is precisely this unitary linguistic meaning which in fact underlies its diverse uses*.<sup>103</sup> Neglecting this factor, Strawson warns us in the same spirit as Grice, hinders the philosopher's deeper understanding and mastery of her subject of study. Consequently, he writes that:

Philosophers, properly concerned with the meanings of expressions, are also properly, and indeed necessarily, concerned with the conditions under which they can be either correctly or appropriately used. Grice's distinctive contribution was to insist that one should not confuse

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<sup>103</sup> Regarding the primacy of the principle of compositionality for systematic semantics see: “Any account we give of meaning in general (in the relevant sense) must square with the account we give of what it is for particular expressions to have particular meanings; and we must acknowledge, as two complementary truths, first, the meaning of a sentence in general depends, in some systematic way, on the meanings of the words that make it up and, second, that for a word to have a particular meaning is a matter of its making a particular systematic contribution to the meanings of the sentences in which it occurs” (Strawson, 1970b, p. 171) and “A statement which couples a particular name and a general predicate is true even only if the named item satisfies the predicate. Of course not all statements are of these simple form. But any theory which sets out to show systematically how the truth conditions of sentences of more elaborate construction are determined by the constituent elements and their mode of combination must, it seems, be erected on the *basis* of just such simple forms as this. So it seems reasonable to believe that simple sentences of this type lie at the foundation of any semantic theory, i.e. any theory of meaning, for a given language.” (Strawson, 1992, p. 88).

the two: a given use may fail the test of ‘appropriateness’ without necessarily failing the test of ‘correctness’ (Strawson, 2011b, p. 211)<sup>104</sup>

In concluding, Strawson’s work offers a bridge between the logical rigor of formal semantics and the intricate patterns of natural language, underscoring the indispensable role of context in the development of a systematic theory of meaning.<sup>105</sup> His nuanced approach reminds us that the elegance of formal logic must be not only balanced but enriched with the diverse reality of linguistic communication, where meaning is not a fixed entity but a dynamic interplay of convention, context, and intention.<sup>106</sup> His legacy, far from being only an anti-formalist

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<sup>104</sup> Still, although Strawson highly praises Grice’s contribution and admits of it as a partial reaction to some of the excesses within post-war Oxford philosophy, he makes clear that Grice’s work on the theory of conversational implicature was “not a repudiation, but a refinement of the ‘ordinary language’ philosophers’ approach” (Strawson, 1990b, pp. 182–183). See also: “It is historically interesting that his introduction of the notion [of implicature] [...] *embodies at one level a criticism of some aspects of those ‘Oxford’ philosophical methods and practices which elsewhere, as we shall see, he effectively defends.* Some practitioners of these methods, he suggests, were over-impressed by the link between the meaning of some expressions and certain conditions of their (normal or appropriate or non-misleading) use to the extent of misconstruing the nature of that link. In its extreme form, the misconstrual might involve claiming that no account of the meaning of the expressions in question could be correct or complete which did not include a statement of those conditions” (Strawson, 1990b, pp. 180–181). Hence, Grice’s work aimed to bring more clarity and precision to the study of language, aligning with the goals of the Oxford philosophers while addressing some of the challenges associated with their method. Grice himself acknowledges his credentials and commitments as an Ordinary Language philosopher: “It is, in my view, an important part, though by no means the whole, of the philosopher’s task to analyze, describe, or characterize (in as general terms as possible) the ordinary use or uses of certain expressions or classes of expressions”. And also: “It is in my view the case that a philosophical thesis which involves the rejection as false, or absurd, or linguistically incorrect, of some class of statements which would ordinarily be made, and accepted as true, in specifiable types of situation is itself almost certain (perhaps quite certain) to be false” (P. Grice, 1989, p. 172). See also Lawlor (2018, p. 35).

<sup>105</sup> As a final proof of Strawson’s life-long commitment to the possibility of a systematic semantics, see his final remarks on Schiffer’s *Remnants of Meaning* (which I quote in full given their relevance):

“Even if cognitive science fails, as it will, to supply the sort of inspiration which would satisfy Schiffer, it is not clear that despair of the possibility of positive theory is appropriate. For the demands made and what is to count as positive theory may themselves be inappropriate. So it is, in two ways, with Schiffer’s demands. First, he despairs, and rightly despairs, of that ideal of conceptual analysis which would issue in non-circular statements of the necessary and sufficient conditions of the application of the concepts to be analysed. But this reductive conception of analysis is not the only possible conception. Valuable philosophical insights can be gained by establishing conceptual connections which do not fall short of, because they do not aim at, reduction; and any systematic account of a problem-area which accurately delineates such connections can properly be called an analysis of it. Second, his thinking is constructed by his unflinching commitment to physicalism and to nominalism.

<sup>106</sup> “Must we suppose that at least and at most one model will fit each case? I am inclined to think that we take our models too seriously, if we suppose this, and have too little regard for the pleasant fluidities of thinking” (Strawson, 1967b, p. 15).

critique, emerges as a foundational contribution to an ongoing debate in the philosophy of language, advocating for a comprehensive semantic theory that embraces a wider spectrum of linguistic usage.

## **Conclusion**

The objections presented at the beginning of the chapter represent the main criticisms of Strawson's views on the formal treatment of natural language. Through this exposition, neglected aspects of his understanding of natural language have been brought to light. Now we can see that Strawson's critique of formal semantics is not a claim of its impossibility, but rather a call for its necessary expansion. Furthermore, the exhortation to transcend logic does not imply a complete abandonment of systematic inquiry. Instead, it suggests that *ordinary language has a logic*, one that could potentially be accounted for if we move beyond the constraints of formal logic to include a systematic study of pragmatics.

In summary, the critique of formalism put forth by Strawson is more nuanced and refined than commonly believed: while recognizing the usefulness of formal systems as tools in the study of language and in philosophy as a whole, it is crucial to establish clear boundaries and limitations to prevent them from becoming the sole method for linguistic and philosophical clarification. I hope this brief exposition and argument provide unequivocal support for Glock's claim that "Strawson's early work provides the most sustained critique of the scope and limits of formal logic in philosophy, whether it be for the purposes of linguistic reform or for the discovery of depth-structure" (2008, p. 218).

# Chapter 3

## “A Perspicuous Grammar”

### Strawson’s Views on Metasemantics and his Research Programme on Non-Empirical Linguistics

The procedure to be followed in pursuing such a programme will in some ways be reminiscent of the setting up of ideal languages by the logicians; but the purpose will be less restrictive than that of the logicians (Strawson, 1972, p. 143).

I have been suggesting that a general theory of language should not be above receiving help from philosophy as well as offering help to it (Strawson, 1972, p. 147).

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to elucidate Strawson’s what I call *metasemantic commitments*, certain convictions and desiderata regarding the function and purpose of a theory of meaning, to provide a deeper understanding of his theory of semantics for natural language. My reconstruction is derived from a diverse range of Strawson’s works spanning several decades. Accordingly, the presentation of this material is thematic rather than chronological, allowing for a more coherent exploration of his metasemantic views. The purpose of this reconstruction is to outline how Strawson’s views and commitments regarding a theory of meaning are mutually informed by his approach to ontology and, in general, the method and purpose of philosophical analysis.

Therefore, from his extensive body of work, I outline and characterize five key metasemantic commitments central to a Strawsonian semantics:

1. **Proto-Emergentism on the Origins of Language:** Strawson's perspective on the emergence of language can be characterized as proto-emergentist, suggesting that language develops from complex interactions within cognitive and social frameworks.
2. **Representational Semantics:** As a metaphysical realist, Strawson advocates for a representational semantics that is essentially truth-conditional, positing that the meaning of sentences is fundamentally tied to their truth-conditions. In consequence, Strawson offers a broad argument against semantic antirealism.
3. **Semantics within the Communicative-Intention Framework:** While committed to the notion of truth-conditions and the inherently informative nature of language and communication, Strawson situates his semantics within a communicative-intention framework. Crucially, this approach emphasizes a more holistic understanding of semantic interpretation, integrating pragmatic considerations alongside truth-conditions.
4. **Semantics as a Theory of Understanding:** Moving beyond a purely truth-conditional derivational approach, Strawson's semantics is conceived as a theory of understanding. This perspective prioritizes the cognitive processes involved in comprehending and interpreting language.
5. **Intensional Semantics:** Reflecting its comprehensive nature and contrasting with the extensional approach characteristic of the Davidsonian project, Strawson's semantics is necessarily intensional. This commitment underscores the indispensability of intensional notions in the construction of a theory of meaning.

Sections 2 to 6 correspond to each of these metasemantic commitments, providing a general exploration of Strawson's views on each point. Section 7, on the other hand, presents a brief and broad characterization of Strawson's unique proposal for a grammar for natural language,

his project of *Non-Empirical Linguistics*. This research program constitutes a method for developing a grammar a priori, intended to reveal the structure of actual languages based on the fundamental categories of human thought.

Delineating these metasemantic commitments not only allows us to better understand Strawson's views on the semantics of natural language and his conviction in its development as a comprehensive systematic theory, but it also offers a wider and more defined picture of his metaphilosophical view and the intimate relation between his views on logic and semantics, on the one hand, and his general project of descriptive metaphysics. Through this thematic exploration, we gain valuable insights into the depth and scope of Strawson's philosophical approach, emphasizing the crucial interplay between language, thought, and reality.

### **The Social Reality of Language: Strawson as an Emergentist**

With the dawn of modern syntax at the hands of Chomsky (1957, 1965, 1966), the so-far prevalent conception of language as a public, social phenomenon shaped by a set of rules endemic to a particular community was put into question (Chomsky, 2000, p. 37; see also Lin, 1999). The view championed by Chomsky's new breed of linguists has it that language is instead the product of a biological faculty, a "language organ" whose workings can be studied in a precise, naturalistic manner. The goal of this scientific study (known now as *biolinguistics*) is the production of a *grammar*: a systematic account of the internalised, tacit theory with which we must credit a language-user in order to explain what her knowledge of language consists of—that is, what is it that she knows when she knows a language. Such internalist theory<sup>107</sup> consists of: (a) a finite lexicon (a collection of terms), and (b) a finite set of rules for grammatical derivation (that tell you how to put those terms together). Together these two elements constitute what Chomsky calls an *I-Language*, the cognitive structures of the human

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<sup>107</sup> Thus, the label "internalist semantics" often used to talk about Chomskian semantics.

brain which, although more or less common to the entire human species, are finely individuated at the level of speaker (Chomsky, 2000). In sum, each individual speaker possesses her own idiolect, and “there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with” (Davidson, 1986, p. 446). Hence, the notion of language as a social and conventional practice becomes, at best, derivative of that of an internal grammar, and at worst, a pre-scientific myth.<sup>108</sup>

Not surprisingly, Ordinary Language philosophy held on to the priority of the common-sense notion of a language as a socially constructed, abstract object, over the more individualist and scientifically rigorous conception of an idiolect.<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, Strawson does not only rely on, but defends the idea of language as a fundamentally social phenomenon whose primary function is communication. His main objection (grossly simplified and not actually raised against Chomsky but against Davidson<sup>110</sup>) is that even if we concede for a moment the Davidson/Chomsky conception of language and its origin, that is, that communication is cognitively and evolutionarily a derivative function from that of private representation and reasoning, such a story would eventually come out to be “too perverse and arbitrary to satisfy the requirements of an acceptable theory” (Strawson, 1970b, p. 188).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> See also “Conceptual Shifts in the Science of Grammar: 1951-92” in Freidin (2007)).

<sup>109</sup> For a detailed defense of the Ordinary Language concept of a language see Lin (1999)

<sup>110</sup> For the full argument see “Meaning and Truth” (Strawson, 1970b, pp. 185–189).

<sup>111</sup> A more recent formulation of this form of objection against Chomsky’s view is put forward by Glock: “Unsurprisingly, Chomsky’s denial of any substantial link between language and communication has stretched the credulity even of admirers (e.g. Jackendoff 2002). It creates insurmountable difficulties for explaining the origins of language. There is no conceivable evolutionary explanation of why our hominid ancestors should have developed biologically costly neural structures simply in order to soliloquize or to run through the tree diagrams of a Chomskian phrase-structure grammar in silence. This point is all the more acute since these ancestors were social primates like us, with an immediate and pressing need for media of communication and coordination (see Greenspan and Shanker 2004). Furthermore, Chomsky describes “the language faculty” as an organ. But an organ, especially one that is not a physiological unit, had better have a function. Chomsky seems to acknowledge this point, since he describes language as a means for expressing thoughts. Yet it is difficult to see what principal purpose the expression of thoughts could serve, if not that of communicating” (2008, p. 106)

Thus, although Strawson would not deny that tacit knowledge plays a crucial part in language acquisition and linguistic capacity in general (see Strawson, 1972, 1974c, 1974f),<sup>112</sup> his views align seamlessly with contemporary *emergentist* approaches in the philosophy of linguistics that aim to explain language “by reference to more basic non-linguistic (i.e., ‘non-grammatical’) factors and their interaction—physiology, perception, processing, working memory, pragmatics, social interaction, properties of the input, the learning mechanisms, and so on” (O’Grady, 2008, p. 448).

Moreover, Strawson’s proto-emergentist view of a public language constituted by shared conventions of use even predates the more sociological approaches of Evans (1973) and Putnam (1974) by introducing his notion of ‘deferred reference’ (1957b, 1959 Ch.1) and cementing the idea that language users, though competent speakers, might fail to fully know their own language (something the Chomskian would find incomprehensible).<sup>113</sup> Similarly, his central concept of ‘identifying reference’—in fact, his whole conception of meaning and communication—is essentially interpersonal (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 342): successful communication occurs when both parties in conversation, speaker(s) and addressee(s), arrive at a more or less similar content.<sup>114</sup> On the same vein, his continuous defence of—non-individualistic—intensional notions finds a solid foundation in the avowal that “[a]ll things, of

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<sup>112</sup> See also Lin: “The ‘ordinary language’ view of language defended in this paper is against the strong view of language innateness, but it is consistent with the weak view. It is an interesting research topic to investigate what the innate basis of language is, in the weak sense of the word ‘innate’. I suggest that it consists of notions such as time, person, and number (Jespersen 1924), and notional abilities such as those of individuating objects and processes (Strawson 1959)” (1999, p. 187).

<sup>113</sup> See, for example, Partee (1981): “In such cases, human ignorance about the extension of the term and/or about the causal history of its use leads to ignorance about the intension, without preventing the term from having the appropriate intension in the language used by the speaker. In this respect it makes perfect sense, and is probably true, to say that a speaker of a language does not in general fully know his language” (p. 66). Williamson would also endorse such a view: “Even where we cannot sensibly divide the linguistic community into experts and non-experts, the picture of a natural language as a cluster of causally interrelated but constitutively independent idiolects is still wrong, because it ignores the way in which individual speakers defer to the linguistic community as a whole” (2007, p. 124).

<sup>114</sup> Cf: “‘S putatively meant x’ is short for ‘S, if taken by a linguistically competent and reasonably informed audience to be speaking conventionally in the physical and social context of his utterance, would be taken by that audience to have meant x in that context’” (Strawson, 1986a, p. 95).

whatever category, have properties; only conscious beings; *and perhaps societies*, can be said to have concepts” (Strawson, 1998c, p. 325 my emphasis).

In spite of the considerable support that the notion of an idiolect had gained from the developments in generative linguistics, the popularity of *semantic externalism* or *anti-individualism* that came after the seminal works of Kripke (1972) and Putnam (1974) has offered new support to the former mainstream view common to the Oxonian analysts and so vehemently upheld by Strawson.<sup>115</sup>

### **The Priority of Representation: Truth-conditional Semantics**

Regardless of the apparent conflict between Davidson’s truth-conditional semantics and Strawson’s views on the nature of semantic theory, they both (at least) agreed on the fundamental role of representation in our linguistic practices. Accordingly, Strawson writes that:

a central consideration in the understanding of sentences is a grasp of their truth conditions: to understand a sentence is to know what thought it expresses (or is capable, in given contextual circumstances, of expressing); and to know this is to know what we would be believing if we took that thought to be true (Strawson, 1992, p. 99)<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Finally, a more recent and elaborate defence of the Ordinary Language view of language and its inherently normative character is offered by Glock on behalf of Strawson and his Oxford peers. Appealing to the notion of ‘constitutive vs regulative rules’ (Searle, 1969, p. 33) to block Davidson and Chomsky’s individualist conception of language, Glock points at that “[not] every divergence in linguistic use amounts to a difference in idiolects” (2008, p. 112): if a speaker differs too much from standard linguistic use “he does not speak an idiolect, he is simply an idiot” (ibid., p. 113). I will go back to this point later on.

<sup>116</sup> See also: “It is a truth implicitly acknowledged by communication-intention theorists themselves that in almost all the things we should count as sentences there is a substantial central core of meaning which is explicable either in terms of truth-conditions or in terms of some related notion quite simply derivable from that of a truth-condition [...] If we suppose, therefore, that an account can be given of the notion of truth-condition itself, an account which is indeed independent of reference to communication intention, then we may reasonably think that the greater part of the task of a general theory of meaning has been accomplished without such reference. And by the same token, on the same supposition, we may think that the greater part of the particular theory of meaning of a particular language *L* can also be given, free of any such, even implicit, reference” (Strawson, 1970b, p. 178).

This is so because “[o]ne of the main purposes for which we use language is the purpose of stating facts about things and persons and events” (Strawson, 1950, p. 17). In fact, for Strawson, “the intention to communicate something” constitutes “the *standard* purpose of speech” (1952, p. 3). Importantly, although the standard purpose, it is not the only one. Moreover, “Strawson distinguishes between *sentences*, which can be characterized as meaningful (significant) or not, and *statements* (‘assertions’, or ‘uses of sentences’, as Strawson calls them), which are the appropriate candidates for the assignment of a truth-value” (Beaney, 2012, p. 880, italics in the original). Later in his career he will return to the essential role of information and representation in language as expressing a *proposition*:

I distinguish two essential features [of a basic or simple proposition]<sup>117</sup>. One is the excluding power of every such proposition. To say that things are *thus-and-so* is to exclude other possibilities. The other is a certain necessary duality of function which, in a way, parallels at the linguistic level Kant's epistemic duality of concept and intuition, and which consists in having the means both of specifying general types of situation or object or event and of indicating their incidence, i.e. of attaching these *general* specifications to particular instances. Finally, we add the idea, essential to any language, of identifiable linguistic devices with conventional forces or meanings (Strawson, 1997a, p. 11)

Hence, Strawson identifies two fundamental features of a basic proposition: First, the inherent exclusionary nature of any proposition, which by asserting a certain state of affairs, simultaneously negates other possibilities.<sup>118</sup> Secondly, the dual function of categorising

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<sup>117</sup>See: “In the simplest case in which a general term is predicated of one or more particular, directly identified items, the identity of the proposition is determined by the identities both of the particular individual or individuals referred to and of the property or relation associated with the general term” (Strawson, 1990a, p. 176).

<sup>118</sup> Cf: “Now it is simply to express the necessary excluding power of every empirical statement in another way, to say that every such statement must admit of the two mutually exclusive possibilities to being true or being false. Because it excludes, it *can* inform, i.e. be a vehicle of truth; because it *can* inform, it *can* misinform, i.e. be a vehicle of falsehood” (Strawson, 1982a, pp. 146–147) and also: “[...] it was on the fact that statement-making includes the purpose of informativeness—on saying how things are—that we based their essential character of excluding something (Ibid, p. 160).

generalities and identifying their instances, in other words, the capacity to recognise universals and also the particulars which instantiate or exemplify them. A final idea points towards the conventional character of language and its capacity to express these basic propositions.<sup>119</sup> In this regard, he puts emphasis on how our language(s) provide unlimited potential for thought: knowing a language means understanding the meanings of countless possible sentences and combinations of sentences (even if we only use or encounter a relatively small portion of them) (Strawson, 1976a, p. 110). Therefore, Strawson endorses *the Principle of Compositionality* as a foundational tenet of semantic theorising: a theory of meaning should explain both the meanings of individual words and how these meanings combine to form sentences. Essentially, the meaning of a sentence is determined by its constituent expressions, and each expression contributes systematically to the meaning of the sentence.<sup>120</sup> Strawson first appealed to the principle of compositionality under the guise of what is now called *the Generality Constraint*, which he introduced in the third chapter of *Individuals* (1959): in terms on linguistic understanding, it holds that understanding a simple subject-predicate sentence like ‘*Fa*’ requires distinct abilities: understanding ‘*a*’ and understanding ‘*F*’. Further, these abilities must be in principle applicable to other sentences involving ‘*a*’ and ‘*F*’.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Cf: “[...] it seems reasonable to allow, as essential to any developed language in which empirical statements are made, not merely this function of indicating occasions for the application of terms, but the function of indicating particular individuals, particular items, to which general terms are applied” (Strawson, 1986d, p. 155)

<sup>120</sup> Cf: “Any account we give of meaning in general [...] must square with the account we give of what it is for particular expressions to have particular meanings; and we must acknowledge, as two complementary truths, first, that the meaning of a sentence in general depends, in some systematic way, on the meanings of the words that make it up and, second, that for a word to have a particular meaning is a matter of its making a particular systematic contribution to the meanings of the sentences in which it occurs” (Strawson, 1970b, p. 171). See also:

“Grammatical structure, then, as well as the senses of individual words, is determinant of the sense or semantic interpretation of sentences” (Strawson, 1972, p. 132).

<sup>121</sup> Strawson formulated this constraint as essential for linguistic understanding. Nowadays, however, it is more often taken as a necessary condition for the ability to entertain thoughts and as such it is implicit in many arguments for the compositionality of language and thought (Hale et al., 2017).

On the whole, Strawson's commitment to the representational nature of language and thought is grounded in his metaphysical realism (see Glouberman, 1975), which he considers to be the metaphysics "of all sensible men" (Strawson, 2005, p. xii), for it is "the unarticulated metaphysics of the common man, as it is of the common natural scientist as well; and, in a suitably refined form, it is also the metaphysics of the reasonable metaphysician" (Strawson, 1998m, pp. 196–197). It is also because of this reason that he continually argued against semantic antirealism, which holds that the truth of statements depends on certain criteria for their verifiability or knowability,<sup>122</sup> rather than in their relation to an objective reality, contending that it is an unbelievable and unsupported form of revisionary metaphysics (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 340; see also Strawson, 1976c, 1976a, 1987c, 1994d, 1998m; Szubka, 1998; Wright, 1979): "The conception of verification-transcendent truth conditions [...] is an essential part of a general view of the world which is in no way contrary to reason and to which we are in any case inescapably committed" (Strawson, 1976c, p. 123).<sup>123</sup>

Many statements are understandable even if speakers cannot state the conditions for their assertibility nor for their truth (think, for example, of moral statements). Recognising that assertibility-conditions for a particular statement are indetermined presupposes understanding what it would take for them to be determined, which is as difficult as knowing what would make the statement true. Yet this is all what Strawson claims is needed to understand a statement (Strawson, 1987c, p. 417). In short, although our notions of truth, assertion and fact find application in our basic empirical sentences and the propositions they express, this does not

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<sup>122</sup> Cf: "*Criteria*, in something like Wittgenstein's sense, might be supposed to be just such conditions. They are supposed, traditionally, to be such that their satisfaction is a priori, or conventionally, or definitionally, linked to justified belief in the statement for which they are criteria (i.e. to provide necessarily good grounds for asserting it), while they are simultaneously held to fall short of being truth-conditions in that their satisfaction leaves the relevant statement still defeasible" (Strawson, 1987c, p. 416, original emphasis).

<sup>123</sup> Strawson, however, makes sure to clarify that antirealism is a more sophisticated theory than simple verificationism: "Of course the doctrine is to be sharply distinguished from old-style verificationism, which would simply deny meaning to statements which failed to satisfy the (variously glossed) condition of verifiability; and which ran into the familiar difficulty of facing a choice between implausible reductions, preposterous denials of significance or simple vacuity" (1987c, p. 416).

mean that they can be perfectly worked out for the whole range of declarative sentences. Regardless, if we take the unproblematic cases as the basic model for the relation between truth and meaning, our intuitive realist approach can be expanded in analogous ways to include more complex statements (Strawson, 1976a, p. 113). For as Strawson gently reassures us: “we are investigating foundations; and it is enough if the beginnings are clear and distinct” (Strawson, 1961b, p. 69).

### **Meaning and Truth: Semantics within the Communicative-Intention Framework**

With this in mind, the other primary notion at the foundation of a theory of meaning for Strawson is that of *communicative intention*: “an intention such that (arguably) its recognition by the addressee is a necessary and sufficient condition for its fulfilment” (Recanati, 2004, p. 54). Such an intention is therefore analytically prior to the concept of truth, at least regarding meaning.<sup>124</sup> Strawson’s argument (extremely simplified) is that the notion of *saying something true* itself presupposes the notions of assertion and belief: to evaluate the truth of a statement we first need to arrive at the determination of its content, but to get here we need to make reference to the notion of assertion (as the uttering of a sentence with the wholly overt intention of getting an audience to entertain a certain content) or at least to the notion of belief (as the uttering of a sentence with the same content as a certain belief) (Strawson, 1970b, p. 181).<sup>125</sup> In more contemporary terms, Soames (in full Strawsonian fashion) argues that “[b]ecause propositions are conceptually prior to truth, truth cannot be something from which propositions are derived” (2022, p. 127). Therefore “meaning, together with truth, has to be

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<sup>124</sup> Cf: “the centrality of the notion of fully overt communication intention to any general understanding of the notion of linguistic meaning remains indisputable, hence the failure of all inevitably self-frustrating attempts to expel all considerations dismissed as merely ‘pragmatic’ from the sacred area of semantic theory” (Strawson, 2011a, p. 239).

<sup>125</sup> Soames shares the same scepticism regarding Davidsonian theories of meaning: “The fact that pursuing this strategy for four decades has resulted in nothing but failure is good reason to believe that the justificatory problem can’t be solved. Davidsonian theories of truth conditions can’t be theories of meaning, because the semantic information they provide is too impoverished” (2010, p. 41).

grounded in a relation between sentences and the cognitive roles and communicative purposes of speakers and hearers” (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 340).

In that vein, Strawson adopts (and adapts) a Gricean view of speaker’s meaning<sup>126</sup> as grounded in communicative-intention and consequently urges us to place the theory of meaning in a larger context of human interaction.<sup>127</sup> Such concern for our ordinary notion of meaning as rooted in communication stands in contrast to the traditional Davidsonian/Montagovian approach in formal semantics that elucidates the concept of meaning through the concept of truth and hence proposes semantics as (fundamentally) a truth theory.<sup>128</sup> Notwithstanding, Strawson is wary about reducing the realm of semantics to the realm of psychology, so he concludes that:

Of our actual working concepts of the semantic on the one hand, and the psychological (and social) on the other, it may well seem preferable to settle for the notion of mutual

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<sup>126</sup> Grice distinguishes between the conventional meaning of a sentence and the potentially limitless meanings a speaker might convey through it. The term ‘speaker meaning’ is interpreted as the intended semantic content of an uttered sentence. Grice referred to it as ‘occasion-meaning’ and to the stable meaning of a sentence as ‘applied timeless meaning’ (P. Grice, 1989, p. 119). Grice’s concept of conventional meaning relies on the idea of having a procedure in one’s repertoire, which roughly means being inclined to perform the procedure in certain situations. An utterance type *u* has a specific meaning *p* for a group if many members of the group use *u* to mean *p*, and this usage is conventional, that is, assuming that at least some other members of the group also use this procedure (H. P. Grice, 1957, p. 127). Cf: “What makes our decisions, for a word already in use, non-arbitrary, is this: that our normal purpose will be defeated if the comparison implicit in the use of the word is too unnatural, if the similarity is too tenuous” (Strawson, 1952, p. 6).

<sup>127</sup> Such a view of meaning is echoed in Stalnaker (2014): “The main reason it is important that the output of our semantic theory be a proposition, and not just a truth-value, is (as I have argued) that our semantics is supposed to be a part of a more general theory of communication. Our general background story says that language is a device for conveying information” (p. 23) and even in the work of a noted Davidsonian like Ludwig, who warns us that “[...] regimentation in a familiar notation can distort logicosemantic [sic] form, and [therefore] placing the project in the context of a comprehensive semantic theory for the language can provide a correction” (2013, p. 37).

<sup>128</sup> This type of semantic theory attempts to replace our ordinary concept of meaning with a Quinean notion of stimulus meaning, our common-sense notion of reference with a Tarskian concept of extension, and our intuitive concept of truth with Tarski-truth, or truth as satisfaction. These Tarskian concepts, characterized by their disquotational nature, can be defined through entirely formal, recursive definitions without relying on ordinary semantic or psychological concepts (see Soames, 2009, p. 281).

interconnection and abandon the seductive idea of the reducibility of the former to the latter (Strawson, 1990b, p. 180)<sup>129</sup>

As a result, the task of semantics has to be conducted hand in hand with that of pragmatics, and the concept of ‘meaning’ is to be elucidated or analysed from (or in relation with) our communicative practices.<sup>130</sup> In short, we “cannot hope to understand language as a theorist hopes to understand it unless we understand speech. We cannot hope to understand speech unless we take account of the aim of communication (Strawson, 1997b, p. 231).

### **Realistic Explanations: Semantics as a Theory of Understanding**

The notion of tacit knowledge (Evans, 1981) as the implicit semantic competence of speakers that facilitates their ability to communicate effectively without needing an explicit understanding of all semantic and syntactic details of their language is central not only to Strawson’s idea of semantics (Strawson, 1974c, p. 222) but to his conception of philosophy in general (1992).<sup>131</sup> As a result, his picture of metaphysics as endowed with the task of developing a grammar for thought—of uncovering the network of interconnections that constitutes the conceptual scheme that makes our experience of reality possible—is built over the double assumption that (1) human beings are in possession of an intricate conceptual system of which they are not consciously aware but is nonetheless manifested in their ordinary transactions with the world; and (2) that such system is recoverable by means of linguistic and philosophical-

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<sup>129</sup> See also: “Moreover the position seems to lead to paradox: if speech is to express thought but thought only emerges in the interpretation of speech, it is hard to see how either thought or speech is possible” (Strawson, 1975a, p. 1383).

<sup>130</sup> Cf: “Valuable philosophical insights can be gained by establishing conceptual connections which do not fall short of, because they do not aim at, reduction; and any systematic account of a problem-area which accurately delineates such connections can properly be called an analysis of it” (Strawson, 1989, p. 163).

<sup>131</sup> Cf: “Evans proposed to gloss this notion of tacit knowledge (of the axioms of the theory) in terms of the language-master’s ‘dispositions to judge correctly the truth-conditions of novel sentences in the language’” (Strawson, 1987c, p. 415). See also: “We should not expect of the fluent and correct speaker of a language, just because he is one, that he can state the theory of his practice” (Strawson, 1972, p. 131).

conceptual elucidation. Given that this project of philosophical clarification is in itself a task of self-discovery or self-knowledge, the personal-level descriptions through which we can access and characterise our conceptual system become indispensable and as such cannot be reduced nor replaced by the sub personal-level descriptions of modern scientific practice. Which is not to say, of course, that these reductions do not have their own purpose and function.<sup>132</sup>

It is for this reason that, for Strawson, a theory of meaning has to be conceived as a theory of understanding: *a model of what a competent speaker of a language knows when she understands an expression of that language* (Dummett, 1978, p. 217).<sup>133</sup> The data for the theory, just like the data collected by the Ordinary Language analyst for the purpose of her philosophical elucidations, is constituted by the judgments of native speakers regarding their own language. Importantly, “the primary data is not ‘this is ungrammatical’ or ‘this can’t mean this’ but really ‘this sounds funny’ or ‘this is not an appropriate way to describe such-and-such a situation’” (Jacobson, 2018, p. 59). Such a theory must then articulate the implicit knowledge of axioms and rules of inference implicitly attributed to speakers, but, *pace* Dummett, for Strawson this needs not be a ‘full-blooded’ theory of understanding but merely a ‘moderate’

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<sup>132</sup> Cf: “Of the approach associated with Quine, which is broadly skeptical [sic] about a range of intuitive notions of meaning, Strawson has written in numerous places. Against it he makes the following points. First, the skepticism [sic] is grounded on arguments which claim that the meaning-notion cannot be adequately explained in certain preferred terms, say behavioral [sic] ones, but there is no reason to ground the semantic notions that way. Second, the notions can be validated by the plain agreement between people in the judgments they make. Third, the notions are indispensable to us as language users; thus, we simply cannot speak and think in the way we do without talking of meaning and sameness of meaning. And fourth, the notions are indispensable to the theoretical study of language and logic as well; thus logic cannot do without propositions” (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 340).

<sup>133</sup> Cf: “A theory of meaning must be, I have implied, a theory of understanding. It must not only show how the meanings of sentences are systematically determined by the meanings of constituent words and constructions. It must be able to show how we *understand* meanings as so determined. Understanding a sentence is knowledge of its truth conditions” (Strawson, 1976, p. 110) and “It seems at least plausible to hold that [the problem of semantics] must be solved by crediting us with (a) an implicit mastery (implicit in the sense of my original analogy with grammar) of a finite set of semantically significant constructions (general types of significant combination of linguistic elements) and (b) a grasp of a finite vocabulary of elements, which do have to be learned independently and individually; this mastery and this grasp being such that together they contain, and explain, the possibility of our limitless understanding” (Strawson, 1992, p. 98).

one.<sup>134</sup> In this sense, a modest theory of meaning for a language would provide theoretical representation of the practical ability that constitutes their linguistic competence to someone who already has the concepts in the language, without attempting to explaining these concepts themselves; whereas a full-blooded theory should also describe what it means for a speaker to possess the concepts expressed by the language (Beaney, 2013b, p. 670).

In other words, “[the] theory reveals the semantic machinery with which competence [of a language] works, but leaves undetermined the psychological form in which competence exists”(Foster, 1976, p. 2). Accordingly, Strawson would agree that:

our theoretical understanding of our grasp of the semantic-syntactic structure of sentences of a certain class may be assisted by the production of paraphrases, or more or less equivalent sentences, of a different grammatical structure, even when no claim that the latter make manifest the true or underlying structure of the former can be sustained (Strawson, 1974c, pp. 223–224).

Therefore, with the aim of semantic understanding, we can make use of paraphrases with different grammatical or syntactical structures, even if these paraphrases do not reveal the true or inherent structure of the original sentences.

### *Logical form*

Strawson’s notion of logical form plays a relevant role in his metasemantic view yet it differs importantly both from that of classical analysis and that of Davidsonian semantics. For Strawson, both classical analysis and Davidsonian semantics share a programme of regimentation:

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<sup>134</sup> Cf: “To say what a speaker knows is not of itself to give an account of what his knowing it in practice consists in, of how his knowledge is manifested in his use of the language” (Strawson, 1976c, p. 119).

a programme for reducing semantic structure in general to the structural forms so perspicuously displayed in standard logic; and this is sometimes thought of as revealing the true or deep logical forms of the natural language sentences—by a structural paraphrasing or recasting in the canonical forms (Strawson, 1992, p. 100)

The main difference between them lies at the purpose of such regimentation: whereas for the Logical Constructionists like Carnap and Quine, the analysis of logical form is aimed primarily at philosophical clarification and the construction of a more scientifically appropriate language (and is therefore sometimes conceived as a wholly creative, as opposed to interpretative or revelatory, enterprise), for the Davidsonian semanticist, regimentation purports to display a structure more amenable to the formal derivations of a semantic theory conceived as a theory of truth.

In contrast, Strawson thinks of logical form in two different but related ways: the first in connection to logic, and hence, to the study of the *logical powers* of a statement, “meaning by this the whole range of its possible logical relations (e.g., the whole range of parts it could play in valid inferences, etc.)” (Strawson, 1952, p. 50). In that sense, “[l]ogical form is not a property which statements have *on account of which* (or in virtue of which) they have certain formal powers. Their possession of a certain form *is* their possession of those powers (Strawson, 1952, p.

56).<sup>135</sup> Therefore, to capture the whole range of logical relations of an expression is to offer a picture of its logical form.<sup>136</sup>

The second conception of logical form, though intimately related to the one above, is more interested in preserving a structure that makes justice to our actual natural language processing, that is, to the way we actually understand our sentences:

We are to remember that the primary importance of the grammatical categories and their permitted orderings in the deep structures of a language lies in the fact that they provide the terms in which the underlying grammatical functions and relations of elements in sentence is can be defined—for the given language. And these functions and relations are functions and relations which any ordinary speaker of the language grasps implicitly in understanding the sentences he hears and produces (Strawson, 1972, p. 138)

In this regard, “a singular proposition is *par excellence* a paradigm of subject-predicate propositions because it represents the fundamental form of judgement” (Tse, 1998, p. 380). With this in mind, Strawson distinguishes between *grammatical role*, on the one hand, and *grammatical form*, on the other (Strawson, 1961b, p. 57). Two expressions might differ in grammatical form yet share their grammatical role, for example:

(a) Socrates is wise.

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<sup>135</sup> See, for example, Strawson’s notion of logical truth: “A statement is a truth of logic if it is true, and remains true under all reinterpretations of the components other than the logical particles, provided that, in any reinterpretation of propositional components (clauses), all those propositional identities which are represented in the original statement by typographically identical clauses are preserved in the reinterpretation, and in any reinterpretation of non-propositional components all those identities of sense and reference which are represented in the original statement by typographically identical predicate expressions and referring expressions are preserved in the reinterpretation” (Strawson, 1957b, p. 128). Furthermore, since (as we will see in the next section) Strawson believes that intensional notions are indispensable for a semantic theory, “[...] the logical relations determined by those forms are determined by meaning alone; and this is as much as to say that logical truth is determined by meaning alone. So the disputed notion of analyticity—understood as truth in virtue of meaning alone—together with the associated range of notions of intensional relations, such as that of necessary implication, is vindicated for the case of logical truth, logical implication, etc. (Strawson, 1982a, p. 159).

<sup>136</sup> Cf: “Deductive relations alone are revealed by form” (Strawson, 1982a, p. 159).

(b) Socrates has wisdom.

(c) Wisdom is a virtue.

Hence, although the expressions “is wise” and “has wisdom” do not have the same grammatical form, they play the same grammatical role (that of predicating a property) in (a) and (b) respectively. Moreover, although “Wisdom” in (c) is the same property predicated in (a) and (b), in (c) it plays the grammatical role of a referential expression and not of a predicative expression.<sup>137</sup>

For the interests of both logic and semantics, the identification of the *characteristic role* of an expression (Strawson, 1961b, p. 60) is an essential part of the characterisation of the logical form of the sentences in which it appears, and as such, it crucially involves the description of its semantic features, not only of its merely syntactic features.<sup>138</sup> A failure to capture all the elements of the characteristic role of an expression translates into a misconception of *the* logical form of a statement as a single, ultimate analysis, “as if a statement could never have more than one kind of formal power; as if statements could, in respect of their formal powers, be grouped in mutually exclusive classes, like animals at a zoo in respect of their species” (Strawson, 1952, p. 53). Hence, for the purposes of logic one might arrive at

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<sup>137</sup> Cf: “Thus the predicate-expression in a complete simple sentence both introduces and copulates a property. The syntactical variation between ‘Socrates has courage’ where the property is introduced by name and copulated by ‘has’ and ‘Socrates is courageous’, when the property is introduced by general term and copulated by ‘is’, is not more than that—a syntactical variation. We do not have to say that the resultant proposition is a curious compound of concrete and abstract object. We can say, instead, as above, that the identity of the proposition, as purely abstract object, is determined by, or the resultant of, the *identities* of the concrete individual and the abstract object, the property: This has the further consequence that quantification into predicate-position (more precisely, into general-term position) is just as securely objectual as quantification into subject-position” (Strawson, 1990a, pp. 176–177)

<sup>138</sup> Cf: “Suppose, then, there are intrinsic and general connections between types of element-meaning and potentialities of grammatical role in deep, or base, structure. In stating the principles of such connection, we should, obviously, be linking semantic and syntactic considerations” (Strawson, 1972, p. 138).

a particular analysis of logical form, whereas for the interest of natural language semantics one might identify a different, more suitable analysis.<sup>139</sup>

On this ground, Strawson would demand from our semantic theories at least a minimal degree of “plausibility, simplicity, realism” (ibid., 228). What he means by this is that our semantic models and explanations cannot do “forms of language apart” (p. 227), that is, they need to come from, and make justice to, our actual communicative practices: “to get a true explanation of grammar, it [is] necessary to establish clear or perspicuous links between the semantico-logical [sic] features of a given language on the one hand and its formal syntactical features on the other” (Strawson, 1995, p. 6).

With this end, semanticists need to pay special attention to natural language as it is and as we understand it, so that even if our theory of meaning cannot be a full-blooded psychological description of our linguistic capacity, it should nonetheless aim at providing the most plausible account in the sense of being the closest to our personal-level, common-sense understanding of our own language.<sup>140</sup>

Two brief but characteristic examples should suffice to illustrate the Strawsonian concern for *realistic* explanations in semantics: (a) his quarrel with Quine regarding *quantification*

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<sup>139</sup> Cf: “[W]e might reasonably say that the verbal form of a statement was (at least potentially) misleading as to its logical form in the following circumstances : (1) the sentence used to make it has a certain verbal pattern in common with a great many other sentences; (2) most, or a great number, of the statements made by the use of sentences having that verbal pattern in common, are analogous to one another in a certain formal respect; (3) the statement in question is not analogous to these statements in that formal respect. In practice, the notion of ‘verbal form being misleading as to logical form’ has been very much more widely and loosely used; and is associated with so many mistakes and incoherences [sic] that the phrase might well be discarded” (Strawson, 1952, p. 51).

<sup>140</sup> See, for example, McDowell: “[W]e are concerned with these states of knowledge, not as actually possessed by all competent speakers, but as such that someone who possessed them would be able to use them in order to arrive by inference at the knowledge about particular speech acts that a fluent hearer acquires by unreflective perception” (1977, p. 182). In more contemporary terms, Strawson is exhorting us to always pay attention to what Szabó calls ‘naïve semantics’ (2019, p. 253).

*into predicate position* (Strawson, 1974d), and (b) his discussion with Davidson on *the logical form of action-sentences* (Strawson, 1974c). I will address them briefly:

### *Quantification into predicate position*

Strawson's concern with realistic semantic explanations is yet another instance of his general criticism of the formalist project, which in this case aims to paraphrase the logical structure of natural language sentences through their regimentation into an "ideal" formal language such as first-order logic. This formal language is designed to eliminate syntactic ambiguities and to capture all the relevant logical and semantic features of a sentence's constituents: "Thus, giving a sentence's logical form with a regimented sentence comes down to producing a sentence whose semantic structure is presumed (a) to be well understood and (b) to be the same as that of the original" (Ludwig, 2013, p. 35).

Now, at the time of Strawson's writings, the prevailing view held that the legitimate framework for quantification was first-order logic.<sup>141</sup> This framework restricted quantification into subject position, excluding general terms in predicative position from being accessible to quantifiers. However, based on our ordinary speech forms, Strawson argued that general terms in predicative position should also be open to quantification, for we "can acknowledge quantification into predicate-position as a feature of the logical grammar of natural language as freely as we can acknowledge quantification into name- (or singular-subject)-position" (Strawson, 1974d, p. 71).<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> This would remain the standard view pretty much until the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>142</sup> Cf: "Referential position is the position primarily and fundamentally occupied by a term definitely identifying a spatio-temporal particular in a sentence coupling that term to another signifying a property-like or kind-like principle of grouping particulars. The particular-identifying term is the primary case of a definite singular term. The other term occupies predicative position. Second, referential position may be occupied by a term signifying a property-like or kind-like principle of grouping particulars provided that this term is itself coupled to another term which signifies a higher principle of grouping such principles of grouping. The first of these terms is then a secondary case of a definite singular term. The other term again occupies predicative position. Finally, the position occupied by a definite singular term of any kind may be

### *The logical form of action-sentences*

In a paper from 1967, “The Logical Form of Action Sentences” Davidson (1967a) put forth the proposal that ordinary *that-sentences* should be interpreted as having an existentially quantified event argument, thus likening them to indefinite noun phrases.<sup>143</sup> Although Davidson was not committed to the idea of an Ideal Language, at least for the present purposes his method of linguistic analysis was altogether not that different from the traditional approach to regimentation: “[t]o know the logical form of a sentence is to know, in the context of a comprehensive theory, the semantical roles of the significant features of the sentence” (Davidson, 1980, p. 146).<sup>144</sup> Strawson would argue against this perspective in contending that attributing tacit knowledge of predicate calculus to ordinary natural language speakers, when in most cases they appear to be unaware of it, while still demonstrating complete competence in using adverbs and ordinary action-sentences, is an overly far-fetched explanation for their linguistic abilities. In Strawson own words:

It seems indeed reasonable to credit the language-speaker with implicit mastery of principles of combination, of semantically significant constructions, in explaining his understanding of his sentences, even if he cannot readily articulate those principles. But it seems hardly realistic to credit him with implicit mastery both of the predicate calculus and of the transformation rules which license the paraphrase of the ordinary sentences into their Davidsonian replacements (Strawson, 1992, p. 103)<sup>145</sup>

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coherently yielded to a kind of term which does not characteristically have the identifying function of a definite singular term, and which is called an indefinite singular term” (Strawson, 1961b, p. 70).

<sup>143</sup> This also remained the standard view pretty much until the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>144</sup> An important difference, however, is his distinction between deriving logical form for the purposes of conceptual analysis, on the one hand, and for semantic theory, on the other. Davidson is interested in the latter task (Ludwig, 2013, p. 30).

<sup>145</sup> See also: “An account of speaker-understanding of the construction canonized in logic, the constructions with which Tarski’s own theory is concerned, would then presumably not constitute an overwhelming problem. Even Quine, holist as he is, seems prepared to offer such. As for other types of construction, it is very much an open question how useful the model provided by Tarski will prove. But, in principle at least a complete Davidsonian truth-theory for a language, if such existed, could thus be fleshed out into a

His argument then contends that the competence exhibited by ordinary language users in employing adverbial modifiers can be adequately accounted for without resorting to the assumption of a tacit knowledge of predicate calculus. Instead, Strawson would propose that their competence can be attributed to their familiarity with the conventional usage and meaning of linguistic expressions.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, Strawson would also be concerned with the ontological consequences of the Davidsonian analysis, for it suggests that if we accept action sentences as true, then we are implicitly committed to the existence of events, even without their explicit mention (Ludwig, 2013, p. 38).

As it becomes apparent in both of these debates, what Strawson is ultimately defending is another instance of that thesis that so thoroughly informs his understanding of natural language semantics and his suspicion of traditional formal semantics: “formalisation must pay tribute to the inferences recognised in non-regimented discourse rather than the other way around” (H.-J. Glock, 2022, p. 451).<sup>147</sup>

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systematic theory of language-understanding. Such a theory, however, to stand a chance of being true, must at least be credible (Strawson, 1975a, p. 1383).

<sup>146</sup> Cf: “I do not say the dependence claim [of natural language understanding on quantified logic] is actually incompatible with this fact; for the claimed dependence might be understood as dependence not on actual, but on potential, understanding of the paraphrase forms. But in that case the claim of dependence has become so rarefied that its power to support the explanation claim is fatally attenuated—or so it seems to me (Strawson, 1992, p. 105). See also: “Less germane to the central debate is Wright’s searching examination, in Essay 6, of the notion of ‘tacit’ or ‘implicit’ knowledge of a compositional theory of meaning such as that projected by Davidson. Evans proposed to gloss this notion of tacit knowledge (of the axioms of the theory) in terms of the language-master’s ‘dispositions to judge correctly the truth-conditions of novel sentences in the language’. But in view of the difference between the surface grammar of the sentences to which the language-learner is exposed and the regimented syntax characteristic of a truth-theory, a substantial explanatory gap seems to be left open. As Wright says: ‘if Evans’ account of the project is the right one, this a priori indifference to the *overt form* of many of the utterances which a novice speaker is able ‘creatively’ to understand is rather strange methodology’(p.234)” (Strawson, 1987c, p. 415).

<sup>147</sup> And so, in an uncharacteristic visceral attitude that betrays his undeniable sympathy for it, he explains Sommer’s view thus: “So linguists (theorists of grammar) on the one hand and psychologists (cognitive) on the other are cautioned: they should not be seduced by the almost universally exclusive acceptance of MPL [Modern Predicate Logic] among philosophers into whoring after MPL deep structures in syntax or in the psychological mechanisms of inference” (1982b, p. 787).

## Meaning Beyond Extension: Intensional semantics

As we saw above, Strawson contended that our everyday language usage supports the inclusion of general terms in quantificational statements (Strawson, 1971, pp. 65–66). This argument springs from, and at the same time lends support to, his general view about the indispensability of properties and other higher-order entities within our ordinary conceptual scheme, and in particular, for our ordinary notion of meaning (see Strawson, 1974d, 1983b, 1987a, 1997a). For Strawson, the relevant notion in this regard is that of *intension*<sup>148</sup> or *proposition*:

Whatever term we use for an item of this kind—and I am content with the old-fashioned ‘proposition’—the essential point is that such an item is not to be identified with an inscription or an utterance of a type of inscription or utterance: it is an intensional abstract entity, but nonetheless an item of a kind such as we constantly think of and refer to whenever we think of, or comment on, what someone has said (Strawson, 2000a, p. 194).

A proposition is then an abstract entity distinct from a particular utterance or inscription but also from a type of utterance or inscription. It is not “a curious compound of concrete and abstract object”<sup>149</sup> but a purely abstract object whose identity is determined by the identities of the concrete individual referred to and the abstract general property predicated of it<sup>150</sup> (Strawson, 1990a, pp. 176–177). In that sense, an intension consists of the propositional content expressed by statements made by particular linguistic utterances.<sup>151</sup> In the same vein,

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<sup>148</sup> Here the term ‘intension’ and its cognates are understood in opposition to ‘extension’: “The extension of an expression is what the expression stands for or what it applies to. By contrast, the intension of an expression is an aspect of what the expression means, standardly that aspect which determines its extension” (H.-J. Glock, 2022, p. 451).

<sup>149</sup> Cf: “there is no need to go as far as Russell sometimes did and declare the particular individual in question to be a constituent part of the proposition or to represent the latter as—in appropriate cases—an ordered couple of individual and property. These further steps, though perhaps permissible, can only be an embarrassment for those who prefer to think of propositions as purely abstract entities” (Strawson, 1986a, p. 93).

<sup>150</sup> Cf: “The primary sense of ‘y is predicated of x’ is ‘x is asserted to be non-relationally tied to y either as an instance of y or as characterised by y’ (Strawson, 1959, p. 171).

<sup>151</sup> Cf: “A proposition is defined as “the literal meaning of an indicative sentence” (1). It is also spoken of as either true or false (2). There are, however, countless indicative sentences which are unambiguous, i.e. which express one proposition (1); but which are, on different occasions, used to make different statements,

and to use contemporary terminology, for Strawson *the semantic value of a linguistic expression is an intension* conceived as its contribution to the content of a statement expressing a proposition.

Crucially, however, Strawson's countenance of intensions and other abstract entities does not entail an over-inflated ontology for *they are objects of thought alone* (Strawson, 1994b, p. 43):

In so far, then, as things other than spatiotemporal particulars qualify as objects they do so simply because our thought, our talk, confers upon them the limited and purely logical analogy with spatiotemporal particulars which I have just described. And now, surely, we are in a position to understand the nominalist prejudice, and to discount it—without flattering the fantasies of Platonism. If by accepting as entities, on this logical test, things other than spatiotemporal particulars, we were claiming for them any other, any further, likeness to such particular than the logical analogy itself contains, we should indeed be running into danger of committing the characteristic category-confusions of Platonist mythology (Strawson, 1961b, p. 74)

According to Strawson, this interpretation allows us to see past the nominalist's viewpoint without indulging in the abstract excesses of Platonism. Acknowledging non-spatiotemporal entities on the basis of this criterion avoids the Platonic error of ascribing to them any qualities beyond their logical analogy with tangible particulars, and therefore renders Strawson's ontology a form of common-sense realism or "demythologised Platonism" (Strawson, 1997a, p. 3).<sup>152</sup>

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some true and some false, i.e. which express many different propositions (2). Otherwise than by giving odd meanings to 'sentence' or 'ambiguous', the inconsistencies can be avoided only by dropping (1) or (2). Since the usage according to which a proposition can be either true or false, but not both, is a reputable one, it seems preferable to drop the definition" (Strawson, 1951, p. 265).

<sup>152</sup> Cf: "As an ontologist, therefore, we might call Strawson's attitude "relaxed realism". He endorses the reality of such entities and their properties—hence, the realism—without supposing that this requires some strong unification between the different levels of thing or property—hence the relaxedness" (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 335)

Moreover, the essential character of intensional notions with regards to our understanding of meaning arises not only from their indispensability in our descriptions of our linguistic practices<sup>153</sup> but from an even more fundamental fact regarding our cognitive constitution:

[...] the bare commonplace fact of *perceptual recognition* contains implicitly the thought of the abstract general thing, the concept or universal; and hence contains implicitly the capacity to distinguish in thought between the particular objects in nature which exemplify the general types or characters on the one hand and the general types of characters which they exemplify on the other and hence to *think* of the latter (objects not of perception but of thought alone) abstractly. Then theoretical recognition of concepts or universals as objects of thought alone would not appear as an explanatory hypothesis of dubious coherence but as the barest commonplace, as the mere acknowledgement of something implicit in our commonest and most evident experience or St(Strawson, 1985c, pp. 67–68)<sup>154</sup>

So, the fact that we can perceptually recognise objects presupposes an inherent understanding of abstract concepts or universals. This ability allows us to differentiate between specific objects and the general types or categories under which they fall, and as such it constitutes an evident and fundamental part of our everyday experience. Echoing Wittgenstein,<sup>155</sup> Strawson refers to this phenomenon as *seeing-as*: When we see an object, we see it as something, as

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<sup>153</sup> Cf: “the notions are indispensable to us as language users; thus, we simply cannot speak and think in the way we do without talking of meaning and sameness of meaning” (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 340).

<sup>154</sup> See also: “[...] the existence of the power, and of the exercise of the power, of recognizing particular things, including expression-utterances, as different instances of an identical type; but he is not saying that the identical type of which they are recognized as instances is an extra mysterious something in the world; for it is not in the world at all. It has no place, no date, no causal powers; it cannot be encountered in perception; only its instances, if any, can be so encountered. It is only in thought that it can be distinguished from its instances. So—if it exists at all—it is an object of thought alone” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 69) and “Certainly we normally apply, say, a descriptive general term or predicate to an observed natural object as a matter of course; but not for no reason at all. We call something “red” or “a car” because we *see it as* red or a car. In Part II of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein has much to say, though in a limited context, of the experience of *seeing as*; and many of the phrases he there uses strongly suggest that the bare commonplace fact of perception recognition contains implicitly the thought of the abstract general thing, the concept or type or universal, as exemplified in the particular case” (Strawson, 1983a, p. 123).

<sup>155</sup> See Strawson (1954, 1960a, 1970a).

belonging to this or that category of things, as possessing this or that property (“We see what we see as red or as a car”). Seeing something as a particular thing involves thinking of it in relation to other objects, whether currently perceived or not, “and what does ‘thinking of as internally related to’...mean here but ‘thinking of as falling under the same concept as, exemplifying the same universal as ...?’” (Strawson, 1985, p. 67). In fact, this recognitional capacity is what constitutes concept-possession: “to have a full grasp of [a concept], is at least to have a certain recognitional capacity, though it is normally more as well; e.g., to know something of its relation to other concepts, its place in a system of concepts” (Strawson, 1992, p. 325).

Consequently, denying the possibility of such recognition would undermine any effort to clarify our notion of meaning. Admitting this recognition implies that *we use and cannot help but use the idea of general types, which are repeatedly exemplified in different instances*—precisely the abstract entities that Strawson’s form of anti-reductionism argues we must acknowledge (Strawson, 1985c, p. 69).<sup>156</sup> Hence, Strawson concludes that:

If this very natural reaction is correct, if these claims are justified, then the supposedly suspect terminology of meanings, concepts, types, attributes, universals, and abstract objects generally; of propositions or thoughts (in Frege’s sense); of necessary or conceptual truths guaranteed by meaning alone—all this is in order as it stands, without need or possibility of reduction; and

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<sup>156</sup> This same natural fact, the indispensability of intensional notions in our basic conceptual scheme, grounds Strawson’s decades long argument in defence of the notion of analyticity against Quinean revisionism (see (H. P. Grice & Strawson, 1956; Strawson, 1967c, 1985c): “Why should there be any limitations at all on admissible combinations of beliefs—or of accepted sentences? The natural answer is: because it is absolutely (logically or conceptually) *impossible* that certain propositions should be jointly true. But this is to say that their conjunction is necessarily false; or, in other words, that the negation of their conjunction is necessarily true. So either we must give up the proviso about preserving consistency or we must accept necessary truth as a distinctive kind of truth. But to give up the proviso is to abandon rationality altogether” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 73). See also: “To rule out any appeal to senses or meanings on the ground that they fail [the nominalist requirements] is not only to beg the question in favour of the latter; it also flies in the face of the common procedures of human beings engaged in critical discussion of even moderate sophistication” (Strawson, 1994b, p. 30)

the free use we appear to make of the apparatus of reference to such abstract entities is a natural and legitimate reflection of the fact (Strawson, 1985c, p. 74)<sup>157</sup>

In short, our ability to perceptually recognize objects assumes a tacit understanding of abstract concepts, allowing us to differentiate between particulars and universals. This capacity is essential to our everyday experience and as such it justifies, in fact, it entails, the acknowledgment of intensional notions in our understanding of meaning.<sup>158</sup>

### **Strawsonian Grammar**

Perhaps the most distinctive approach to semantic theorising from Strawson is his “research in non-empirical linguistics”, a programme that calls “for an unexampled combination of linguistic knowledge, philosophical insight, logical expertise, industry, and perseverance” (Strawson, 1992, p. 108) and whose goal is the production of a *perspicuous grammar*. This research programme constitutes a method for developing a grammar *a priori*, intended to reveal the structure of actual languages based on the fundamental categories of human thought.

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<sup>157</sup> Strawson believes that some sort of dialogue and paraphrase between the naturalist or antireductionist, on the one hand, and the reductionist or nominalist, on the other, is possible for abstract notions regarding the areas of morality and perception; nonetheless, he is sceptical about the prospect of a reconciling these two approaches when it comes to the matter of meaning, language and thought (see H.-J. Glock, 2022, p. 445; Strawson, 1985c, pp. 94–95): “On the one hand there is an acute sense, sharpened by recent work in linguistics, of language as structured: of the meanings of all the sentence is of our language as determined by the composition in a systematically describable way. On the other hand there is a profound reluctance to invoke, in the explanation either meaning or of understanding, any notions but those which manifestly relate only to what is alone held to be scientifically reputable, that is to say, to the physical—which, in its grosser forms at least, means the publicly observable. The reconciliation of these two entities has not proved easy and maybe impossible” (Strawson, 1975a, p. 1383). In spite of this, “in the presumably scientific field of linguistics, theorists are active in producing suggestions about the structure of syntactic and, more relevantly, of semantic theories, which point to one ironical possibility: that the intensions another suspicious characters so sternly deported from the territories of the *language of science* may reappear within its boundaries flourishing visas issued in the name of the *science of language*” (Strawson, 1967c, p. 219, original emphasis).

<sup>158</sup> Cf: “Few things are more implausible than the idea that we can be rapidly forced into a wholesale revision either of our metaphysics or of our logic by a dogmatic interpretation of the observation, in itself irreproachable, that our understanding of a language is manifested only in our use of it” (Strawson, 1976c, p. 124).

First proposed in 1972, it both takes inspiration from the remarkable developments in generative grammar of the time and offers an alternative (and corrective) to the syntactic research championed by Chomsky (1965). Most notably, it represents a (largely ignored) first dive into the branch of linguistics (and metaphysics) now known as Natural Language Ontology (Moltmann, 2013, 2017, 2019) and whose foundational text is considered to be Bach's paper "Natural Language Metaphysics"(1986). As such, it shares with this field of research an attempt to answer, among other questions, what underlying assumptions about the constitution and structure of the world, as perceived by humans, are embedded in human languages? How are these assumptions integrated into language? And which of them are universally shared across all human languages? Strawson does not offer definite answers to the questions, but instead proposes a way of arriving at some of their answers via the elucidation of a perspicuous grammar.

The production of such grammar involves identifying language types and deducing the grammatical requirements that the rules of any language of that type must meet to construct sentences with the intended meaning. These requirements constitute the essential grammar of the language-type. A language-type is therefore defined by (a) specifying the semantic types of elements (words) it contains and (b) by specifying the significant combinations of these elements to form sentences. From this specification (stage one) and the deduction of its essential grammar (stage two), a perspicuous grammar for a model language can be designed in two further stages: first, by selecting a variable grammar that satisfies the essential grammar of that type and, finally, by setting out the rules of the chosen grammar (Peterson, 2005, p. 686)

Hence, a Strawsonian grammar ensures a well-understood connection between syntactic features and semantic interpretation by specifying a language type and deducing a priori its essential grammatical requirements. Crucially, defining the language type requires the

development of a special metavocabulary: (a) an ontological vocabulary to name the types of things that are referred to in the language; (b) a semantic vocabulary to name semantic types of elements: (1) proper names for continuant particulars; (2) predicates for general characters and relations; and (3) deictic elements; (c) a functional vocabulary to name types of combinations of semantic elements; and (d) a formal vocabulary to name the formal devices employed in the theory (Strawson, 1972, p. 144). In this regard, a fully developed clear grammar will reflect both universal features of human language and characteristics of specific natural language groups (Ross, 1974, pp. 388–389).<sup>159</sup>

Evidently, the formal means or devices used to meet this general requirement vary greatly between languages, which is why grammars differ so widely. However, if we conceive of the specific syntactical arrangements of a particular language as ways of meeting its semantically based requirements (which are generally similar across human languages), we can claim to have uncovered, at least in part, the explanatory foundations of its grammar. (Strawson, 1995, p. 6)

To this end, Strawson implicitly draws on Kant's idea of basic categories of human thought and forms of experience, suggesting that we should expect to find certain general types of semantic elements and combinations in any human language. As he writes:

That certain fundamental categories of thought and certain fundamental kinds of combination of types of semantic element are common to the members of a single language-speaking species is not an assumption that science needs to be ashamed of (Strawson, 1975a, p. 1383).<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> It is worth noting how Strawson's approach runs (somewhat) in the opposite direction of that of Stich (1972) whose method prescribes starting with one of the many descriptively adequate grammars of a given language, hypothesize that all of its features are universal, and then gradually refine them.

<sup>160</sup> See also: "We are all animals of the same species with fundamentally similar nervous and cerebral organisations and it is not to be suppose either that the most general categories for the organisation of human experience are widely different or, for correspondingly, that the basic logico-semantic types of element to be detected in human language is also very widely different either" (Strawson, 1972, p. 147).

On that basis, the grammar or syntax of such a language must be able to formally realise or represent these semantically significant combinations. This is what Strawson considers the essential requirement for the grammar of a language. (Strawson, 1995, p. 6).

The primary result of his investigation points towards the fundamental character of the subject-predicate distinction across human languages:

The simplest schema of an atomic sentence ( $Fx$ ) represents a certain fundamental operation of speech and thought: viz. the operation of identifying some individual item and characterising it in some general way; or, in other words, the operation of definite singular reference together with predication; or, in yet other words, the coupling of a definite singular term (e.g. a name) with a predicate-expression. I call this a fundamental operation since it is presupposed by the other logical operations of generalisation and sentence-composition (Strawson, 1994b, p. 22).

For this reason, particular-specifying expressions constitute the fundamental logical subjects, whereas subject-predicate propositions “are the fundamental cases of predication. They really are the model for the rest. For every other kind of subject-predicate proposition presupposes them and they presuppose no other kind of subject-predicate proposition” (Strawson, 1970d, p. 114). This in turn reflects an underlying essential distinction: *general characters* or predicates come in exclusiveness/involvement groups *vis-à-vis individual particulars*, whereas *individual particulars* do not come in exclusiveness/involvement groups *vis-à-vis general characters* (Strawson, 1970d, p. 112).

Although the project was never properly carried out by Strawson beyond its first suggestion in 1972 and a further development a couple of years later in his *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974f) it remains a unique and interesting approach to semantic

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theorising, one that is due to gain more prominence with the current trend of research into what Matti Eklund calls “alien structure” (Eklund, 2019b, 2019a, Forthcoming): an investigation into possible languages with structures thoroughly different from ours and its consequences for metaphysics.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have elucidated Strawson’s metasemantic commitments to provide a deeper understanding of his semantic project. In short, Strawson’s theory of meaning for natural language is grounded in the acknowledgment of the irreducible social character of language and its primary goal of communication, in consequence, it posits that (1) language arises from complex cognitive and social interactions; (2) that meaning is tied to the notion of truth-conditions within a metaphysical realist framework, yet the determination of semantic content cannot be detached from pragmatic considerations through; (3) as such, a theory of meaning cannot stop at the level of semantic interpretation: it is supposed to offer a theory of understanding, of what it means to know a language; and finally, (4) that given the irreducible character of intensional notions, a fruitful semantic theory is to make use of them at a fundamental level, even against our most nominalist scruples.

Moreover, Strawson’s unique proposal of non-empirical linguistics and its notion of a perspicuous grammar predates contemporary concerns in ontology and linguistics about the underlying assumptions embedded in human languages regarding the structure of reality and offers a novel approach in the study of the fundamental categories of human thought.

On the whole, by delineating these commitments we gain a comprehensive view of Strawson’s approach to natural language semantics that also sheds light on Strawson’s metaphilosophical view and the connection between his perspectives on logic, semantics, and his broader project of descriptive metaphysics.

## Chapter 4

### “Meaning and Context”

#### Strawson as a Proto-Contextualist

[T]here is some line to be drawn, in our studies of speech, between what falls within the bounds of linguistic meaning, strictly conceived, and what falls outside those bounds, though still within the broader domain of communicated meaning. It does not suppose a sharp continuous boundary; it allows for a certain area of indeterminacy, for cases which cannot be certainly located, at a given moment, on one side or the other of the border [...]; and perhaps it is a condition of understanding the growth and development of a language that such an area of indeterminacy should be allowed for. *Still, a border of some kind is supposed. Any linguist, who hopes that a systematic semantic theory of a language is possible, must have an interest in this supposal; so must any philosopher who aims, in his own way, at systematic comprehension of our habits of thought and speech.* The problem, of course, is to trace the border in the right place, along the lines that best accord with the demands of the system and the respect for facts (Strawson, 1997b, pp. 228–229, emphasis added).

[...] the notion of fully overt communication intention [is central] to any general understanding of the notion of linguistic meaning remains indisputable, hence the failure of all inevitably self-frustrating attempts to expel all considerations dismissed as merely ‘pragmatic’ from the sacred area of semantic theory (Strawson, 2011a, p. 239).

### Introduction

In this chapter, I propose a portrayal of Strawson as a proto-contextualist which elucidates his distinctive semantic views and offers insight into the theoretical foundations of contemporary contextualism. Moreover, I delve into his contributions to the realm of semantics and

pragmatics, presenting Strawson's conception of a border between the semantic and pragmatic aspects in linguistic communication, characterised by his innovative perspective on communicative presumptions and his three-level description of meaning, revealing how it situates semantics within the broader context of human communication. Through this exploration, I aim to deepen our understanding of Strawson's intellectual legacy and its implications for current debates in the philosophy of language.

I present three main claims in this chapter: (1) that Strawson held a conception of the semantic/pragmatic border which ultimately departs from the traditional, conventionalist view due to the role that contextual influence plays in semantic derivation; (2) that because of this departure from the traditional view, Strawson can be seen as a proto-contextualist; and (3) that his particular form of semantic contextualism is still committed to the development of a systematic semantics, and therefore, it is a moderate, not radical, form of contextualism. The outline for the chapter is this: I first offer a general characterisation contemporary semantic contextualism. Secondly, I present Strawson's semantic/pragmatic distinction and his general view on the nature of linguistic meaning. Finally, I put forward an argument to treat Strawson as a proto-contextualist, indicating how Strawson's view on the determination of semantic content fits with the general tenets of contextualism, and, in particular, with a moderate approach that still differs considerably from the orthodox literalist view. Again, my aim is to present Strawson's views in relation to contemporary contextualism without therefore adjudicating between either side on the debate.

## **The Contemporary Debate Around Context and Semantics**

Traditionally, the semantic-pragmatic distinction has been framed in three main ways, aligning it with distinctions between linguistic or grammatical meaning vs. use, truth-conditional vs. non-truth-conditional meaning, and context independence vs. context dependence (Börjesson,

2014, p. 2).<sup>161</sup> Strawson's conception cannot be properly placed within any of these frameworks, as it is informed by conceptual distinctions belonging to all three which roughly characterise in turn his three different types of meaning: linguistic, propositional, and conveyed or pragmatic. Broadly, in Strawson's view, linguistic meaning is different from truth-conditional content, and both are—though to a different degree—context dependent. For this reason, I propose here to consider Strawson as a proto-contextualist of a moderate sort.

In this regard, the contemporary debate between contextualism and non-contextualism in semantics delves into the intricate relationship between language, context, and communication. On the one hand, contextualism asserts that the semantic content of a sentence is not fully fixed by linguistic meaning and grammar but can vary depending on the context in which it is used. It thus emphasises the pivotal role of context in determining the truth conditions of sentences. On the other hand, non-contextualism contends that linguistic meaning remains relatively constant and is not significantly influenced by context; context primarily impacts the pragmatic aspects of language use, such as conveyed meaning or conversational implicatures. Considering Strawson's perspective on meaning and the intricate interplay between semantics and pragmatics, it is both reasonable and enlightening to identify connections between his ideas and a variant of contemporary contextualism, namely, moderate contextualism. I argue that by doing so, we not only do justice to Strawson's philosophical insights but also enrich the contextualist framework with his views.

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<sup>161</sup> However, for the last 15 years there has been an extensive debate regarding the demarcation of semantics from pragmatics. As we will see, semantic contextualism, minimalism and other views on the subject have emerged as a direct result of this debate. See, among others: (K. Bach, 1997; Borg, 2007, 2012; Börjesson, 2014; Heusinger & Turner, 2021; Horn, 2006; Kempson, 1986; King & Stanley, 2005; Preyer & Peter, 2007; Szabó, 2005).

According to a prevalent view in the philosophy of language, truth-conditional content can be ascribed to sentences independently of the speech act they are used to perform.<sup>162</sup> This perspective, known as 'literalism,' contrasts with 'contextualism,' which argues that speech acts are the primary carriers of content, and only within a specific speech act does a sentence express a clear truth-conditional content (Recanati, 2005b, p. 178).

Thus, from a literalist—or “conventionalist”<sup>163</sup>—perspective, semantics provides the foundation for pragmatics. In consequence, the output of semantics serves as the input for pragmatic processes, and there is a clear separation between the two domains. Importantly, pragmatic processes are conceived not to interfere with the process of semantic composition responsible for generating truth conditions (beyond indexical completion). This delineation underscores the idea that the meaning derived through semantics remains intact and unaffected by subsequent pragmatic considerations.

In opposition, the rationale behind contextualism—informed by a battery of empirical examples of context-sensitivity in natural languages—is expressed in the principle of *Methodological Contextualism*, which holds that we lack a priori knowledge about which expressions are context-sensitive and which are not. It therefore suggests that every expression could potentially be context-sensitive (Recanati, 1994). As a reaction to this principle—but still in acknowledgement of some minimal form of context-sensitivity—semantic literalism withdraws nowadays into a more comprehensive variety, *semantic minimalism*. In a minimalist framework, ‘what is said’, that is, truth-conditional content, deviates from the sentence’s conventional meaning, incorporating contextual elements *but only* when essential to complete

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<sup>162</sup> Berg (2002: 351) calls this the *Standard View of Semantics*.

<sup>163</sup> Conventionalism posits that the truth conditions of a sentence are determined by the language’s rules, independent of pragmatic factors (Recanati, 2005, p. 180)

a sentence's meaning and render it propositional (Recanati, 2004, p. 7).<sup>164</sup> This involves what Recanati calls the “linguistic direction principle”, which states that a context-dependent element is part of the semantic content of a sentence only if the sentence itself includes a grammatical cue that prompts its contextual interpretation (Recanati, 1993, p. 240).

Accordingly, Borg (2007, p. 521) characterises minimalism as committed to the conjunction of the following four claims: (i) the truth-evaluable content of declarative sentences is semantic content; (ii) semantic content for declarative sentences is entirely determined by syntactic structure and lexical content; (iii) natural languages have a restricted number of context-sensitive expressions (also called ‘the basic set’: expressions like ‘I’, ‘here’, ‘now’, etc.); and (iv) understanding semantic content does not require knowledge of the current speaker's intentions; it simply involves comprehending words rather than discerning the speaker's mind.

Essentially, the minimalist distrust of the contextualist way arises from the fact that pragmatic assessment is subject to revision based on evidence, since the best explanation for an interpretation can be overridden by new information. In this sense, the scope of contextual information that can potentially impact pragmatic interpretation is limitless, with any piece of information having the potential to be relevant and thus shape the interpretation. But if that is the case, and pragmatic factors to be considered in semantic interpretation are potentially infinite, then the possibility of a formal, systematic account of semantic derivation seems rather dim.

To this end, King and Stanley (2005, pp. 118–119) advocate for restricting pragmatic impact on truth-conditional content, introducing a distinction between *weak and strong pragmatic*

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<sup>164</sup> Minimalists argue that every well-formed sentence in natural language expresses a complete, though minimal, proposition that remains the same across all contexts.

*effects*. Weak effects involve contextual interpretation aligning with the standard meaning of a lexical item, while strong effects extend beyond this, introducing contextual influences that go beyond strictly lexico-syntactical prompts. In brief, “all truth-conditional context-dependence results from fixing the values of contextually sensitive elements in the real structure of natural language sentences” (Stanley, 2000, p. 392).<sup>165</sup>

A prime example attributed to the intervention of wide context and the production of strong pragmatic effects is the phenomenon known as *free enrichment* (Recanati, 2010) where the meaning of a predicate is shifted or adjusted according to contextual cues. For instance, the predicate “short” can be differently interpreted depending on the context: (a) “Markus is tall for his age” as opposed to (b) “Markus is tall for a basketball player.” Although “tall” is not considered an indexical item like “I”, “here” or “now”, it does not have the same meaning in (a) as it does in (b). To arrive at their distinct semantic values it seems that one needs to take into consideration contextual information that transcends mere grammatic or syntactic knowledge.

To be clear, the contextualist perspective also countenances a basic conventional structure: what Sperber and Wilson’s (1986) call *incomplete logical form*—in turn the object of study of what Kempson (1986) refers to as ‘linguistic semantics’—yet it further differs from semantic minimalism in its rejection of ‘propositionalism’, that is, the thesis that every grammatically correct declarative sentence conveys a proposition, a truth-apt content (K. Bach, 2006). Thus, in many cases, what linguistic semantics attributes to numerous sentences is not

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<sup>165</sup> Bach introduces a parallel distinction between *wide* and *narrow context*: wide context involves any contextually relevant information for ascertaining the speaker’s intention, while narrow context focuses on details specifically relevant to providing the semantic values of context-sensitive expressions. Importantly, wide context doesn’t directly determine anything relevant to semantics proper.

a full proposition but merely a *propositional radical* (K. Bach, 1997) or a *linguistically encoded meaning* (Carston, 2008).<sup>166</sup>

Thus, we find three types of content according to contextualism: (1) an incomplete, sub-propositional, conventional content which aligns with basic linguistic meaning; (2) a pragmatically enriched complete proposition that expresses the literal meaning of the speaker's utterance<sup>167</sup> which corresponds to truth-conditional content; and (3) additional content conveyed by the speaker through her utterance (Borg, 2012, p. 526).<sup>168</sup> As a result, interpreting utterances involves three levels of pragmatic reasoning: firstly, at the *pre-semantic stage*, discerning the intended sentence (resolving syntactic and/or semantic ambiguities); secondly, at the *semantic level*, assigning contextual values to indexical in order to determine the expressed proposition; and finally, at the *post-semantic level*,<sup>169</sup> deriving conversational implicatures, with the inference hinging on the identification of the expressed proposition (Recanati, 2010, p. 70). As we will see below, Strawson's understanding of semantic interpretation is quite similar.

On top of this, one can differentiate between primary pragmatic processes, such as modulation,<sup>170</sup> and secondary pragmatic processes, specifically implicatures, which do not

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<sup>166</sup> In this regard, contextualism sides with Bach's *Radical Semantic Minimalism*<sup>166</sup> and Spencer and Wilson's *Relevance Theory*<sup>166</sup> as a theory positing that the linguistic content of a sentence forms a structured complex offering a framework for propositions to be asserted; assertions are then pragmatically elaborated to flesh out the skeletal structure provided by conventional meaning.

<sup>167</sup> Like Bach's *implicatures* (1994) or Sperber and Wilson's *explicatures* (1986).

<sup>168</sup> Such as Gricean implicatures.

<sup>169</sup> From his part, Levinson describes these first and last stages as 'presemantic' and 'postsemantic' pragmatics and identifies three levels at the semantics-pragmatics interface: sentence meaning (semantics proper), utterance-type meaning (defaults) and utterance-token meaning (produced by pragmatic inference) (Levinson, 2000).

<sup>170</sup> Modulation refers to pragmatic adjustments to a word's meaning that are not dictated by lexico-syntactical but still influence what we intuitively understand to be true in a statement, unlike conversational implicatures. Cf: "Modulation processes come in several varieties [Recanati (1993), (2004), Carston (1997)]: free enrichment, whereby, words are contextually understood in a more specific sense than the sense they possess in virtue of the conventions of the language; loosening, whereby words are contextually given a less specific sense than the conventional sense; and predicate transfer [Nunberg (1995)], whereby a general term comes to contribute a property distinct from, though characterizable in terms of, the property conventionally associated with the term (thus, in 'I am parked out back', the words 'parked out back' contribute the property  $\lambda x$  x's car is parked out back rather than the literally encoded property  $\lambda x$  x is parked out back) (Recanati, 2013, p. 4).

contribute to the explicit content of what is said because they occur after a proposition is already established (Recanati, 2004). In consequence, secondary pragmatic processes, occurring after the proposition is established, are inherently post-propositional. They require the consideration of a proposition  $p$  and operate by inferentially deriving an additional proposition,  $q$  (the implicature), based on the expression of  $p$ . For example, consider the following sentences:

- (1) “The Sibelius is my favourite concerto.”
- (2) “I used to read Kierkegaard when I was an undergrad.”
- (3) “He is French but he speaks English very well.”

In this regard, (1) is a case of modulation in which the term ‘Sibelius’, which (normally) designates Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, is used to refer not to an author but to his work. To claim that (1) is strictly speaking false because ‘Sibelius’ refers to a person and not to a violin concerto seems very unintuitive: to say “the Sibelius is my favourite concerto, but I am not talking about a concerto/piece of music” is not only infelicitous but contradictory. Similarly, (2) is a case of metonymy that can hardly be counted as a derivative or non-literal use of a sentence. In contrast, (3) exemplifies a classic conventional implicature, where the implication that French people are not very good at speaking English does not really take part of its truth-conditional content: that *he is French and he speaks English very well*.

On this basis, “[t]he properly semantic layer of interpretation corresponds to the identification of what is said—the proposition literally expressed.” (Recanati, 2010, p. 70). Therefore, contextualism relinquishes the requirement that what is said be always aligned with the literal meaning of the uttered sentence (Marchesan, 2018, p. 105).

In sum, when proponents of moderate contextualism reject the efficacy of a minimalist theory to fully explain what a sentence says on a given occasion, they emphasize the perceived

limitations of such an explanation: establishing a connection between a sentence and its possible statements through conventional or grammatical meaning alone will not do, *only considering other contextual factors, particularly pragmatic considerations, can get us closer to the goal of achieving a systematic semantics*. Crucially, once pragmatic aspects are accounted for, the real bearer of truth—namely, a statement, not a sentence—can be identified and thus the conditions for the truth of what was said on the occasion can be specified (Zapero, 2018, p. 14).

Crucially, there is also a more extreme form of contextualism, known as radical contextualism and represented by contemporary Wittgensteinians like Travis (2018), which ultimately rejects the possibility of a systematic theory of meaning altogether. I will argue later that while Strawson's views are entirely amenable to a contextualism reading, his word does not align with the more radical stance of contextualism.

With this general characterisation of semantic contextualism, I will now present an overview of Strawson's conception of semantic interpretation.

### **Strawson's Conception of Semantic Interpretation**

While acknowledging the importance of truth-conditional semantics as a starting point for a theory of meaning in natural language,<sup>171</sup> Strawson emphasizes that it is not sufficient on its own. For a comprehensive theory of meaning, one must also consider the role of context<sup>172</sup> in determining the meaning of expressions of a language. Moreover, his approach to natural

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<sup>171</sup> See: "to explain the meaning of a statement-making sentence [...] is to say under what conditions someone who used it would be making a true statement: and let us call this 'giving the rules of use' of the sentence" (Strawson, 1952, p. 211). Also: "A theory of meaning must be, I have implied, a theory of understanding. It must not only show how the meanings of sentences are systematically determined by the meanings of constituent words and constructions. It must be able to show how we *understand* meanings as so determined. Understanding a sentence is knowledge of its truth conditions" (Strawson, 1976, p. 110).

<sup>172</sup> By context, Strawson means "at least, the time, the place, the situation, the identity of the speaker, the subjects which form the immediate focus of interest, and the personal histories of both the speaker and those he is addressing" (Strawson, 1950, p. 19). Unfortunately, his concept of context was never fully defined or characterised, but it seems to correspond to our intuitive, ordinary notion.

language semantics can be seen as an attempt to expand the role of meaning beyond the confines of formal logic and its respective modelling work, therefore abandoning what is called the *Minimality Principle*: the only elements of *what is said* that depend on context are those requiring ‘saturation’, which involves context assigning values to expressions with free variables, such as indexicals. All other context-dependent aspects of utterance meaning come from purely pragmatic processes. These additional elements, known as implicatures, are external to what is explicitly said (Recanati, 2013, p. 59).

For instance, Strawson (1952) contends that the truth conditions of a conditional sentence like ‘*p* therefore *q*’ depend on context beyond the mere presence of indexical elements; in some contexts, for example, the temporal relation between *p* and *q* can be truth-conditionally relevant.<sup>173</sup> This is so because, according to him, truth-conditional content is linked not only to the sentence itself, but to the sentence as used in a particular speech act, so it is crucially affected by context.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Björnsson (2008, p. 202) characterises Strawson’s position as a form of *consequentialism*: “the view that conditionals conventionally imply that some ground-consequence relation holds between the proposition expressed by the if-clause and the proposition expressed by the main clause”. Consequentialism about conditionals stands in opposition to *materialism*, the view famously defended by Grice (H. P. Grice, 1978; P. Grice, 1989) which holds that “the meaning of an indicative conditional, ‘if *P*, *Q*’ is given by the truth-conditions of the material implication: the conditional is false if *P* is true and *Q* is false; otherwise it is true” (Björnsson, 2008, p. 202). Cf: “[I]t is precisely a feature of the conventional meaning of ‘if’ that it carries the consequentialist implication—which is just what the ordinary man naively, and correctly, thinks. That is to say, just as ‘*p*, therefore *q*’ or ‘*p*, so *q*’ (as Grice himself proclaims) conventionally implies the holding of a consequentialist relation between the asserted proposition *p* and the (hence also asserted) proposition *q*, so ‘if *p*, *q*’ conventionally implies the holding of the consequentialist relation between the unasserted, merely hypothesized, proposition *p* and the equally unasserted proposition *q*. Nothing could be plainer” (Strawson, 2011b, p. 215). Unfortunately, for matters of scope and relevance, I will not address the Grice-Strawson debate on the meaning of conditionals and other logical connectives (see Björnsson, 2008; H. P. Grice, 1975; P. Grice, 1989; Strawson, 1986c, 1990b, 2011b), for my point is not to argue for either analysis, but to show how, at a metasemantic level, Strawson conceived of the semantic/pragmatic division and the role of context in semantic determination.

<sup>174</sup> In this regard, Strawson had acknowledged Grice’s remarks about the nature of pragmatics when discussing the connection between logical devices and their equivalents in everyday language in 1952. Thus, in a footnote in *Introduction to Logical Theory*, he writes: “Someone will say these points are irrelevant to logic (are ‘merely pragmatic’). If to call them ‘irrelevant to logic’ is to say that they are not considered in formal systems, then this is a point I should not wish to dispute, but to emphasise. But to logic as concerned with the relations between general classes of statements occurring in ordinary use, with the general conditions under which such statements are correctly called ‘true’ or

In that regard, certain variable elements identified by Strawson as relevant for the determination of an utterance's truth-conditions, such as time orderings or causal relations in conditional statements (see Strawson, 1986c), are instead explained away as implicatures or other purely pragmatic phenomena by semantic minimalists. They argue that such an interpretation lends stability through variable contexts to what is considered by them the actual semantic content of an utterance.<sup>175</sup>

Notwithstanding, Strawson still endorses a distinction between *strict meaning* and the broader domain of *conveyed meaning*.<sup>176</sup> a distinction of radical importance between “what [is] actually asserted, and what [is] in one way or another additionally conveyed in the saying of what [is] said, whether or not such additions [are] conveyed by linguistic devices conventionally adapted to the purpose” (Strawson, 1997b, p. 228).<sup>177</sup> However, this division, like natural language itself, is not rigid, for it can—and should—allow for some uncertainty in classifying

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‘false’, these points are not irrelevant. Certainly a ‘pragmatic’ consideration, a general rule of linguistic conduct, may perhaps be seen to underline these points: the rule, namely, that one does not make the (logically) lesser, when one could truthfully (and with equal or greater linguistic economy) make the greater, claim. [...] The operation of this ‘pragmatic rule’ was first pointed out to me, in a different connection, by H.P. Grice” (1952, p. 179, footnote 1). Strawson, then, rightfully credits Grice with the perspective that numerous purported divergences in meaning between formal systems and ordinary language arise from “pragmatic” implications rather than “logical” ones (Neale, 1992, p. 520), and follows him in trying to identify and characterise contextual and communicative factors, rather than purely formal or based on deductive reasoning, as key contributors to perceived variations in meaning or interpretation.

<sup>175</sup> In the sense that they are not directly tied to truth-conditional content unless shown to arise from contextual completion. Cf: “To quote an example of Grice’s: one utters a sentence of the form ‘*p* therefore *q*’ *conventionally* implicates that the matter affirmed at *q* is a consequence of, or follows from, the matter affirmed at *p*. The implication is carried by the conventional linguistic meaning of ‘therefore’. But this implicature is not part of what is *said* in Grice’s favoured sense. What he said in that sense (effectively ‘both *p* and *q*’) is not made false by the failure of the implicated consequence-relation to hold. And the point is general: it holds for all implicatures, conventional and non-conventional. The truth value of what is *said*, in Grice’s sense, independent of the truth or falsity of what is implicated” (Strawson, 2011b, p. 210). Grice situates ‘what is said’ between constant, stable sentence-meaning and the variable, and thus *unstable*, speaker-meaning. The term ‘speaker meaning’ is interpreted as the intended semantic content of an uttered sentence. Grice referred to the former as ‘occasion-meaning’ and the latter as ‘applied timeless meaning’ (P. Grice, 1989, p. 119). Ultimately, for the traditional Gricean view, ‘what is said’ might deviate slightly, but never significantly, from the sentence’s conventional meaning.

<sup>176176</sup> Although some people seem to argue that he does not. See, for example Soames (2009) and Stanley (2008, 2012).

<sup>177</sup> This text first appeared in partial form in 1970 as “Phrase et Acte de Parole” (Strawson, 1970c). It was not translated into English and published in its full form until 1997.

certain cases. The theorist of language must grapple with the task of defining this border accurately, aligning it with our formal and systemic requirements while respecting empirical evidence.<sup>178</sup>

### *Strawson's Communicative Presumptions*

Before we get to this contrast, it will be illuminating here to call to mind Strawson's picture of cooperative conversation. As early as 1964, with the publication of "Identifying Reference and Truth-Values", Strawson identifies at least three principles of rational conversation: the *Principle of the Presumption of Ignorance*, the *Principle of the Presumption of Knowledge* (Strawson, 1964a, p. 76) and the *Principle of Relevance* (ibid, p. 92).<sup>179</sup>

Together, the Presumption of Ignorance and the Presumption of Knowledge amount to the assumption that the addressee is in possession of some common knowledge between her and the speaker, for instance, knowledge of the language they speak and the expressions they use, as well as some general background knowledge (Strawson, 1961b, p. 63);<sup>180</sup> however,

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<sup>178</sup> Cf: [T]here is some line to be drawn, in our studies of speech, between what falls within the bounds of linguistic meaning, strictly conceived, and what falls outside those bounds, though still within the broader domain of communicated meaning. It does not suppose a sharp continuous boundary; it allows for a certain area of indeterminacy, for cases which cannot be certainly located, at a given moment, on one side or the other of the border [...]; and perhaps it is a condition of understanding the growth and development of a language that such an area of indeterminacy should be allowed for. *Still, a border of some kind is supposed. Any linguist, who hopes that a systematic semantic theory of a language is possible, must have an interest in this supposal; so must any philosopher who aims, in his own way, at systematic comprehension of our habits of thought and speech.* The problem, of course, is to trace the border in the right place, along the lines that best accord with the demands of the system and the respect for facts (Strawson, 1997b, pp. 228–229, emphasis added).

<sup>179</sup> It is important to note here that Strawson conceives of these principles as *presumptions* and not as *maxims*, and as being at play in the determination of meaning in communication in general, not only in discerning implications. Thus, his view predates (with certain qualifications) Bach's approach: "Actually, these maxims are better thought of as presumptions, for it is on the presumption that the speaker is being truthful, relevantly informative, and otherwise appropriate that the hearer figures out what the speaker means. Note, however and contrary to popular opinion [...], that the maxims (or presumptions) do not apply only to implicature. Even when a speaker is being completely literal, meaning what she says and nothing else, the hearer reasons in essentially the same sort of way, although the reasoning is simpler, since he doesn't have to reinterpret the utterance" (Bach, 2005, 2006b).

<sup>180</sup> Although Strawson never fully characterises the contents of such knowledge, I presume it would not be too much to think of it as something akin to the contemporary notion of *common ground* (R. C. Stalnaker, 2002). According to this notion, common ground refers to the body of information, beliefs, and assumptions that are shared by participants in a conversation.

it also assumes that the main goal of rational conversation is the sharing of information, which means that the addressee is also lacking certain pieces of information to be imparted by the speaker, otherwise the conversation would fail to fulfil the main objective of communication.<sup>181</sup> In addition, the Presumption of Relevance assumes there is a certain topic or subject guiding the conversation, and so exhorts the participants in the conversation to identify it and stay within it.<sup>182</sup>

### *Strawson's Three-folded Picture of Meaning*

With this Strawsonian picture of communication in mind, I can now proceed to his characterisation of semantic interpretation. Strawson begins by setting a three-leveled distinction between “progressively richer senses of the phrase ‘the meaning of what was said’, as applied to an utterance made on some occasion” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 191). It is worth noting here (as it will become relevant later on) how the starting point for Strawson’s elucidation of semantic content is the *intuitive notion of “what is said”*. In the end, the goal of Strawson’s approach is to make evident how considerations of context (potentially) play a role in the determination of meaning in all three levels.

At the first level, what Strawson calls the *A-Level* or *linguistic meaning* (or *A-Meaning*), an ideal speaker *X* of a natural language *L* has “complete knowledge of *L*, i.e. a complete mastery of the semantics and syntax of *L*” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 192). Strawson further characterises this complete knowledge as “capable in principle of being articulated in an ideal grammar and dictionary, the latter listing every sense of every unitary expression of *L*” (Strawson, 1997b, p. 220). Such knowledge of meaning is what would make possible for *X* to translate expressions

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<sup>181</sup> It should be noted how Strawson’s conjoined Presumptions of Knowledge and Ignorance more or less constitute Grice’s Maxim of Quantity.

<sup>182</sup> Hence, Strawson’s presumptions of conversation parallel two out of the four Gricean Maxims, namely, Quality and Relation, yet they do not really address the question of Quantity nor that of Manner.

and sentences of  $L$  into another language  $L_\alpha$  of which he also masters its A-meaning (Strawson, 1973a, p. 192).

Already at this level, at least in some cases, extra-linguistic factors are to be taken into consideration in order to disambiguate a sentence and arrive at its intended interpretation. For example, with a sentence like “The bank is closed in the evenings”, one would first need to disambiguate it by identifying the polysemous expression ‘bank’ and settle for one of its lexical meanings, either “riverbank” or “financial bank” in order to characterise its truth conditions. This disambiguation process would require access to some extra-linguistic information, and therefore, it could be considered as affected by contextual considerations too (Strawson, 1973a, p. 192).<sup>183</sup>

It then comes another, more complex level, *B-meaning* or *linguistic-cum-referential meaning* which comprehends all the data for interpretation available at A-meaning plus “the import of all the demonstrative or deictic elements, if any, and the reference of all the particular-referring elements, if any, contained in  $S$  [where  $S$  is a sentence of  $L$ ]” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 193). In short, all the data provided by the process of “saturation” or indexical and referential completion. However, as we will see below, for Strawson the fulfilment of these blanks requires much more context than what the orthodox approach to semantics allows for.

Finally, we arrive at *C-meaning*. Crucially, the gap between B-meaning and C-meaning no longer involves linguistic or grammatical rules (1997b, p. 220). C-level includes all the

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<sup>183</sup> It is not clear whether Grice would accept this claim, but Strawson would do. Cf: “[A]lthough Grice characterised the level of what is said as ‘...closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) [the speaker] has uttered’ (Grice 1989, p. 25), he also recognised that for a sentence to express a determinate proposition at all, indexicals have to get fixed and ambiguities and references resolved. *Grice himself did not explicitly call the processes that lead to such specifications of meaning either semantic or pragmatic*. However, in the discussion of the two levels of meaning that followed, some authors have claimed that what is said—or at least a level of meaning very similar to it—actually IS the semantic content of an utterance (and as such is determined by a semantics component that does allow the consideration of contextual information after all), whereas others have argued that it is a level of meaning that has already gone beyond the purely semantically determined content (thus keeping to the traditional view of semantics as independent of contextual information)” (Börjesson, 2014, pp. 3-4, my emphasis).

information available at the B-level plus “a complete grasp of how what was said was to be taken and of all that was intended to be understood by it, together with the knowledge that this grasp is complete” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 194).<sup>184</sup> In short, all the available information (all the contextual cues) for the interpretation of an utterance.

It is crucial to grasp that Strawson’s levels of meaning are more accurately viewed as levels of contextual information or access to contextual cues. At the first level, understanding is limited to the grammatical content of a sentence with minimal contextual guidance. For example, imagine finding a note outside your home that says, “I will be back in an hour, bitch”. In a sense you do understand what it says, yet in another sense you do not. While you can grasp its literal linguistic meaning, you lack crucial information to interpret it fully—you do not know who “I” refers to or what is the starting point for “an hour”. Without this additional context (accessible only at B-level), your understanding remains incomplete.

Now, imagine that your neighbour informs you that your best friend came by half an hour ago and, not finding you home, left a note. With this new information, you can fill in some of the contextual gaps: you now know who “I” refers to and have a clearer sense of when they will be back. So, what happens at level C? At this level, you consider context that extends beyond literal meaning of words and identifying their referents. For instance, you recognise that “bitch” is not meant as an insult but as a (peculiar, yes) term of endearment, reflecting a personal joke between you and your friend. This layer of understanding is then not governed by linguistic rules; it is driven entirely by the specific pragmatic considerations. Moreover, in light of all the information available at the C-level, you can now clearly

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<sup>184</sup> It is unclear whether this grasp presupposes knowledge of conversational maxims in the Gricean sense, but it would be safe to assume it is informed at least by the communicative presumptions and some similar notion to that of the Gricean maxims.

differentiate between a literal and a non-literal reading of the sentence: your friend did not mean to insult, although they literally did.

The progress from A-meaning to C-meaning can thus look pretty linear; occasionally, albeit rarely, transitioning from A to B may essentially involve no change. This usually happens with regards to purely mathematical propositions or scientific laws that aim for a particular level of generality and context-independency (Strawson, 1973a, p. 194). In fact, “sometimes, the move from B to C may add nothing to our knowledge *except the knowledge that there is nothing to be added*” (idem, original emphasis). Nonetheless, the transition from B to C consistently involves, at a minimum, the confirmation of illocutionary force determining how the sentence should be interpreted (whether as an assertion, a question, a command, etc.).<sup>185</sup>

Briefly, we can summarise Strawson’s three-level view of meaning accordingly:

- **Three-Fold Dimension of Meaning for a language  $L$ :**

1. A-Meaning (Linguistic Meaning).
  - a. Speaker has mastery of syntax and (minimal) semantics.
  - b. Speaker possesses an ideal grammar and dictionary of  $L$ .
  - c. Speaker is capable of translating expressions of  $L$  into another language  $L_\alpha$  of which he also has A-meaning command.
2. B-Meaning (Linguistic-cum-Referential Meaning).

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<sup>185</sup> Cf: “If you say ‘He is very cautious’, intending what you say to be taken as praise and I, understanding the sense-B-meaning of what you say, nevertheless take it as intended as condemnation, then I have certainly not fully grasped the C-meaning of what you said; but my misunderstanding is not a linguistic misunderstanding” (Strawson, 1997b, p. 219) See also: “It seems to be implied, not that the use of linguistic devices for making illocutionary forces *explicit* results in the absorption of illocutionary force into locutionary meaning, but rather that force can never be absorbed into meaning, even when made explicit by the use of linguistic devices (Strawson, 1973a, p. 198, original emphasis)). The same point is argued for by Recanati in relation to Davidson: “As Davidson (1979) emphasized, the assertive force of an utterance cannot be encoded, so assertion must be fundamentally a matter of speakers meaning. [...] The type of speech act which a sentence is designed to perform (assertion vs order or question) is encoded through sentence mood and other indicators: what cannot be encoded is whether or not the speaker is actually performing the encoded speech act. That the speaker is asserting (if she is) is something that can only be determined by considering the context and the speaker’s likely intentions” (2018a, p. 128).

- a. Includes A-Meaning.
  - b. Incorporates demonstrative and deictic elements.
3. C-Meaning (Complete Meaning).
- a. Encompasses B-Meaning.
  - b. Knowledge of intended interpretation (understanding of how the utterance is to be taken).
  - c. Confirmation of illocutionary force (assertion, question, command).
  - d. Contains information conveyed beyond literal meaning (Roughly, something akin to Gricean implicatures).<sup>186</sup>

### *Strawson and “Locutionary Meaning”*

Keeping in mind Strawson’s three-level-picture of meaning, I am now going to characterise where Strawson draws the distinction between the notions of *grammatical* or *linguistic* or *conventional meaning*, that of *strict* or *propositional meaning* and finally the notion of *complete meaning* (which includes *conveyed meaning*)(Strawson, 1997b, p. 230). Although they start their investigation from similar conceptual grounds and are both guided by very compatible theoretical convictions, Strawson’s notion of strict meaning ultimately drifts from the literalist picture in making room for further pragmatic considerations that actually affect the semantic output beyond indexical completion. Thus, with the establishing of three different types of meaning as opposed to only two, it should be already noted that Strawson’s conception and identification of what I will call *semantic content* (see Ball, 2010) is more complex than what his critics contend.

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<sup>186</sup> Compare to Grice four notions, or senses, of meaning: “(1) the timeless meaning(s) of an utterance-type; (2) the applied timeless meaning of an utterance-type (i.e. with the lexical ambiguities resolved); (3) the occasion-meaning of an utterance-type (i.e. what the utterer meant given occasion by the expressions, or devices, belonging to the utterance-type in question); and (4) utterer’s occasion-meaning (i.e. roughly the message the utterer intended to convey to his audience)” (Strawson, 1990b, p. 179).

Strawson here follows a tradition in the philosophy of language that runs from Frege to Austin to Grice (and many others in between and after) which attempts to identify the “primary or essential bearers of truth-value” (Strawson, 1973a, pp. 202–203) and whose pivotal insight is that *locutionary meaning* is to be identified with *propositional content*, which in turn is recognised as the actual semantic content of a sentence (as used in a certain occasion) (ibid, 1973a, p. 206).<sup>187</sup>

As previously mentioned in relation to Strawson’s conversational presumptions, “[o]ne of the main purposes for which we use language is the purpose of stating facts about things and persons and events” (Strawson, 1950, p. 17, see also 1952, p. 5). In consequence, for Strawson, locutionary meaning is tightly connected to an utterance’s *constative aspect*, “the aspect associated with truth and falsity, with the dimension of correspondence with the facts” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 200). In other words, locutionary meaning is tied to the notion of truth-conditions. Hence, the semantic content of an expression is to be identified with the expression’s contribution to the proposition expressed by a sentence containing it, but, as we saw above, context exerts relevant influence in the determination of this content in all three-levels, not just the final one.

First, extra-linguistic factors are to be taken into consideration already at the A-level in order to disambiguate sentences that exhibit syntactic or lexical ambiguity. Thus, Strawson writes that:

As regards the disambiguation of a sentence by context at the level of A-meaning, this is clearly not in general a matter of convention. In so far such ambiguities are resolved by context independently of the further determination or B- or C-meaning, the

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<sup>187</sup> Duly, Strawson attributes a similar perspective to his fellow Ordinary Language philosophers Austin—expressed in his notion of *locutionary meaning*—and Grice—apparent in his notion of “what is said”—but ultimately makes use of Austin’s (1975) technical term instead of Grice’s to refer to his preferred conception of semantic content, although he also uses the expressions “locutionary content”, “propositional meaning or content”, and “what is said”.

resolution depends on a judgement of general relevance or plausibility rather than on the application of a rule (1997b, p. 218).

For instance, with a sentence like “The bank is closed in the evenings”, one would first need to disambiguate it by identifying the polysemous expression ‘bank’ and settle for one of its lexical meanings, either “riverbank” or “financial bank”, in order to characterise its truth conditions.<sup>188</sup> But such considerations are, in that sense, pre-linguistic or pre-grammatical. No rule of grammar guides us at this level.

In contrast, *the conventionalist approach would claim that semantic content (or ‘what is said’, or ‘locutionary meaning’, or ‘propositional content’) is to be identified (in Strawson’s terminology) with linguistic-cum-referential or sense-B-meaning*. In this regard, a disambiguated sentence as used in a particular occasion would contain, at most, a number of indexical elements that require contextual consideration for their determination (what Recanati calls ‘saturation’). Yet these “referential or deictic elements” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 193) would be members of a finite (and not very long) list of context-sensitive expressions whose saturation or fulfilment rules are dictated by grammatical meaning,<sup>189</sup> that is, by sense-A-meaning itself.

As a result, all contextual factors having an impact on B-sense-meaning—and hence, on truth-conditional content—are controlled and triggered by A-meaning: sentence meaning remains thereby stable throughout contexts of use; those contextual effects which are not prompted by grammar are read off as implicatures (or some other related notion) and therefore relegated to C-sense-meaning. In short, in order to arrive at the truth-conditions of a sentence we never need to look further than B-level: everything that we need to understand the

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<sup>188</sup> I take a further example from Ted Chiang’s short story *The Story of your Life*: “The rabbit is ready to eat.” Interpret “rabbit” to be the object of “eat,” and the sentence was an announcement that dinner would be served shortly. Interpret “rabbit” to be the subject of “eat,” and it was a hint, such as a young girl might give her mother so she’ll open a bag of Purina Bunny Chow. Two very different utterances; in fact, they were probably mutually exclusive within a single household. Yet either was a valid interpretation; only context could determine what the sentence meant” (2010, p. loc 2104).

<sup>189</sup> Or linguistic meaning, in Strawson’s terms.

propositional content of a sentence is available at B-level. As will become evident soon, Strawson's goal is to show that relevant contextual influence is not only limited to C-sense-meaning, but that it plays a considerable role too at the A and B levels of meaning.

In that interest, to locate semantic content we need to conceive it as “interpenetrating with, but not to be confused with, the general theory of linguistic meaning (sense *A*) and the general theory of communicated force, including illocutionary force (sense *C*)” (ibid, 1973a, p. 203).<sup>190</sup> One can see then that Strawson thinks about the nature of meaning, as it were, not only in a three folded vertical dimension—constituted by the A, B, and C-meanings—but as comprising a general theory of linguistic meaning, a general theory of communication, and a theory of semantic content. Ultimately, the determination of propositional content is to be obtained from this interplay, and our characterisation of it is to be informed both from our general theory of linguistic meaning (roughly, a generative syntax) and a general pragmatic theory.<sup>191</sup>

But how are we then to even begin to identify, or isolate, the locutionary content of a sentence, that is, the proposition it expresses? Strawson devices the following procedure: “Any proposition is *capable* of being expressed either in some clause or sentence which is *capable*, in all linguistic propriety, of following the phrase ‘it is true that’ or in some logical compound (e.g. a disjunction) of such clauses or sentences” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 203). To test the provision, consider, for example, the proposition expressed by the sentence: “Snow is white”. A way of expressing this proposition would then be: “*It is true* that snow is white”. The use of

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<sup>190</sup> Cf: “A proposition is defined as “the literal meaning of an indicative sentence” (1). It is also spoken of as either true or false (2). There are, however, countless indicative sentences which are unambiguous, i.e. which express one proposition (1); but which are, on different occasions, used to make different statements, some true and some false, i.e. which express many different propositions (2) Otherwise than by giving odd meanings to ‘sentence’ or ‘ambiguous’, the inconsistencies can be avoided only by dropping (1) or (2). Since the usage according to which a proposition can be either true or false, but not both, is a reputable one, it seems preferable to drop the definition” (Strawson, 1951, p. 265). For instance, a sentence like “We ride at dawn”, which is technically not ambiguous, can be used either to issue a command or to state a fact.

<sup>191</sup> Somewhat similarly, Soames (2008) proposes that semantic content is a least common denominator abstracted through rational reconstruction.

“It is true that” helps convey the proposition in a standard linguistic form—or in Strawson’s terminology, in its ‘normal form’.

In all instances, defining locutionary meaning involves describing a potential situation, a “possible state of affairs”. However, there is a basic distinction between situations where the occurrence or realization of that state of affairs would constitute a positive assessment and hence amount to truth (the constative cases), and situations where it happening or obtaining would have no bearing on its assessment (the imperative cases) (Strawson, 1973a, p. 215). However, as was noted regarding the C-level of meaning—which is the level at which force and intention are confirmed—if we abstract or remove both types of intentions (imperative as well as assertive) from consideration, we encounter a situation where there is no clear and compelling rationale for giving preference to a sentence’s capacity to function as a *true* statement over its potential to *effectively* convey a command (Strawson, 1961a, p. 5).

This posture challenges the conventional emphasis on conventional aspects of meaning in defining the locutionary content of a sentence by emphasising how the identification of the intended force of an utterance—itsself a matter of C-meaning—plays a relevant role in the correct characterisation of truth-conditional content. Hence, Strawson proposes “a wider notion which might not inaptly be called the “satisfaction-relation” or the “fulfilment-relation” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 200)<sup>192</sup> which encompasses both “directions of fit” (Anscombe, 1957) towards the facts.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Cf: “Christensen should at least recast his doctrine a little at this point, and substitute for the “truth-relation” which occupies such a central place in his theory a wider notion which might not inaptly be called the “satisfaction-relation” or the “fulfilment-relation”. For if the imperative intention is something extraneous to the linguistic meaning of the uttered words, so presumably is the assertive intention; but if we abstract from both types of intention, we seem to have no reason left for choosing the capacity of a sentence to be used as a true statement, rather than the capacity of a sentence to be used as a successful command, as that which the meaning of a sentence essentially is” (Strawson, 1961a, p. 4).

<sup>193</sup> Cf: “I think we can say that the content that p is the content of a given locutionary act A, if in performing that the speaker produced a sentence s, meaning—that is, not necessarily asserting, but expressing—by it that p. (Thus, just as one can perform different illocutionary acts with the same content—asserting, or demanding, for instance—so too, according to this suggestion, one can perform different locutionary acts

Such considerations only make more apparent why proceeding directly from the sense-A-meaning of a sentence to its truth-conditions can often be *either insufficient or excessive* when it comes to the characterisation of what is said. First, insufficient because to arrive at propositional content it is necessary to understand the significance of deictic and referring elements in the spoken sentences.<sup>194</sup> As Strawson notes:

[...] many ungrammatical sentences make sense, and so do many expressions which are not sentences at all, but which, if written, would be written between full stops; and context may confer upon a single word the force of a sentence [...] “Either there will be war or not” is a perfectly good sentence; but ‘p v ~’ is an ill-formed expression [...] (Strawson, 1952, p. 225).

Thus, in pointing out that some grammatically incorrect sentences and even non-sentential expressions can still convey full propositional meaning, Strawson is alluding to the phenomenon now characterised by Bach as *sentence nonliterality* (K. Bach, 2001), where ill-formed or incomplete sentences get fleshed out by broader contextual considerations into complete propositions.

Secondly, A-meaning can be excessive since, in very many cases, certain elements present at the level of linguistic meaning do not even enter into the proposition: expressions like ‘of course’, ‘fortunately’, ‘nevertheless’, etc. in a sentence like “Nevertheless snow is white”, although they appear at the A-level, really play no role in the discerning of the truth-conditions of such a sentence. Strawson proposes that to recognise which expressions that do

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with the same content.) So the view that what is said is the content of a locutionary act seems ultimately intelligible” (Ball, 2010, p. 196) Strawson would revisit this matter later on in “Austin and “Locutionary Meaning”” (1973a, p. 214): “we have the choice of regarding locutionary meanings as differentiated into broad classes of which the constative and the imperative are two [...]; or of regarding locutionary meanings as undifferentiated throughout [...]”. Although he does not explicitly endorse either of the two options, he seems to lean towards the latter one, so as to keep a unified notion of locutionary meaning (or semantic content) common to all illocutionary acts.

<sup>194</sup> As it will become evident by the end of this chapter, for Strawson, the realm of semantics involves both sense and reference.

not take part at the level of propositional content we should specify that only the elements of meaning that are essential to the main clause's proposition stay in place when we add the phrase "it is true that"; if moving these elements into the prefixed phrase results in infelicity, then those elements are essential to the clause's content (1973a, p. 204). Expressions like 'of course', 'therefore', 'nevertheless', 'fortunately', and 'unhappily' do not pass this test and therefore are not to be taken into consideration when analysing propositional content (idem).<sup>195</sup> For example, "'it is true that he is of course married' or 'it is true that he is nevertheless married' [are] at best infelicitous shots at 'It is of course true that he's married' or 'It is nevertheless true that he's married'" (Strawson, 1973a, p. 204).

In this respect, Strawson is following Frege and Grice in recognizing constructions that originate pragmatic implications beyond mere propositional content (Recanati, 2010, p. 63). These constructions, which include various linguistic elements like scalar particles, speaker-oriented adverbs, and others, do not influence the truth conditions of an expression. Therefore, even when transitioning from A to B addresses (some of) the limitations of sense-A-meaning, it does not rectify its redundancies (Strawson, 1997b, p. 227). It is for this reason, Strawson argues, that *grammatical or linguistic meaning cannot be identified with locutionary/propositional meaning*.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Note how Strawson had already drawn attention to this phenomenon in 1952: "The words 'but', 'although', 'nevertheless', for example, are not mere stylistic variants on 'and'. Their use implies at least that there is some element of contrast between the conjoined statements or attributes; and, sometimes, that the conjunction is unusual or surprising. But this kind of implication, though it must not be neglected when we are discussing the meanings of words, is not readily expressible in an entailment- or inconsistency-rule" (Strawson, 1952, p. 48). Frege makes a similar point in "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry" (2019).

<sup>196</sup> Hence, in his "Reply to Professor Patton" Strawson clearly states: "Does Patton take me to be committed to the principle that structural difference must always be reflected in difference in truth-conditions? I am committed to no such principle" (1976b, p. 8). This is what Perry has called the *Principle of Homomorphic Representation* (Perry, 1986)

### *Strawson's Notion of Implication*

To separate actual propositional meaning from (*pragmatically*) conveyed meaning, Strawson turns to his own concept of *implication* (Strawson, 1997b, p. 223) and distinguishes it into two broad kinds: *context-specific implication* and *general presumptive implication*.<sup>197</sup> The first form of implication—which Strawson also calls “highly context-dependent” (Strawson, 1990b, p. 181)—occurs when the speaker, while saying something, intends for it to be understood as carrying a specific implication, even though the words themselves typically or usually would not be taken to imply that. In other words, speaker X says S, implying q, and it is accurate to say that part of what he conveys with his words is the implication q. This kind of context-specific implication falls under C-meaning (and thus it cannot be fully discerned at the prior levels). Here is an example by Strawson:

A and B are discussing the relative intellectual endowments of their colleagues. A remarks to B on the high intelligence of a third colleague, C. B replies: if C were of a more angelic temperament, he wouldn't make some of the pronouncements he does make. Since what is at issue is intelligence, not moral character, the possession or lack of an *angelic* temperament seems quite irrelevant. But B, remembering the familiar adage about fools rushing in etc., immediately cottons on to the implicature, viz. that C is not really as bright as all that (Strawson, 2011b, p. 211).

The second form, presumptive implication, is “attributable not to the specific intentions of speakers or specific occasions, but to certain general presumptions relating to the point and purpose of discourse at large” (Strawson, 1997b, p. 223).<sup>198</sup> Examples of this type of

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<sup>197</sup> Notice that they do not fully correspond to Grice's own categories of 'conversational implicature' and 'conventional implicature' (H. P. Grice, 1975, pp. 24–31), rather, Strawson is proposing a further distinction within the realm of conversational implicature.

<sup>198</sup> Cf: “A standard illustration of this phenomenon is the speaker's use of the disjunctive form, ‘A or B’, in reply to a question, when the information-seeker's needs would obviously be more fully met had the speaker been in a position to give, and been willing to give, the more specific answer mentioning just one of the alternatives. So, assuming the speaker is conforming to the Cooperative Principle, it follows that he was not in that position, that although he had sufficient grounds for asserting their disjunction,

implication can be found in disjunctive responses to questions, like when someone is asked a question and, instead of providing a specific answer they respond with a more general, disjunctive statement such as “either today or tomorrow” when it is evident that a more precise response—such as “this evening”—would have been more informative. In such situations, it is generally assumed that the speaker is not in possession of knowledge about the specific details of the question (Strawson, 1997b, p. 223).<sup>199</sup>

In brief, the speaker’s choice of response implies their partial ignorance on that particular matter. Notwithstanding, when a speaker utters a sentence with just such a presumptive general implication—and there is nothing in the context to counter that implication—the speaker will likely lead the audience to believe that they hold the implication true, and this might even be the speaker’s intention. However, this does not mean that the speaker’s utterance also includes the specific meaning that such an implication holds (Strawson, 1997b, p. 224).<sup>200</sup>

Thus, the content that a certain presumptive general implication holds belongs to the C-level of meaning yet it is not itself part of the implication.<sup>201</sup> To put it bluntly: my conveying

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he didn’t know which of the two disjoined alternatives was correct. And so, in general, with other less than ideally specific answers like ‘Somewhere in the kitchen’ or ‘In one of the dining room cupboards’. Of course, in all such cases, there might be special circumstances which defeated the implication” (Strawson, 2011b, p. 211).

<sup>199</sup> Of course, there might be circumstances where this assumption is incorrect: if the speaker is purposefully being misleading or if they are playing a mystery-solving game, to name some.

<sup>200</sup> “[G]eneral presumptive implication does not merely by reason of its existence, win a place in the C-meaning of an utterance” (Strawson, 1997, p. 224). I take this to mean that general presumptive implications can be cancellable. “For example, ‘The President was strong enough to take a short walk today’ would normally be taken to imply at least that the President was not in perfectly robust health; ‘He signed the report voluntarily’ would normally be taken to imply that there was some reason to think that he acted under pressure” (Strawson, 1997b, p. 224). It seems to me that the qualification “normally” suggests that in non-normal cases, that is, when the circumstances of utterance defeat the implication, then the implied meaning is not conveyed and therefore, does not take part in the sense-C-meaning or complete meaning of an utterance.

<sup>201</sup> “Many statements are made in this way, against a background of assumption which is not called in question when their truth or falsity is discussed, and the calling in question of which prohibits discussion of their truth or falsity. Comment on the logical relations of statements occurs against the same background, at the same level of assumption, as discussion of their truth or falsity” (Strawson, 1952, p. 18).

or implicating something with my utterance does not include the further affirmation that I am conveying it, that is, I convey something by saying something else, not by saying that I convey something.<sup>202</sup> On the whole, complete meaning therefore comprises not only linguistic-cum-referential meaning but also the information conveyed, implicated or anyway transmitted, not *in* uttering linguistic meaning, but *by* uttering linguistic meaning. Yet, complete meaning leaves out the assertion, affirmation, or statement, of information which is, in a way, presupposed or assumed for rational conversation.<sup>203</sup>

The notion of implication is crucial not only to those interested in semantics and the theory of meaning but to philosophy itself, since some “features of [the] normal use [of an sentence] which philosophers have been prone to represent as integral to their meanings should rather be seen as generalized conversational implicatures of their use and thus as no part of their conventional meaning” (Strawson, 2011b, p. 212).

It is important to notice that Strawson’s remarks do not offer a complete characterisation of the concept of a proposition, neither a full framework for the classification of speech acts. Moreover, his provisos do not represent a practical method (a decision-procedure) for applying the partial categorisation offered, for they are intended “only as *indications* of the place which the relatively abstract notions of proposition and imperative might be held to occupy on one possible form of interpretation, and that is not the least plausible or attractive, of the notion of locutionary meaning” (Strawson, 1973a, p. 208).

To sum up, Strawson’s approach to natural language semantics presents a multi-layered framework for understanding meaning and communication. His distinction between linguistic meaning (A-meaning), referential meaning (B-meaning), and broad meaning (C-meaning)

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<sup>202</sup> Contrast: “Typically, when I assertively utter I am F [sic], I don’t assert that I am speaking or using language at all” (Recanati, 2004, p. 66).

<sup>203</sup> An implication in the Strawsonian sense, therefore, does not have the form “I imply that p” but simply “p”.

offers a nuanced perspective on the phenomenon of context-sensitivity in natural language, and his emphasis on the relevance of context for the three levels and the identification of locutionary meaning as the basis for propositional content challenges the orthodox assumptions about the structure of semantic content. In the next section I will argue that this picture of the semantic-pragmatic interplay strongly suggests Strawson's characterisation as a forerunner (moderate) contextualist.

### Strawson the Contextualist

Strawson's hesitations regarding formal semantics stem from a genuine apprehension about the dominance of predicate logic during his era: the concern that formal semanticists might excessively depend on established structures of logical calculi, originally designed for mathematical purposes and not yet adapted to fully grasp the complexity of natural language and its interplay with context (Strawson, 1952, p. 212): "the identity of truth-value bearers in [...] discourse is always contextually dependent: whatever that tense of the verb may be, the content of *what is said* depends on the time and place and, in general, the circumstances of utterance" (1998e, p. 215).

Therefore, Strawson contends that the *entailment-rules* of the formal semanticist must be augmented by the so called *referring-rules* of the communication-intention analyst in order to capture "the complete logical picture" (Behling, 1998, p. 113). These 'referring rules' provide the necessary "contextual requirement for the correct employment of an expression" (Strawson, 1952, p. 213), *filling the gap from linguistic meaning to proper semantic meaning or 'what is said'*. However, referring-rules cannot be subsumed under nor absorbed by entailment-rules (Strawson, 1952, pp. 224–225).<sup>204</sup> Contextual contribution cannot be so domesticated as to

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<sup>204</sup> Cf: "Examples of referring rules are: the word 'I' is correctly used by a speaker to refer to himself; the word 'you' is correctly used to refer to the person or persons whom the speaker is addressing; one of the correct uses of the present tense is for the description of states of affairs contemporaneous with the describing of them; the past tense is correctly used to indicate that the situation or event reported is temporarily prior to the report. Elucidation of some or all of the uses of such words as 'the', 'a', 'over there',

guarantee the stability, precision and systematicity of ordinary entailment-rules, that is, of semantic derivation as conceived from a literalist perspective.

Moreover, and going back to Strawson's trilevel meaning framework, the identification of B-meaning relative to context-sensitive expressions is not always specifically determined though a linguistic rule of use contained at A-level (like indexicals are taken to be) (1997b, p. 220). Take, for example, demonstrative terms.<sup>205</sup> Further, with regards to the step from B-meaning to C-meaning, which constitutes the application of secondary pragmatic processes and thus the inference and interpretation of implicatures, "there are no predefined e-rules that the audience consistently employs to gap, navigate, or even recognise the absence of such a gap" (Strawson, 1997b, p. 219). Regardless, as Strawson reminds us:

Except in the eyes of some logicians, addicted to philosophical dreaming about 'ideal languages', the dependence on linguistic or non-linguistic context of those elements of meaning which B adds to A is no imperfection, but a vitally important feature of linguistic communication; and no statement of the semantic rules of any natural language could be complete which did not contain rules governing such contextual dependence (1997b, p. 218).<sup>206</sup>

Consequently, if we conceive of semantics as concerned only with linguistic or sense-A-meaning, semantic derivation can only amount to the products of entailment-rules that, by definition, cannot reach further than the B-level of meaning, which, impoverished and

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'he', 'they', 'now', 'here', 'this', 'those' are elucidations of referring rules; so are some discussions—of the uses of the many tenses of verbs" (Strawson, 1952, p. 213). Thus, Strawson allows for—and even predates—something like a Kaplanian semantics. I say "something like" because, to begin with, Strawson's inclusion of 'the' and 'a' already differs from Kaplan's position.

<sup>205</sup> Of course, one can and should distinguish between *what S said* and *what S meant to say*, but cases of indetermination still arise even when what is said and what is meant to say coincide, e.g.: "Yes, him. No, not him, *him*".

<sup>206</sup> "That there are such linguistic rules, governing the use of indexical expressions, the tenses of verbs, personal pronouns, and the definite article, and that they are of central importance to the use and understanding of language, I have no doubt at all" (Strawson, 1998b, p. 224).

contained from pragmatic processes, is (in many cases) prevented from being fleshed out into full propositional content. In this regard, Strawson's argument for A-level indetermination reveals that *minimal semantic interpretation based on linguistic meaning alone can fail to establish reference, and hence the full content of a speech act.*

But this is not the only form semantic indeterminacy found at the A-level of meaning. Strawson writes that: "[...] it is a commonplace that words may naturally acquire or bear, in a context, *extended* or *figurative* senses, or simply different or *incorrect* senses, owing to the speaker's ignorance or illiteracy (cf. journalistic misuses of 'refute', 'flaunt', 'mitigate', etc.)" (ibid, p. 220). Critically, Strawson is not talking here of strictly metaphoric applications of language—for which he distinguishes a specific, "secondary" or "non-standard" use (1950, p. 13, see also 1964c, p. 149)—but of "normal" or "serious" uses of speech (1964c, p. 149) when certain determinations of meaning of particular words or linguistic constructions occur only after these words have been deployed in an specific context. Strawson calls this phenomenon "*semantic creativity*" (1997b, p. 222).

For instance, the non-polysemous predicate 'chocolate' in "The chocolate car smells nice" can either mean (a) *chocolate<sub>m</sub>* as material, meaning the car made of chocolate; or (b) *chocolate<sub>c</sub>* as colour, meaning the chocolate-coloured car.<sup>207</sup> Moreover, the sense of the word 'chocolate' itself can be specified as a noun, meaning a sweet, but also a drink, or an ingredient, etc. In addition, consider the slightly varied interpretations that arise depending on the object of the verb 'take'—for example, "take a break", "take a risk", "take a walk", "take a chance", "take my hand" or "take a stance". Each phrase shifts the meaning of 'take' in a particular way based on the context provided by its object.

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<sup>207</sup> In addition, the predicate 'chocolate' can be further interpreted as *chocolate<sub>s</sub>* as to mean a scent.

Similarly, quantified expressions are usually given a restricted or specified sense only in context, just as Strawson noticed as early as 1950 when describing the phenomenon of incomplete descriptions: “The table is covered with books”. It is quite certain that in any normal use of this sentence, the expression “the table” would be used to make a unique reference, i.e. to refer to some one table” (Strawson, 1950, p. 332). In the same manner, cases of parametric predicates like ‘tall’, ‘old’, ‘big’, as used in sentences like “Peter is tall” usually acquired a narrowed down sense relative to context and akin to “Markus is tall [for his age]”.<sup>208</sup>

With this in mind, Strawson suggests that “it might be held that sentences of this problematic sort are, not ambiguous, but intrinsically *indefinite* in sense; and the resolution of this indefiniteness cannot be assigned to a lower level than that of C-meaning” (1997b, p. 225), that is, by taking into consideration contextual and pragmatic factors that go well beyond the border established by semantic minimalism.

My suggestion is to consider the Strawsonian cases of semantic creativity as instances of *modulation*. Modulation is a ‘top-down’ or ‘free’ pragmatic process, which means that it is not initiated by an expression in the sentence but is driven by the context, solely for pragmatic purposes, in order to understand the speaker’s message. Therefore, according to Recanati, “[t]hrough the interaction between the context-independent meanings of our words and the particulars of the situation talked about, contextualised, modulated senses emerge, appropriate to the situation at hand” (2004, p. 131). Hence, it makes sense to cast such cases of semantic indefiniteness as examples of free pragmatic enrichment, which occurs when: (1) the interpretation is influenced by the context; (2) this influence is pertinent to truth conditions (unlike conversational implicatures); and (3) the contextual contribution is not

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<sup>208</sup> Bach calls such cases “implicatures” (K. Bach, 1994) as the intended meaning is conveyed implicitly through expansion or completion.

essential for the utterance to convey a full proposition, distinguishing it from indexicals and similar context-sensitive expressions (Recanati, 2010, p. 70).<sup>209</sup>

In addition, developing the very same line of thought that originated all the way back to “On Referring” (1950), Strawson uses the example of the sentence “The next leader of the party will have many enemies” (Strawson, 1997b, p. 226) to argue for the claim that reference-determination is in itself a function of the speaker’s intention, as a definite description like the one in this example can either be used referentially, i.e., to refer to a specific individual, or it can be used attributively, that is, without having a particular intended referent (Donellan, 1966). In such cases, wide context becomes crucial in deciding which interpretation applies.<sup>210</sup>

Therefore, if one adopts and extends the idea of an inherent indetermination at A-level meaning, the orthodox assumption that B-level questions of reference are automatically determined once one has established A-level is quickly shown not to hold in many cases.<sup>211</sup> Briefly,

[...] the picture of a simple progression in determinateness of the meaning of what is said—from A through B to C—no longer applies. For, on the extended hypothesis of indefiniteness, *the settlement of A-questions may not itself always determine what B-questions there are to be settled* (Strawson, 1997b, p. 226, my italics)

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<sup>209</sup> Among the phenomena mentioned by Strawson as cases of semantic creativity one can find instances of predicate transfer (Nunberg, 1995), as the chocolate examples, but also domain restriction (Stanley & Gendler Szabó, 2000) and sense extension (Carston, 2021).

<sup>210</sup> Cf: “We now have in hand all the ingredients which I take to be constitutive of contextualism: the demonstrative (referential) dimension of meaning; the central role of similarity in determining extension (hence truth-conditions); and finally the context-dependence of similarity relations” (Recanati, 2018b, p. 94)

<sup>211</sup> Compare: “[...]what I am rejecting is not the claim that the literal interpretation of the constituent is accessed before the derived interpretation—that I take to be obvious—but the claim that a similar priority holds at the level of the complete sentence; that is, I reject the claim that the process of semantic composition begins by paying attention only to literal semantic values, and turns to derived values only after the literal semantic value of the whole (the proposition literally expressed) has been computed. It is this picture which I think is unwarranted” (Recanati, 2004, p. 28)

In essence, for Strawson, semantic interpretation involves both pre-semantic, co-semantic and post-semantic pragmatic processes, underscoring their radical interdependence in linguistic understanding.<sup>212</sup>

At the end, Strawson would argue that if what we really want is a semantics without pragmatics, (in many cases) semantics will not yield traditional truth conditions but only Recanatian schemata, or Kaplanian characters (see 1989), or Bachian propositional radicals, for, in fact, truth-conditional aspects can only be fully discerned by appeal to pragmatic considerations.<sup>213</sup> Even if we follow semantic minimalism and allow for saturation of A-level indexicals into B-sense-meaning, Strawson would claim that not only standard indexicals are affected by context: from non-explicitly polysemous nouns to general predicates, a considerable number of expressions seem to be context-sensitive in a manner relevant to the determination of truth-conditions and, hence, to the specification of locutionary content. In Zappero's words, "[t]he gulf between the meaning of a sentence and what is said by using the sentence on an occasion can only be bridged by relying on considerations that transcend the rules governing [linguistic] meaning" (2018, p. 4).

But what, then, is—for Strawson—semantics proper? When does semantics end and pragmatics begins (again)? If only A-meaning can be isolated from the pervasive influence of context, should not a Strawsonian semantics be simply reduced to linguistic semantics and leave (all) the rest to pragmatics? These questions become of major relevance given that "different choices of terminology are accompanied, at least sometimes, by different verdicts concerning the truth values of particular sentences" (N. Salmon, 2005, p. 327). Perhaps it will

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<sup>212</sup> The integration of pragmatics and semantics has been further supported with arguments that the interpretation of pragmatic implicatures occurs interspersed with semantic interpretation (Chierchia, 2004).

<sup>213</sup> See, for instance, Soames: "I argue that the meaning, M, of S is a set of constraints on what normal uses of S assert or express. When S contains demonstratives, indexicals, or is otherwise semantically incomplete, M won't determine a complete proposition, and so must be pragmatically completed" (2022, p. 103).

be illuminating to make use of Soames' (2022, p. 126)' distinction between two parallel poles of semantic investigation: the first one outlines a set of conditions which speaker and hearers must fulfil to be considered as understanding a sentence in effective communication; the second one aims at identifying the linguistically encoded information that is taken to be the consistent contribution to illocutionary contents across contexts. Strawson is primarily concerned with the first approach, which he takes to comprehend the main task of the second one. Hence, the identification and isolation of such an invariant content is just a part—an essential yes, but minimal one—of what semantic elucidation constitutes for Strawson. In this sense, *the real object of semantics in an Strawsonian framework are not sentences or their linguistically encoded meaning but the statements made in using those sentences.*<sup>214</sup>

In strong opposition, Salmon remarks: “semantics as concerned with speaker assertion (i.e. with what the speaker who uses the sentence thereby asserts) is not merely to blur the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. It is to misidentify semantics altogether” (2005, p. 321). Yet this is exactly what Strawson is proposing: the Strawsonian project locates the distinction between semantics and pragmatics at the level of propositional, truth-conditional content but transcends the traditional, literalist view of semantics (and anticipates some fundamental tenets of contemporary contextualism) by arguing for the irrepressible influence of context in all 3 levels of meaning. The key contextualist idea in Strawson's work is that the content of a speaker's explicit statement may still be indeterminate, even after resolving ambiguities and assigning context-specific values to all indexical elements.

## **The possibility of a systematic semantics**

Although it could seem that by emphasising the prevalence of pragmatics over semantics Strawson has relinquished the possibility of a systematic semantics—and thus, self-fulfilled his

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<sup>214</sup> In that sense, Strawson can be partly characterised as conceiving of semantics as truth conditions, as opposed to the view that sees semantics as interpretation of logical forms (see K. Bach, 2005).

promise made at the end of “On Referring”: “ordinary language has no logic”—this is not the case. Despite popular conceptions, Strawson was firmly committed throughout his career to the possibility of a systematic theory of meaning (see, for example Strawson, 1989, p. 163). In this regard, faced with the problem of the pervasiveness of pragmatics in semantic interpretation, he writes (and I quote in full given the relevance):

Are we to suppose that all [possible] senses [are] antecedently listed in X’s ideal dictionary? If so we can indeed (so far) preserve the principle that some sense-A-meaning is always included in the complete meaning of what is said; but we preserve it at the cost of a certain unrealistic, and even brutal distortion or misrepresentation. For the truth is that the existing semantic resources of a language are inherently capable of more or less idiosyncratic variation and development in ways which can hardly be reduced to rule in advance of what actually happens, i.e. in advance of what is actually said and understood. If, on the other hand, we do not take this unrealistic course, we must sacrifice our principle. For given the use of an expression in an extended or figurative or illiterate or incorrect sense in an uttered sentence, there may be no assignable sense-A-meaning for that sentence included in the complete meaning of what was said. We could, perhaps, achieve a compromise: by allowing that X’s ideal dictionary is revised by inclusion of the new extended sense at the instant of his understanding what was said! But then, in such cases, will make his dictionary follow his understanding instead of making his understanding follow his dictionary (Strawson, 1997b, p. 221)

Thus, a dilemma: either (a) we stick to the conventional, orthodox commitment to invariantism—the thesis that semantic content remains invariant across contexts—but in doing so we leave semantics impoverished and incapable of performing a substantial explanatory role—and thus we sacrifice a realistic understanding of linguistic communication;

or (b) we abandon the principle of invariantism and adopt instead a conception of semantic creativity as entirely unrestricted—and intractable—but then we renounce the classical conception of semantics as a compositional, systematic theory.<sup>215</sup>

Strawson, yet again in his characteristic spirit of compatibility, aims for a middle ground: we hold to our desire for systematicity by conceiving of semantic content—all semantic content and not just classic indexicals—as a product of linguistic content plus context in hopes of figuring out the reference-rules for all of our context-sensitive expressions. The classical notion that lexical meaning contributes to a word’s sense in shaping the conveyed thought is therefore retained: *the sense of an expression is a function of its lexical meaning and an additional contextual factor ‘x’ required beyond lexical meaning to determine sense.*<sup>216</sup>

Remarkably, Strawson goes separate ways both from the literalists and the radical contextualists. *Radical contextualism*, usually attributed to contemporary followers of the later Wittgenstein such as Travis (1989, 2008, 2018) and Baz (2012, 2018), rejects what Recanati calls “*systematicity*”, that is, it eschews a rule-based process of semantic interpretation in favour of holistic guesswork.<sup>217</sup> However, as Recanati himself counters:

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<sup>215</sup> As Jackman puts it: “The fact that our practice embodies a commitment to invariance doesn’t entail that it is a necessary criterion of adequacy for any semantic theory. Our commitment to invariance is just one (heavy) commitment among others, and it may have to be given up if it is incompatible with too many of the rest” (Jackman, 2007, p. 332).

<sup>216</sup> Compare: “The project of trying to explain linguistic meaning by appeal to the communicative function of language does not force us to embrace the thought that explanations of word meaning must always appeal to the meanings of sentences” (Szabó, 2019, p. 263). Whether Strawson’s approach maintains a strong sense of compositionality largely depends on how it is detailed, particularly in how we can make contexts and their contributions formally manageable.

<sup>217</sup> Thus, Strawson issues the following warning regarding Wittgenstein and the prospect of a systematic theory of meaning: “[We] must know that anyone who invokes Wittgenstein in support of any theoretical position [in relation to meaning] runs a risk thereby. [We are] perhaps on safer ground in finding in that author a profound scepticism about the objectivity of meaning itself” (1987c, p. 418). Moreover, Hansen even cites Strawson when he attributes a radical contextualist view to Travis, even though such position evidently clashes with Strawson’s on view on a theory of meaning: “the linguistic meaning of an expression should not be understood—as it is on the standard theory of how meaning and context interact—as a function from some specific set of contextual parameters to an extension. *Travis’s version of the constructive project might therefore be regarded as a closer continuation of the spirit of classic ordinary language*

In general, nothing prevents unsystematic factors from being handled systematically, by being assigned their proper place in the theory. In the case at hand, we can define a function *mod* taking as argument an expression *e* and the context *c* in which it occurs: the value of *mod* is the particular modulation function that is contextually salient/relevant/appropriate for the interpretation of that expression in that context (Recanati, 2012, p. 147).<sup>218</sup>

In the end, as Bezuidenhout (2017, p. 30) states, the proponent of a systematic theory of meaning that aims at generating truth conditions for natural language sentences faces the challenge of context-sensitivity and the demarcation between semantics and pragmatics in three possible ways: she can either dismiss the relevant data by questioning the existence of genuinely context-sensitive expressions; or she can limit the data and tame the phenomena by showing that such expressions fit the familiar categories of context sensitivity, such as indexicals—which can be dealt with making use of traditional methods—; or she can adapt her theories to accommodate context-sensitive expressions beyond indexicals. It seems clear to me that the most charitable reading of Strawson’s views on the interplay between context, semantics and pragmatics is the third one: what he was proposing was to enhance the theory to accommodate context-sensitive expressions. In his own words:

To the objection that this is to introduce merely pragmatic considerations into what is essentially a semantic question, the answer must be that no serious semantic theory can afford

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*philosophy than DeRose’s in the respect that it aligns with the classic idea that the resources of systematic semantic theory are ill-suited for explaining ordinary use because ‘ordinary language has no exact logic’ (Strawson, 1950, p.344)” (Hansen, 2014, p. 559).*

<sup>218</sup> In cases where no contextual modulation is suitable, and the expression is interpreted literally, the modulation value (*mod*) will be the identity function (Recanati, 2010, p. 76). See also: “For every expression *e* – including ‘and’ or definite descriptions – it may be that *e* is context-sensitive and contributes different contents in different contexts (even though *e* is not ambiguous). As a result, we need to draw a general distinction between the linguistic meaning of an expression and its contribution to propositional content, while allowing for special cases in which they will be identical, instead of doing the opposite (i.e. equating conventional meaning and propositional contribution, while allowing for exceptions – the expressions in the ‘basic set’)” (Recanati, 2012, p. 137).

to ignore the points—and their consequences—to which I drew attention (Strawson, 1998a, p. 7).

In that sense, the Strawsonian project is not far from Recanati's own approach,<sup>219</sup> although it lacks, of course, the conceptual framework with which we now assess the debate (in the sense that it would be anachronistic to argue that he considered himself a moderate contextualist as opposed to a conventionalist or a radical contextualist) as well as the specific configuration and technical detail that could only be arrived at thanks to the remarkable developments in formal semantics of the past 50 years. Yet, recognising Strawson's affinity with such a contemporary perspective not only makes justice to his advocacy for contextual consideration and his vanguardist insights regarding semantic theorising, but it also illuminates and enriches the intellectual tradition and the theoretical commitments at the heart of semantic contextualism.<sup>220</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Strawson's contribution to the debate between semantics and pragmatics becomes evident through his recognition of a nuanced border between these linguistic dimensions. Whereas some critics argue that not only he does not distinguish the two of them,

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<sup>219</sup> In Recanati's words: "On that issue I am happy to part company with the most radical contextualists – the 'sceptics' who would go for the holistic guesswork answer (assuming they exist, which I doubt). Like Stanley and the formal semanticists, I maintain that semantic interpretation is grammar-driven" (2012, p. 147).

<sup>220</sup> Some authors have classified Recanati's view and its departure from radical contextualism as semantic relativism, an emerging alternative to contextualism which contends that the existing contextual framework proposed by theorists like Kaplan, Perry, and Stalnaker is sufficient for handling increased context-sensitivity in radical pragmatics. Unlike contextualism, it doesn't advocate for augmenting contextual inputs to directly expressed propositions but emphasizes increased contextual contribution to the conditions determining propositional-truth evaluation. (Borg, 2007, p. 519). However, Recanati's later stance has grown even closer, in a way, to semantic minimalism: "On the view I advocate, semantic values are linguistic meanings (as they are for Lewis); so, in addition to the *Compositionality constraint*, they satisfy the *Modularity constraint*: they can be calculated simply in virtue of one's knowledge of the language" (Recanati, 2018a, p. 134). So, whether Recanati is still a contextualist is an open question. Unfortunately, this discussion is beyond the scope of this work.

but he wrongly confuses semantics with pragmatics,<sup>221</sup> a closer examination reveals a subtle but substantive conception of this division.<sup>222</sup> By emphasizing the importance of shared assumptions, presuppositions and expectations in linguistic exchange, Strawson underscores the contextual richness that influences meaning. In this sense, his focus on communicative presumptions provides a broader framework for understanding semantics within the intricate web of human communication, while his the three-level description of meaning facilitates the identification and characterization of semantic content as locutionary or propositional content, renouncing the limitations imposed by the traditional view and its literalist and minimalist offspring.

A Strawsonian systematic theory of meaning would then resemble an informal model rather than a rigid, axiomatized structure. By avoiding the constraints of a closed formal system, it sacrifices formal precision and mathematical rigor but gains flexibility and descriptive fidelity. Instead of framing language as a logical calculus, this approach treats it as a dynamic model where mere linguistic meaning (or A-meaning) would indeed emerge through (semi) structured derivations (like those of generative grammar) but to which context-sensitive rules are further applied in order to arrive at locutionary content.

Further, portraying Strawson as a proto-contextualist sheds light on his idiosyncratic semantic outlook. This contextualist lens not only deepens our understanding of Strawson's semantic theory but also provides a valuable backdrop for reassessing the theoretical commitments of contemporary contextualism, thus contributing to a meaningful distinction between radical contextualists, often associated with Wittgensteinian views—and who

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<sup>221</sup> As Strawson himself acknowledges: “I agree that my very first essays on truth contained an indefensible mistake, pointed out by many, and excluded by me from all of my subsequent writings on the subject—the mistake of supposing that to draw attention to one particular aspect of the use of the expression “is true” was to give an exhaustive account of its meaning” (Strawson, 1998h, p. 402).

<sup>222</sup> As Butchvarov contends, the separation of the meaning or sense of an expression from its use was precisely what Strawson was arguing for all the way back to “On Referring” (Butchvarov, 1998, p. 93).

challenge the very feasibility of a comprehensive theory of meaning—and moderate contextualists—or relativists like Recanati—who acknowledge the dominance of pragmatics without entirely discarding semantics.

In short, Strawson's work not only introduces and makes use of significant conceptual distinctions for characterising semantic theory, but also adds to—and partly predates—the contextualist framework that invites a more nuanced appreciation of the interplay between semantics and pragmatics.

## Chapter 5

### “What Is in a Name?”

#### Strawson on the Semantics of Proper Names

“To use an expression [...] we must understand that expression, i.e. we must know what we mean by it” (Strawson, 1994b, p. 38)

“There is nothing you can sensibly talk about without knowing, at least in principle, how it might be identified” (Strawson, 1997a, p. 22)

“To understand a name is, at least, to know what particular it is which the name refers to. It is to identify the particular concerned. And what does this involve? It involves identifying it as just the instance that it is of some general feature, or cluster of features” (Strawson, 1957a, p. 377)

### Introduction

In this chapter I examine Strawson’s account of proper names in order to show that there is a common misunderstanding about his view which tends to classify him as a descriptivist<sup>223</sup> about the meaning of names. Strawson did believe in a certain form of *descriptivism conceived as theory of reference fixing*, and as such, he was not convinced by causal theories of reference. In spite of this, I argue that a careful reading of Strawson will show that he *never endorsed descriptivism as a theory of the meaning of a name*;<sup>224</sup> in short, Strawson holds that *although names get their reference through a cluster of associated descriptions within a linguistic community, names themselves do*

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<sup>223</sup> Here and throughout this work I follow Salmon’s (1981) terminology of ‘descriptive’ and ‘nondescriptive’ theories of names, to differentiate the terms from the more general term ‘descriptive’, which I mainly use to speak about Strawson’s approach to metaphysics.

<sup>224</sup> Kripke (1972), for example, seems to consider Strawson a descriptivist about the meaning of names. More recently, Braun also categorises Strawson among the philosophers that accepted *Description Theories of Proper Names* (2008, p. 492).

*not have linguistic meaning*. Nonetheless, his emphasis on the intersubjective character of reference, and his constant appeal to the notion of *identifying reference* might have cemented his identification as a total adept of a descriptive theory of meaning. Moreover, his views about directly referential expressions have been largely ignored, but once they are understood in the broader context of his theory of linguistic meaning, it is easy to see how his picture of names, singular terms, and linguistic reference holds together in a tighter and more nuanced manner than it is usually taken to be.

Overall, it seems to me that another plausible reason why Strawson's work on the philosophy of language might have lost the relevance that it once enjoyed during his lifetime is precisely the difficulty of making sense of his picture of reference—when considered under a descriptivist understanding of proper names—in a post-Kripkean framework that seems to have almost entirely displaced the descriptive approach to meaning and reference that was once common in analytic philosophy.<sup>225</sup> The aim of this chapter is to show that Strawson's views on proper names and linguistic reference are more complex than traditional descriptivism and therefore can be made compatible with a more contemporary understanding of these problems in the philosophy of language.

It is worth noting that his views about reference were held consistently (with minor but important elaborations) throughout the span of his career, from his initial thoughts in *On Referring* (1950) to his final remarks on the subject in *Direct Reference* and *Reference and its Roots* (1986b, 1986d). As before, the character of this chapter is expository and explanatory, for that reason, even though I mention some positions opposed to that of Strawson, I attempt no

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<sup>225</sup> Cf: "It is [...] noteworthy—and regrettable—[...] that the current mainstream of debates about reference labors under the illusion that Strawson's ideas have been superseded by the direct reference industry (see, for instance, the paucity of references and the cursory nature of discussions in Russell and Graf Fara 2012; Lepore and Smith 2006)" (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 219)

motivation or justification either for or against beyond the reconstruction of Strawson's own views.

## **Descriptonalism VS Referentialism**

To start this discussion, I will provide an overview of the debate between descriptonal and nondescriptonal views of meaning and reference. First, I will characterise the key concepts and distinctions relevant to this debate; I will only be concerned here with *linguistic reference*, which is, broadly speaking, a relation between a linguistic term and an extralinguistic object: if some word in our language stands for or represents certain non-linguistic item, then the relation between that word and the object it stands for is a reference relation, where the word is a *referential expression* and the object it names or refers to is its *referent*. It is important to recall here the distinction between a *semantic* referent and a *speaker's* referent: I follow Strawson (1950, 1961b, 1986b) in taking the semantic referent of a name to be the thing it names, and in the case of a description, the thing that uniquely satisfies the description; the speaker's referent of a name or a description would be the intended referent, viz, the thing the speaker intended to refer to by using the name or the description in question.<sup>226</sup> A paradigmatic case of semantic reference relation, then, would be that between a name and the person or thing it names.

I will refer to propositions as the primary bearers of truth and falsity, as Strawson (2000b, p. 194) does. A proposition, then, is true if things *are* as the proposition says they are. A further distinction is to be noticed between singular and non-singular propositions. Singular

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<sup>226</sup> Cf: "[There is a distinction] between the notion of the reference the speaker intended on a particular occasion of his use of a definite singular term and the notion of the reference which such a term actually has in the mouth of a speaker on a particular occasion. Normally, no doubt, they will be the same: the intended will be the actual reference. But it is not difficult to imagine examples in which they come apart" (Strawson, 1981a, p. 326). See also: "(Ex)(S meant x • Dx • S putatively meant x) where 'S putatively meant x' is short for 'S, if taken by a linguistically competent and reasonably informed audience to be speaking conventionally in the physical and social context of his utterance, would be taken by that audience to have meant x in that context'" (Strawson, 1986a, p. 95).

propositions are expressed by sentences containing singular terms, like proper names,<sup>227</sup> while non-singular propositions are expressed by sentences which contain no singular terms; the proposition that *James reads a book* would be a singular proposition, while the proposition that *all men are mortal* would be a general, or non-singular, proposition.<sup>228</sup>

Additionally, to explain the differences between descriptive and nondescriptive approaches, I will use Stalnaker's (2003) distinction between *descriptive semantics* and *foundational semantics*: a descriptive semantics is concerned with the question "what kind of thing is the semantic value of a name?", where 'semantic value' can be generally understood as the semantic contribution that an expression makes to the truth conditions of a sentence containing it; and where a 'name' is a definite noun phrase<sup>229</sup> that is used to refer to an individual. A foundational semantics, on the other hand, has to do with the question "what makes it the case that a particular name has the particular semantic value it has?" (R. C. Stalnaker, 2003, pp. 166–167). The distinction between descriptive and foundational semantics is somewhat parallel to that between a theory giving the meaning of a name, on the one hand, and fixing the referent of a name, on the other. It is worth noting as well, that semantic value is to be distinguished both from linguistic meaning and semantic referent. Anticipating, Strawson seems to hold that

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<sup>227</sup> Cf: "A term is singular in a given use if it there purports to make an identifying reference to a single object" (Strawson, 1956b, p. 439). In "Singular Terms and Predication" Strawson elaborates on this by stating that "the singular term is used for the purpose of *identifying* the object, of bringing it about that the hearer (or, generally, the audience) knows *which* or *what* object is in question" (1961b, p. 59). See also: "Peacocke's favoured term for an expression functioning in the semantic role in question is Kripke's; 'rigid designator'; Baldwin's is 'singular term'. Others might be suggested, including Russell's original 'logically proper name'. Since one of Peacocke's aims is to elucidate the semantic category concerned without recourse to the notion of possible worlds, it might have been better not to choose a term which has such strong associations with that notion. Baldwin's choice seems to involve an arbitrary restriction on a useful phrase. Perhaps Russell's phrase, its irrelevant associations worn away by time, is due for revival" (Strawson, 1977, p. 267).

<sup>228</sup> It is disputed as to how definite descriptions should be classed. Russell (and those following him) treat them as quantified general terms, while Frege (and those following him) treat them as singular terms. Strawson thinks that there are uses of definite descriptions in which they appear as singular terms and uses where they appear as general terms (see Strawson, 1961b, 1964a, 1971a, 1986b).

<sup>229</sup> Here 'phrase' is understood in a syntactic sense, so that a single word can constitute a phrase.

proper names have no linguistic meaning; when they have a semantic referent, they contribute that referent as their semantic value.

Thus, with the help of these distinctions it will be easier to clarify the differences between the two opposed views I am presenting.

### *Descriptionalism*

To begin with, the descriptionalist conceives of names on the model of descriptions, and argues that the meaning, taken as the semantic value of a proper name like 'Jim', 'David' or 'Mary' is its *sense*, the theoretical posit that captures the cognitive significance of a name (Cumming, 2019, p. 13), which can normally be expressed by means of a definite description (an expression of the form *the F*), and which somehow mediates between the name and its referent.<sup>230</sup> A name is thus conventionally linked to an associated description, so in learning the name the speakers learn the description; for there to be successful reference, such descriptive content must *uniquely* determine the name's referent. Take for example the name 'Nicole Kidman'. According to the descriptionalist, the meaning of 'Nicole Kidman' is something like "the famous actress who won an Oscar for *The Hours*". I say "something like", because different speakers may associate different descriptions to the same name.<sup>231</sup> On this view, then, we have three elements involved in a reference relation: first, a *name*, 'Nicole

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<sup>230</sup> This is certainly a controversial point, especially regarding Frege and Russell, whose views are more nuanced than this. The philosophical tradition has perhaps negligently identified both Frege and Russell with the standard descriptionist view of names, however, in the case of Frege, although the *sense* mediates between the word and its referent (*Bedeutung*), it is still the referent that counts as the semantic value of the name in non-intensional contexts; in Russell's case, the associated description is what provides the semantic value.

<sup>231</sup> According to the classic view (inaccurately referred sometimes to as the 'Frege-Russell' view), a proper name is associated with a single description. There is also the 'cluster' view championed by Wittgenstein and Searle which proposes that a name is associated instead with a cluster of descriptions and not just one. (Abbott, 2010, p. 104). In this sense, the referent of a name is the entity that best fits such cluster of descriptions. Note that Kripke (1972, p. 278) classifies Strawson within the cluster view (I will address this point later in the paper). Kripke will later correct his stance by speaking of the Mill-Russell view in opposition to the Frege view in *Reference and Existence* (2013, p. 13).

Kidman'; second, a *referent*, the individual Nicole Kidman; and third, a *sense*, expressed by "the famous actress who won an Oscar for *The Hours*", which mediates between the name and its referent. What makes it the case that the semantic value of 'Nicole Kidman' is the sense expressed by "the famous actress who won an Oscar for *The Hours*" is that such sense "is determined by the abilities and dispositions of the speaker to describe or identify a certain individual" (R. C. Stalnaker, 2003, p. 167). In other words, what makes it the case that I refer to the particular person Nicole Kidman by means of the name 'Nicole Kidman' is that Nicole Kidman happens to be the unique individual that fits the description associated as the sense of her name. As a result, the sense of the name is not only the semantic value of a name but also what determines its referent.<sup>232</sup>

Before I move on to the nondescriptionalist position there are two theses that Soames (2005, p. 337) recovers from Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (1980; 1972) that will further illuminate the descriptionalist stance. According to the first thesis, *a proper name is synonymous with a description—or cluster of descriptions—associated with the name*. It is important to notice here that if a name is synonymous with a description, then the sentence "Nicole Kidman won an Oscar for *The Hours*" would express the proposition that *the famous actress who won an Oscar for The Hours won an Oscar for The Hours*.<sup>233</sup> I will address this matter again when we consider Strawson's relation to the theory of direct reference.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Cf: "[F]or any true *knowledge-what* ascription, there must be a true propositional knowledge ascription whose content is a non-singular proposition that makes the method of identification explicit, and that entails the knowledge-what ascription" (R. C. Stalnaker, 2003, p. 179, my emphasis).

<sup>233</sup> This is perhaps an unfortunate example if we consider '*The Hours*' to be the proper name of a film (and a novel). For the sake of simplicity, I will ignore this complication.

<sup>234</sup> This thesis has certain consequences when it comes to names in modal contexts and as such it is also related to the notion of *rigid designation*: a name or tag that accompanies its referent across all possible worlds.

Following the second thesis, *even if a name is not synonymous with a description, it is the description—or cluster of descriptions—associated with the name that fixes its referent*. This thesis entails epistemic consequences regarding our knowledge of the referent of a name; I will address them later on. Notice too that although the first thesis entails the second, the second thesis does not entail the first one. In other words, since the meaning of a name determines its referent, if the meaning of a name is a description, then that description determines its referent. However, even if name and description are not synonymous, it could still be that what fixes the reference of the name is a description, that is, the referent of a name would be given by whatever satisfies a uniquely identifying description even if such description is not synonymous with the name.

These two theses run parallel with Stalnaker's distinction between descriptive semantics and foundational semantics. This is relevant because one could endorse only the second thesis and give a non-descriptivist descriptive semantics while offering still a descriptivist foundational semantics. In other words, one could hold that the semantic value of a name is its referent, not its sense, and still argue that what fixes the semantic value of the name is the description associated with it, i.e., that sense determines reference. I take Strawson to hold this view: for Strawson, *a proper name has no linguistic meaning*, only a semantic referent, therefore, it is not synonymous with a description. Moreover, although such a referent is determined by a cluster of associated descriptions, it appears directly, without any descriptive content, into the propositions expressed by sentences containing its name.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> A thoroughly nondescriptivist position would not only deny the first thesis and say that the meaning of a name is not a description but also deny the second one and say that the referent of a name is not given by a description. Thus, Strawson's views about proper names is only partly non-descriptivist.

## *Referentialism*

Now, in opposition to the descriptivist view, the non-descriptivist—or referentialist—conceives of names as tags, adopting an approach that echoes the *Millian* view of names:<sup>236</sup> the idea that proper names do not have connotation but only denotation. To use our prior example, for the direct reference theorist the semantic value of the name ‘Nicole Kidman’ is just its referent, the individual Nicole Kidman. Accordingly, a name does not describe the thing it names, it just refers to it. We have then here two contrasting models for a descriptive semantics: the referentialist, where names are like tags; and the descriptivist, where names function as pegs on which we hang descriptions (Searle, 1958, p. 167). Supplementing the *Millian* semantics there is a metasemantic picture known as ‘the causal theory of reference’: simply put, what makes it the case that this particular name has this particular referent is that there is a causal-historical chain that can be traced from my use of the name ‘Nicole Kidman’ back to an initial baptism, an event in which Nicole was given that name—this is what we call *reference fixing*. Such a chain of use is preserved by individuals who across history have used the name to refer to that same person—we call this *reference borrowing*.<sup>237</sup> Put it simply, when I use the name ‘Nicole Kidman’ I can refer to Kidman because the causal-communicative chain of use goes back to her.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Such a view is named after John Stuart Mill (1843), who argued that names do not have connotation but only denotation; in other words, proper names unlike general terms like ‘water’ or ‘cat’ do not bear descriptive content. It is important to notice that although the referentialist view does bear similarities with the *Millian* view, they are not identical.

<sup>237</sup> This view is meant to be non-descriptivist in as much as it appeals to a causal connection between the name and its bearer, and not to an intensional fit between an associated description and the object that satisfies it. Notice that the referentialist view is concerned only with names (and natural kind terms), and thus, it is not a complete alternative to the descriptivist view of reference but only a restriction or qualification; for the referentialist, the picture of reference by description indeed applies to descriptive terms, e.g., definite descriptions, quantified noun phrases, etc. It is argued that *quantification* and *reference* are fundamentally different linguistic phenomena, and hence, that descriptions terms do not really refer see (Abbott, 2010, pp. 130–134). Strawson, along with Kaplan, would argue that some descriptions can refer, or, more exactly, that some descriptive terms also have directly referential uses.

<sup>238</sup> I will only address the problem of *empty names*, or names which lack a referent, in a passing manner later in the paper.

There are two important corollaries to the referentialist theory: (a) that proper names are *directly referential*, and (b) that they are *rigid designators*. Names are directly referential because they directly contribute their referent to the propositions expressed by sentences containing them; in that sense, the proposition expressed by the sentence “Nicole Kidman is Australian” is that *Nicole Kidman is Australian* and not something like the proposition that *The famous actress who won an Oscar for The Hours is Australian* as the descriptivist would hold. In other words, *Nicole Kidman* appears directly in the proposition and not in any particular descriptive guise. As a result, names are rigid designators because they refer to their bearers across all possible world-states, thus, “Nicole” refers to Nicole even in counterfactual scenarios where she did not win an Oscar.<sup>239</sup>

Although the direct reference view still faces some problems and puzzles,<sup>240</sup> nowadays it has more or less become the standard take in philosophy, mostly due to the persuasive arguments of philosophers like Donnellan (1970) Kripke (1972), Putnam (1974), and Kaplan (1989).

## **Strawson on Names**

In the present section I will present Strawson’s take on the descriptive semantics for proper names, making it clear that his is a *non-descriptivist view of the meaning of a proper name*. To introduce such an account, I will characterise his picture of semantic reference in relation to proper names. In the next subsection I will address the role that *identifying reference*—a plausible source

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<sup>239</sup> A further consequence of these two features of proper names according to the referentialist view is that identity statements between co-referring names are held to be necessary, a highly intuitive claim that descriptivist theories struggle to account for.

<sup>240</sup> ‘Frege’s Puzzle’, the problem of ‘negative existentials’, and the problem of ‘empty names’, are among them.

of Strawson's mischaracterisation as a full descriptivist—play in his account of the use of names by distinguishing between a pragmatic and purely semantic picture of reference.

The consensus during Strawson's most prolific and influential era—that is, before the publication of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* in 1972—took the descriptivist view of names to be, if not the final answer, at least the point of departure for any inquiry into the nature of linguistic reference. Two of his major interlocutors, Russell (1905) and Quine (1960) arguably<sup>241</sup> had also a descriptivist approach to reference. One could even say the spirit of the time was still a descriptivist one. However, there are several considerations that distinguish Strawson's perspective on the nature of proper names from the traditional descriptivist approach.

Reference is such an important topic in Strawson's philosophy because he considers that the fundamental case of a proposition is brought about by assertion,<sup>242</sup> which essentially involves a subject—a *referring expression*—copulated with a predicate. Hence, he specifies that “to refer is not to assert, though you refer in order to assert” (1950, p. 15). With this he wants to make clear, against Russell's position, that referring to an object is not the same as asserting the unique existence of the object referred to.<sup>243</sup> This is so because he held that in referring

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<sup>241</sup> I say arguably because although Russell held a view of proper names as a shorthand for definite descriptions, what he took to be the only logically kind of proper name, demonstratives like *this* or *that*, behaves according to referentialist view (B. Russell, 1910, p. 121). Quine, on the other hand was concerned with a ‘canonical notation’ for an ideal scientific language. Following both Kripke (1972, p. 343) and Strawson (1959, p. 195), and given that Quine adopts Russell's technique to paraphrase names into descriptions, I take him to be subject to the same criticisms directed towards the descriptivist view of names; let it be noted that Quine is not advancing any views as to how names work in ordinary language—he is eliminating names, not analysing them.

<sup>242</sup> Cf. Strawson (1959, p. 151): “The central fact to cling to is that the primary mode of appearance of *propositions* is assertion”.

<sup>243</sup> To put it in Russellian terms, such would be the distinction between naming and describing. In this sense, Strawson's claim would be that definite descriptions also have naming (referential) uses. Cf: “[One] distinguishes sharply between proper names, which are, in such contexts, purely referential, and definite descriptions, which are to be treated either à la Russell or in some variant style which serves, in the context of this problem, the same purpose. [One should also] consider the possibility—I would say, the fact—that what are, in form, descriptions sometimes serve, semantically, as names; nor the possibility—again I would say, the fact—that what are, in form, names may sometimes serve,

one does not assert but *presupposes* unique existence,<sup>244</sup> a view that he shared with Frege (and with Russell too, at least regarding the latter's view of logically proper names).<sup>245</sup>

Crucially, Strawson conceived of referring as a speech act, something that is achieved by speakers and not by words alone.<sup>246</sup> In his own words, ““Mentioning”, or “referring”, is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do”(1950, p. 8).<sup>247</sup> In short, “referential forms themselves, rich and familiar or spare and

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semantically, as a kind of description (perhaps, one that mentions the name)” (Strawson, 1977, p. 266). See also: “To say that some definite singular terms are sometimes used purely referentially is not to say that all are sometimes so used or that any are always so used. Especially in the case of definite descriptions, something like the Russellian model of analysis may often be nearer the mark” (Strawson, 1986a, p. 100).

<sup>244</sup> Is in that sense that in “Singular Terms and Predication”, Strawson writes: “Singular terms are what yield truth-value gaps when they fail in their role. General terms are what yield truth or falsity, when singular terms succeed in their role, by themselves applying, or failing to apply, to what the singular terms apply to”(1961b, p. 58).

<sup>245</sup> In his “Intellectual Autobiography”(Hahn, 1998, p. 7) Strawson clarifies that by the time he had published “On Referring” he had not yet read Frege, which means he arrived to the now called ‘Frege-Strawson’ view of presupposition independently of Frege. Furthermore, it should be noted that he also agrees with Frege that most if not all of what we now call Noun Phrases (NPs) and Frege (1948) referred to as Proper Names—proper names, pronouns, definite descriptions, indefinite descriptions, possessive NPs, demonstrative descriptions and bare NPs (NPs without a determiner)—are genuinely referential (see (Strawson, 1952). The question whether Quantificational NPs are referential is still an open matter, though Strawson would also consider them as having a referential use.

<sup>246</sup> Cf: “Strawson’s dictum flies in the face of common philosophical lore. It is generally assumed, and occasionally argued, that there is indeed a class of referring expressions—indexicals, demonstratives, and proper names—and that they aren’t just eminently capable of being used to refer, which nobody can deny, but that they themselves refer, albeit relative to contexts. There is general consensus that at least some expressions do this, but there is considerable dispute about which ones. It is rare to find a philosopher who includes indefinite descriptions among referring expressions, but some are liberal enough to include definite descriptions. Some reject definites but include demonstrative descriptions (complex demonstratives) on their list. Some balk at descriptions of any kind referring but have no qualms about proper names. Some have doubts about proper names referring, but readily include indexicals and simple demonstratives. Yet I can’t recall anyone directly responding to Strawson’s argument. Instead, what I’ve observed is that philosophers slide down a verbal slippery slope” (K. Bach, 2008, p. 516).

<sup>247</sup> Cf. (Searle, 1969, p. 28): “The term “referring expression” is not meant to imply that expressions refer. On the contrary, as previously emphasized, reference is a speech act, and speech acts are performed by speakers in uttering words, not by words”. Donnellan (1966, p. 241) also emphasises the difference between *denoting* and *referring*, the latter being realised only in connection with a speaker in a specific context of use. Even Church (1995, p. 69) holds that, according to normal English usage, only speakers refer. As Kripke suggests, since Black’s (1948) influential translation of Frege’s “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” the use of “refer” for the relation between words and what they designate has become standard.

strange, make no metaphysical claims and impose no ontological limitations. It is we who do these things, if we do them at all—and for diverse reasons” (Strawson, 1986d, p. 141).<sup>248</sup>

In that regard, it is important to note from the beginning that Strawson distinguishes between two sense or dimensions of reference. On the one hand, there is reference in relation to the conventional meaning of a term and how that meaning secures a referent, which we could call the “semantic dimension” of reference—though Strawson himself does not use this term.<sup>249</sup> On the other hand, there is the dimension of reference that he most frequently discusses, which he calls “identifying reference” (Strawson, 1964a). This could be described as the “pragmatic dimension” of reference. For Strawson, the notion of identifying reference is analytically prior to the notion of semantic reference; in other words, semantic reference is

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<sup>248</sup> Strawson seems to have been aware of something like Donnellan’s (1966) distinction between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions since “On Referring”, or at least between referential and nonreferential uses of descriptions (Cf. (K. Donnellan, 1966, p. 235)); moreover, he explicitly acknowledges Donnellan’s distinction in “Belief, Reference and Quantification” (Strawson, 1979b) and later in “Direct Singular Reference” (Strawson, 1986b, p. 92). See also: “[One] distinguishes sharply between proper names, which are, in such contexts, purely referential, and definite descriptions, which are to be treated either à la Russell or in some variant style which serves, in the context of this problem, the same purpose. [One should also] consider the possibility—I would say, the fact—that what are, in form, descriptions sometimes serve, semantically, as names; nor the possibility—again I would say, the fact—that what are, in form, names may sometimes serve, semantically, as a kind of description (perhaps, one that mentions the name)” (Strawson, 1977, p. 266)

<sup>249</sup> Though Strawson does not use the terminology of pragmatic/semantic dimension of reference, he does make the distinction, implicitly, in the second part of *Individuals* (1959) and more explicitly in *Subject and Predicate* where he writes: “In general, when we talk of ‘theories’ in this area, ‘theories’ of reference and so forth, we are nowadays often talking of different choices that might be made of ways of fitting onto each other, or bringing in relation to each other, two kinds of thing: on the one hand, the complex phenomena of actual discourse, all that is done, and the background to what is done, when we talk to each other [the pragmatic dimension]; on the other, some relatively simple paradigm or framework, such as that provided by our logic [the semantic dimension]” (Strawson, 1974e, p. 48). Strawson makes again an explicit distinction between the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of reference in a later paper from 1982, “Belief, Reference and Quantification”, when he writes: “What determines whether the speaker is using the term as a vehicle of direct reference (at least in intention) or not? This is a question in the pragmatics of direct reference. It is distinct from the question, what puts a speaker in a position to make a direct reference to a particular individual [the semantic question][...]Granted that a speaker is, or thinks he is, in a position to make a direct reference by the use of a certain definite singular term, under what conditions will it normally be correct to say that he is, in a given case, actually (or at least in intention) using the term in this way? I think we can answer this only by taking account of the speaker’s view of the information-state of his *audience*, of the person or person he is *addressing*” (1979b, p. 121). As one can also notice from this quote, his concern with the pragmatic dimension of reference was a constant throughout his career.

to be explained in terms of identifying reference (Strawson, 1962a, p. 256).<sup>250</sup> I will begin by focusing on the conventional dimension and then move on to clarify Strawson's notion of identifying reference.

### *The Semantic Dimension of Reference and the Meaning of a Name.*

Although reference is essentially as speech act, referring expressions can still be identified *as* referring expressions within a sentence independently of its use in a particular context: we speakers use words to refer, but those words already have a conventional force that enables them to be used so; they are *semantically shaped*, so to speak.<sup>251</sup> However, it is the information provided by a particular context of use which ultimately helps determine reference and enables the audience to identify the referent of a referring expression as then used.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> See also: "First, it is essential in linguistic theory to recognize the *semantic function* of definite singular reference, represented in the standard symbolism by 'Fa'—a function performed equally by both proper names and definite descriptions in their characteristic uses. Second, since the successful performance of this function normally depends on what may broadly be called contextual features of the situation, and since it is this fact which licenses, or encourages, the invocation of 'pragmatics', one may reasonably conclude that, insofar as this invocation is justified, then, to just that extent, it is a mistake to represent the distinction between semantics and pragmatics as absolute: perhaps we should speak, rather, of 'pragmatic-semantics'. The point is evident enough in the cases involving demonstratives" (Strawson, 1994c, p. 400).

<sup>251</sup> Cf: "[A]n expression which [...] is "cut out" by the "rules of language" for referring use (i.e. for bringing about identification in the sense I have suggested) and [...] is correctly used in application to the object it is applied to on a given occasion. Whether it actually succeeds with the audience on that occasion would be irrelevant to its success in this sense, even though this sense is explained in terms of the other" (Strawson, 1962a, p. 256). An expression is only a referring term if it is used successfully to refer to a particular. This does not mean that it is always a referring expression; the same term can function as a referring expression in some instances and not in others, without change of sense (Strawson, 1962a, p. 253). Again, here is the idea that just like definite descriptions can be used referentially and attributively, so too can names and other referring expressions be used non-referentially.

<sup>252</sup> Cf. (Strawson, 1950, pp. 13–14): "When we begin a sentence with 'the such-and-such' the use of 'the' shows, but does not state, that we are, or intend to be, referring to one particular individual of the species 'such-and-such'. *Which* particular individual is a matter to be determined from context, time, place, and any other features of the situation of utterance" (italics in the original). See also: "Strawson and Quine, for examples, are ostensibly in basic agreement as to the conditions for reference, but they disagree as to what terms have the referential task. They both agreed that the conditions of reference are contextual; i.e., that whether or not a term is used successfully to refer depends upon the context of the utterance of the sentence in which the term is used" (Haight, 1998, p. 200). Note that for Strawson, such contextual factors include not only a speaker, a hearer, a time and place, but also the situation, aspects of saliency, and "the personal histories of both the speaker and those he is

Building on this, Strawson argues that the referent of a name is determined by the sum of identifying descriptions associated with the name by the community of name-users (Strawson, 1959, p. 191): imagine a group of people using the name ‘Nicole Kidman’ to refer to the Hollywood actress. If we ask each person to list key facts about her, and then combine the most commonly mentioned details into one description, it is not necessary that all of these facts perfectly describe one person. However, there must be one person—Nicole Kidman—who fits a reasonable number of these shared details for reference to be secured.<sup>253</sup>

Consequently, Strawson seems to have been the first to think of definite descriptions in a way similar to what Kripke calls reference-fixing. Like Kripke, he did not impose an epistemic requirement, such as Russellian acquaintance, for using descriptions to establish reference, nor did he demand that the speaker have the object in mind in any way beyond what the description provides (Kaplan, 2012, pp. 144–145).

In contrast to Kripke, however, Strawson consistently opposed causal theories of reference throughout his career, even contending that:

The (relatively fleeting) popularity of ‘causal theories’ of names may just make it worth adding this: any reflective speaker will acknowledge that he cannot have *meant* a particular item like the use of a name on a particular occasion unless he had *some* identifying *knowledge* of that item;

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addressing” (ibid, p. 19). Such views predate Kaplan’s work on indexicals (1989), as well as Stalnaker’s notion of *common ground* (2002).

<sup>253</sup> “Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Searle rejected the view that the individual’s associations with the name determine a name’s sense or denotation. They maintained that certain relations that hinge on the individual’s belonging to a wider linguistic community, together with the descriptions actually available in the wider community, determine the sense and reference of a name. Kripke and Donnellan retained the role for social relations, postulated by Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Searle. But they showed that the individual’s linguistic community need not contain sufficient descriptions to determine the name’s denotation” (Burge, 2013, p. 373).

and he could not (in general) have acquired such knowledge saved by a *causal* route originating in some fact about the particular concerned (1974b, p. 49, original emphasis).<sup>254</sup>

In short, *the reference of a name is fixed by a cluster of associated descriptions associated held by a linguistic community without appeal to causal connection*. Thus, it is fair to conclude that Strawson endorses a descriptonal foundational semantics, or a descriptonal theory of reference-fixing.

Now I will demonstrate that Strawson was only partially a descriptonalist about names, as he did not endorse a descriptonalist theory regarding the meaning of proper names. To begin with, Strawson (1950, p. 21) presents the following classification of referential expressions according to their degree of *conventional force*.

- (1) *Degree of context-sensitivity*. Indexicals like ‘I’ or ‘you’ would be at one end of this scale with definite descriptions at the other.
- (2) *Degree of descriptive content*. Proper names would be at one end of this scale since they have no descriptive content.<sup>255</sup> Pronouns like ‘you’ and ‘I’ would have minimal descriptive meaning. Proper definite descriptions would have full descriptive content.
- (3) *Degree of referring-cum-ascriptive convention*. On one side we would have those referring expressions whose use is regulated by general conventions, either contextual or ascriptive, like definite descriptions (ascriptive conventions) and pronouns (contextual

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<sup>254</sup> In a similar vein, Strawson wrote five years later in “Perception and its Objects” (1979b, p.137): “the recently much canvassed ‘causal theory of reference’ merely calls attention to another instance of the causal link which obtains between thought and independently (and anteriorly) existing thing when the former is rightly said to have the latter as its object”. See also: Cf: “Strawson and Kaplan seem to think that it is possible for a speaker to use a linguistic expression and refer to an object even in the absence of any historical-causal contact between the speaker using the linguistic expression and the object” (Capuano, 2019, p. 1096).

<sup>255</sup> Exceptions to this category would be names that originated as definite descriptions, like *The Holy Roman Empire*.

conventions); on the other side there would be proper names, which have *ad hoc* conventions of use.<sup>256</sup>

Now, I want to draw attention to his conception of proper names here. Based on these categories, it is clear that, for Strawson, names lack descriptive content. According to this, proper names have no (linguistic) meaning at all. Thus, he writes: “Ignorance of a man’s name is not ignorance of the language. This is why we do not speak of the meaning of proper names” (1950, p. 21). He elaborates this claim by stating that:

*An ordinary personal name is, roughly, a word, used referringly, of which the use is not dictated by any descriptive meaning the word may have, and is not prescribed by any such general rule for use as a referring expression (or a part of a referring expression) as we find in the case of such words as ‘I’, ‘this’, and ‘the’, but is governed by ad hoc conventions for each particular set of applications of the word to a given person.* The important point is that the correctness of such applications does not follow from any *general* rule or convention for the use of the word as such. (The limit of absurdity and obvious circularity is reached in the attempt to treat names as disguised descriptions in Russell’s sense; for what is in this special sense implied, but not entailed, by my now referring to someone by name is simply the existence of someone, *now being referred to*, who is *conventionally referred to* by that name.) (Strawson, 1950, p. 23, my emphasis).

So, clearly, Strawson did not accept Russell’s account of ordinary proper names as disguised descriptions.<sup>257</sup> *Hence, if (functional) proper names have no linguistic meaning, but only a referent, they cannot be synonymous with descriptions.*

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<sup>256</sup> Cf: “Names, in this respect, can be appropriately classified with overtly indexical expressions like “this” and “I”, although, in contrast with these last, the variable applications of names are not governed by rules of meaning, but by customs or conventions of a different kind” (Strawson, 1952, p. 215).

<sup>257</sup> Cf: “For if we consider how an ordinary proper name brings off its reference, we see that it does so only by way of definite descriptions known to its users. (Russell exaggerates here, saying that an ordinary proper name really is a description; but the main point is sound enough)” (Strawson, 1957a,

He held such a view later in his work. In “*Phrase et Acte de Parole*” from 1970, later published in English as “Meaning and Context”, Strawson writes:

It is not by tacitly applying a rule of English to the circumstance of utterance that you know whom I mean by ‘John’ or ‘Henry’ when I produce a sentence containing such proper names; though it is, doubtless, in virtue of a convention of some less general kind that you know this (1997b, p. 219).<sup>258</sup>

A claim almost identical to the above one from “On Referring” which amounts to the fact that ignorance of a name is not ignorance of the language. Later, in *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* from 1974 (twenty-four years after “On Referring” and fifteen years after *Individuals*) he goes on to specify the general conditions under which a proper name has useful currency thus:

- (1) There is a community of language-users who often need to make an identifying reference to an individual;
- (2) There is a concern with maintaining the same identity of the particular across different instances of reference;
- (3) There is not a fixed description or title that members of the group can consistently and naturally use to refer to the particular (like, “the boss” or “our mother” or “the neighbor in flat 243”)(1974e, p. 36).

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p. 375). Strawson was also suspicious of the Quinean project of paraphrasing names into unitary predicates. See Strawson (1974e, p. 40).

<sup>258</sup> See also: “It may be that the use of an expression to refer to a particular object is rendered correct by nothing but a purely arbitrary convention licencing the application of the expression to that particular object. That is, this application of the expression does not form part of any system and is not governed or guided by any general rule of language. In such a case we have a totally arbitrary o.r.e. [ostensible referring expression] (e.g. some proper names, and, Mr. Shwayder also suggests, the Greek mathematicians’ use of  $\pi$ )” (Strawson, 1962a, p. 258).

Again, as it follows from these conditions, specially (3), a name *is not* synonymous with any one description: “Proper names [...] owe their referential utility on the complexity or variousness, or both, of their descriptive hinterlands” (Strawson, 1974e, p. 42). On the contrary, a team number, for example, only becomes useful for reference when tied to a specific description, like “the player displaying this particular number on their shirt”.

Still, a descriptionalist may argue that a name is synonymous with the description which fixes the referent of the name. For example, imagine a stray dog named after the place it was found in: ‘Pina’ for instance, is the name of a dog that was found in the Mexican town of Pinos, with the description that gives it its name being something like “the dog that was found in Pinos”. For the descriptionalist, this description, the basis of the name, not only fixes the referent of the name but also gives it its meaning. Against this Strawson claims “the basis of the name, if it has any such basis, is quite unimportant. Once the name is established, it does not matter if they [the name-users] forget or lose sight of its basis altogether” (ibid, p. 37). Therefore, such description can hardly be the meaning of the name. Furthermore, in an almost Kripkean spirit, Strawson writes a bit after that:

So it is convenient to have in circulation in such groups a tag, a designation, which does not depend for its referential or identifying force upon any particular such position or relation, which preserves the same referential force through its object’s changes of possession or relation and has the same referential force for communicators who know the object in different connections and for whom quite different descriptions would be uppermost (ibid, p. 38).

Different name-users, then, would associate different descriptions to the name (something both Frege and Russell would accept), but the fact that someone associates a name with a description does not make the two of them semantically equivalent.

Moreover, according to Strawson, *in an ideal communicative context when both speaker and addressee have command of a proper name*, such name

will *act* as an ideal or Russellian proper name would act if there were such a thing: i.e. as a name which is essentially born by one and only one thing, and to know the meaning of which is simply to know what that thing is (Strawson, 1974e, p. 47).

Hence, the semantic value of a name, once the contextual specifications are in order, is nothing but the thing it names, just like the Millian would hold. So much for the descriptionalist view of reference as a view of the meaning (or semantic content) of a name. This is important because *claiming that names have no linguistic meaning is not the same as claiming they do not have semantic values*, for that would turn all names into empty names. No, in fact, in the Strawsonian framework, the semantic value of a name, that is, what they contribute to a proposition expressed by a sentence containing them, is their referent.<sup>259</sup>

Now, to complete my characterisation of Strawson's picture of semantic reference I want to draw attention to some important features in relation to his view of singular terms and direct reference:

*Direct Reference*: Kaplan (2012, pp. 144–145) himself credits Strawson with the notion of *Referential Conversion*: the view that “ascribes to all of us the ability to simply convert an arbitrary piece of knowledge by description to a state in which we hold the described individual in mind in a nondescriptive way”. In brief, the basis for Kaplan's own notion of *direct reference*. In that sense, he holds that Strawson had already argued in *On Referring* that in sentences where a

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<sup>259</sup> However, this does not generalise to all referring expressions: “that the meaning of any genuine referring expression is taken to be *identical with the object to which it applies*... This simple and only too natural equation is fatal to the claims of phrases like “a man” as referring expressions” (Strawson, 1952, p. 188). Whether the expression “a man” is referential or not, well, that is another question (against Strawson, I do not think it is).

definite description is the subject, the description functions as a referring expression. This is not just because it is a singular term, but also because the proposition expressed by the sentence involves the particular referred to by the definite description, while the descriptive conditions are treated as presuppositions.<sup>260</sup> Strawson explicitly acknowledges the directly referential quality of definite singular terms and states that:

when definite singular terms with explicit descriptive content [e.g., definite descriptions] *are* successfully used to make direct references, their descriptive content does not enter into the statement of the truth-conditions of *what is said*, i.e. of the proposition which is affirmed, or otherwise expressed, by the speaker (Strawson, 1986b, pp. 92–93).<sup>261</sup>

It would be odd, then, to claim that singular terms with explicit descriptive content can be used to make direct references but names cannot, especially considering that Strawson does not attribute any descriptive content to proper names. Therefore, it seems fair to assume that, for Strawson, names are directly referential.<sup>262</sup>

*Reference and context-sensitivity:* From his early work onwards, Strawson not only acknowledged but constantly stressed the pivotal role that linguistic context plays in determining reference, and so he states that “no statement of the semantic rules of any natural language could be complete which did not contain rules governing such contextual dependence” (1997b, p. 219).<sup>263</sup> His stress that the meaning of a term is the set of rules determining its correct

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<sup>260</sup> This contrasts radically with Russell’s view, who, according to Kaplan, believed we could only describe, not directly know or refer to, an individual without direct acquaintance.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. (Kaplan, 1978, p. 320).

<sup>262</sup> For successful direct reference in communication, three conditions must be met: (1) there must be a single existing individual the speaker intends to refer to; (2) if the term used contains any descriptive content, the individual must meet that description; and (3) the communicative context should allow a competent audience to clearly understand that the speaker is referring to that specific individual and not another (Strawson, 1997a, p. 7). Strawson also claims that directly referential terms can be used within belief-specifying clauses (Strawson, 1979a, p. 108), such as in the sentence, “Stjopa believes that Nicole Kidman is the best actress of our time”.

<sup>263</sup> Basically, what Strawson also calls “Referring-rules” (see chapter 2 and chapter 3 of this thesis).

application within a certain contextual parameter echoes the view of Kaplan and his distinction between *character* and *content* (Kaplan, 1989).<sup>264</sup> I believe it would not be far-fetched to claim that Strawson's notion of linguistic meaning for referential expressions as the "set of directions for the use of the expression to refer" (Abbott, 2010, p. 135) is akin to the Kaplanian notion of character.

*Meaning Opacity:* A problem for a descriptivist descriptive semantics is the fact that one can still use the name "Nicole Kidman" to refer to Nicole Kidman even if one does not know that she won an Oscar for *The Hours*. But how could this be if the meaning of the name is precisely such a description? Since according to Strawson, names have no meaning beyond their referent, this problem does not arise for him, thus, respecting our intuition about the lack of semantic transparency in names. This seems to be true even if we take Strawson as merely giving a descriptivist theory of reference fixing.<sup>265</sup>

*Rigid designation:* If modal notions like 'rigid designation' are legitimate, as the orthodoxy takes them to be, then they are compatible with Strawson's position, given how he conceives of names as directly referential (see Kripke (1972, p. 276)).<sup>266</sup> A further reason to support this claim is Strawson's conviction that identity statements are necessary truths, so he writes: "yes, such an utterance [of an identity statement], if true, is a kind of necessary truth; though, of course, it is not such that, merely in virtue of having command of the names, we automatically know it to have this character" (Strawson, 1974e, p. 47). It is important to notice that he does not offer a particular view as to the nature of proper names in modal or counterfactual

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<sup>264</sup> Roughly, Kaplan distinguishes *character* as the rule or function that determines the reference of an expression based on the context of its use, while *content* is the specific referent or proposition that an expression conveys in a particular context.

<sup>265</sup> However, the problem reappears in relation to failures of substitutivity in 'opaque' contexts, and for that Strawson offers no solution.

<sup>266</sup> Rigidity is a weaker notion than that of direct reference. A directly referential term is thereby a rigid term, but a term can still be rigid without necessarily being directly referential.

contexts; his only text regarding modality, “May Bes and Might Have Beens” (1979c), focuses on the epistemic character of modal statements but offers no detailed insight as to the rigidity of names beyond using them in what seems to be examples of rigid designation, e.g.: “Aristotle might never have been born and so might never have existed” (ibid, p. 185).

*Pretended or “secondary” use of reference:* Strawson approaches the issue of referring to fictional or mythical entities in a manner similar to Kripke’s *Pretence Principle* (2013, p. 24). According to this, one refers to a fictional entity only in a secondary or derivative sense of *refer* (Strawson, 1950, p. 13) very much in line with Evans’ *conniving use* (Evans, 1982, p. 343). In this case, the presupposition-set that enables the identification of the thing referred to is *relative only to a story and not to history* (Strawson, 1959, p. 18). In the case of existential statements containing names, like “Nicole Kidman exists”, if there is in fact no referent of “Nicole”—that is, if Kidman does not exist—then one fails to express a proposition because there is a failure of reference (Strawson, 1974e, p. 49). Similarly, negative existentials would entail a failure of reference and hence a truth-value gap (Strawson, 1964b, pp. 81–84). Thus, here Strawson follows the Mill-Russell paradigm in denying there can be reference to non-existent entities, for, again, reference presupposes existence (Strawson, 1959, p. 190). Ultimately, Strawson does not address the problem of an ontology of fiction; however, given his trademark of relaxed realism and his continual countenance of abstract entities, there is no reason to believe he would be against one.

*Homonymy:* To complete Strawson’s view of names, I want to point out that he seems to adopt a certain form of homonymy about names, a view that is similar to that of Kripke and Kaplan (1990) but also to Evans’ (1982) notion of *name-using practices* and to Recanati’s (1993) *naming conventions*:

For just as there is normally a plurality of items falling under a general term ‘F’, so there is, normally, a plurality of persons bearing an ordinary proper name such as ‘John’ or ‘Mr Smith’—or even ‘Aristotle’ or ‘Socrates’; and a speaker, using such a name to make an identifying reference will normally rely, just as he will using the form ‘the F’, on the audience’s knowledge of the context and circumstances of utterance to indicate which of the bearers of the name within the scope of the audience’s knowledge is the one intended (Strawson, 1994c, p. 399).<sup>267</sup>

Following Kaplan, such view holds that there are general names, say “David”, which is the name that both David Kaplan and David Hume share; and common currency names, which are the specific names we use to refer to an individual, for example, in the case of Kaplan, we use David<sub>K</sub> as opposed to David<sub>H</sub>, which we use to refer to Hume. Thus, as with his original distinction between sentences and uses of sentences, we would have names and uses of names.

To finish this section, I want to sum up Strawson’s view of proper names in connection with the descriptive semantics question:

- I. There are two dimensions to reference, one semantic and one pragmatic; the semantic dimension involves the relation between referring expressions and the items referred to, while the pragmatic one elaborates on it by focusing on the relation between speakers and their audience.
- II. In abstraction from the pragmatic picture, proper names lack descriptive content and overall, they have no meaning, though, of course, for identification-purposes name-users do associate some descriptive content with names.

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<sup>267</sup> See also: “[P]roper names for particulars are, in use, implicitly indexical, i.e., depend for their reference on contextual features” (Davidson, 1980, p. 317)

- III. In an ideal contextual setting proper names are directly referential and hence rigid designators.
- IV. Strawson presents then descriptonal foundational semantics paired with a non-descriptonal descriptive semantics for proper names.

### *The Pragmatic Dimension of Reference and Identifying Descriptions*

For Strawson, the concept of *identifying reference* is fundamentally audience-dependent. A speaker successfully identifies a referent for an audience when the audience, upon hearing the speaker's expression, understands which specific object or thing the speaker is talking about. Thus, successful identification occurs when the listener gains clarity about the intended referent (Strawson, 1962a, p. 254). It is for this reason that he proclaims: "[a] name is worthless without a backing description which can be produced on demand to explain its application" (1959, p. 20, my emphasis).<sup>268</sup> A claim that has undoubtedly reinforced the idea that Strawson equates the meaning of a name with a description.<sup>269</sup> Nevertheless, this is clearly a misunderstanding. I will now elaborate on this point to clarify Strawson's actual conception of identifying reference, demonstrating how it does not entail attributing definite descriptions as the semantic values of proper names. I hope to show that Strawson's focus on the pragmatic dimension of reference and the importance he grants to identifying descriptions is solely grounded on the platitude that, given that it carries no descriptive content, the successful use of a name in a

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<sup>268</sup> Strawson presents basically the same view in his earlier paper "Proper Names" (1957b, p. 58). He further elaborates in *Individuals: One cannot significantly use a name to refer to someone or something unless one knows who or what it is that one is referring to by that name. One must, in other words, be prepared to substitute a description for the name. [...] There must be a particular answering to the description which the speaker uses, or to the description which he is prepared to substitute for the name he uses, if he uses a name* (1959, p. 181, my emphasis).

However, the idea of being "prepared to substitute a description for a name" should not be understood too rigidly or taken too literally: "It is not required that people should be very ready articulators of what they know" (1959, p. 182).

<sup>269</sup> See, for example, Donnellan's (1972, p. 357) account of the "principle of identifying descriptions" which he explicitly links to Strawson.

communicative setting requires both speaker and addressee to be able to identify the name's referent.

First, an expression can identify something in two ways: either as a general member of a category or as a specific individual within that category. For example, expressions like “a teacher” or “someone” refer generally to a class without identifying a specific person, while phrases like “you”, “the teacher” or “my boyfriend” aim to single out a particular individual in a given context (Strawson, 1956b, p. 438). Names constitute a special class in this case, because “a name, like a definite description and unlike an indefinite description, does characteristically purport to identify the object which it is used to refer to” (Strawson, 1956b, p. 439).

Moreover, to understand which universal is being talked about it is enough to know the general meaning of the corresponding concept. For example, when someone says ‘dog’, they are alluding to the general idea of a four-legged, domesticated animal. However, to identify a specific dog, such as the one named ‘Pina’, we need more than just our understanding of the word ‘dog’. What is needed is some additional fact or piece of information that singles out this specific dog—perhaps a distinctive feature like “the Mexican dog with the long brown paws”. This extra piece of information is what separates Pina from all other dogs (in an appropriate context). Hence, a particular-designating expression, conveys with it a distinctive fact that uniquely identifies it: “*to explain which particular we mean by it, it would not be sufficient to appeal to knowledge of the language—we should have, in one way or another, to indicate or adduce a distinguishing proposition, true uniquely of that particular*” (Strawson, 1994b, p. 38, my emphasis).<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> But note that “a man who responds appropriately to the demonstrative reference ‘That dog’ might be said, in a sense, to know that there is just one dog in his field of vision and hence to know an individuating feature of the object referred to, but not to have reflected upon or formulated to himself this proposition, and hence not to have knowledge of it in a more “theoretical” sense” (Strawson, 1962a, p. 256).

The general notion behind this is that the speaker must know what she is referring to, or, to use Strawson's own terminology, that the speaker must be in possession of *identifying knowledge of a particular*; she must know a uniquely identifying fact about a certain object if she wants to refer to it. As Strawson explicitly states:

[T]he general requirements of hearer-identification could be regarded as fulfilled if the hearer knew that the particular being referred to was identical with some particular about which he knew some individuating fact, or facts, other than the fact that it was the particular being referred to. To know an identifying fact about a particular is to know that such-and-such a thing is true of that particular and of no other particular whatever (Strawson, 1959, p. 23).

Later, with the publication of "Identifying Reference and Truth-Values", Strawson elaborates on this position and claims that an *identifying description* is one which applies to one and only one thing, while a referring expression is in turn one which is used to invoke *identifying knowledge* (1971a). The use of a singular term aims to establish for the audience a connection between what the speaker is referring to and an object already known, experienced, or perceived by the audience. The speaker may rely on various resources, such as what the listener can perceive at that moment, prior information shared in the conversation, or knowledge the audience possesses independently from these sources (Strawson, 1961b, p. 63). Coming back to our example with Kidman, when a speaker S grasps the meaning of 'Nicole Kidman', S is in possession of uniquely identifying knowledge of the referent of 'Kidman'. It is that capacity to single out, to pick out the referent through a fitting description, which warrants identifying reference. In this regard, uniquely identifying descriptions are not necessary for successful identification. What matters is simply the ability to communicate and reach mutual understanding between the speaker and her audience (Strawson, 1959, p. 18).<sup>271</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>271</sup> Cf: "It would seem gratuitous to insist on such high standards of audience-reflectiveness and still more gratuitous to insist that the feature reflected on has to be such that it must be individuating if

and crucially in line with Strawson's conception of direct reference, the information conveyed (and arrived to) by means of an identifying description relating to a name does not take part of the propositional content of a sentence using the name but merely as a guideline to help the listener identify the referent and hence grasp the sentence's meaning. To use contemporary terminology, the use of a singular term prompts the audience to access a "mental file" corresponding to the term, and its success depends on whether the interpreter can correctly link the term to this mental file (Recanati, 2005a, p. 292).<sup>272</sup>

Importantly, *Strawson's concept of identification is interpersonal*: it relies on what the audience can collectively recognise as the speaker's intended reference, rather than on the cognitive abilities of an individual alone (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 342). Hence, he allows for the possibility of using an identifying reference which borrows its referring credentials from the identifying reference of another, therefore allowing for a certain form of *parasitic* or *deferential* reference (Strawson, 1957b, p. 59, fn 11).<sup>273</sup> This means that one could use a referring expression, say, a name, without being able to produce or give *any* identifying description that goes with it on the condition that he uses it with the intended reference of someone else who can produce such identifying description.

Moreover, Strawson acknowledges even cases where the audience gains the necessary identifying knowledge solely from encountering the name for the first time. In this situation, even without prior identifying knowledge, the audience is able to associate the name with

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anything has it. But would there be any non-arbitrary way of relaxing the standards so as to allow proper names a central place in successful identification while keeping demonstrative reference on the periphery" (Strawson, 1962a, p. 256).

<sup>272</sup> Recanati himself credits Strawson with initiating the line of research on mental files (Recanati, 2005a, pp. 291–292).

<sup>273</sup> Such notion of borrowed reference reappears in *Individuals* (1959, p. 191). Notably, Michaelson and Reimer (2019, p. 10), as well as Cumming (2019, p. 23), remark on this feature of Strawson's conception of parasitic reference which seems to be neglected in most of the literature on descriptorial theories of names.

relevant information (possibly through some form of contextual salience), enabling the name to effectively serve its identificatory role.<sup>274</sup>

Strawson's emphasis on identifying knowledge as a condition for understanding and using names, thus, amounts to no more than the evident fact that a speaker uses proper names *on the presumption* that the hearer be somehow familiar with them. As Abbott clearly puts it: "proper names do not include descriptive content which might enable an addressee to figure out the referent, so typically a speaker will not use one unless they assume that their addressee already knows the referent by that name" (2010, p. 259).<sup>275</sup>

## Conclusion

To sum up, Strawson's view on the nature of proper names differs from standard descriptivism in important ways. In fact, he is only partly descriptivist in as much as his views on the meaning of a proper name have more to do with the direct referentialism of Kaplan than with the late descriptivism of Searle, for example. A plausible explanation of why Strawson has usually been classified as total descriptivist might be due precisely to people like Searle, who claimed that his own thoroughly descriptivist account of reference was a continuation of both Frege's work and Strawson's *Individuals* (Searle, 1969, p. 77). Even just a careful reading of *Individuals* in abstraction from his subsequent work will bring to light the patent differences between Strawson's view and that of Searle, who was committed to the idea that "meaning is prior to reference; reference is in virtue of meaning", and hence, to the

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<sup>274</sup> Cf: "[A] reference succeeds if and only if the audience has, or then acquires, knowledge of an individuating feature of the object being referred to and knows that it is the object of which it has this knowledge which is being referred to" (Strawson, 1962a, p. 256). Here the key remark is "or then acquires".

<sup>275</sup> Contrast with "For a hearer of a name to have command of the name, as then used, it is sufficient that the name invoke some kind of identifying knowledge, in the hearer's possession, of the bearer of the name" (Strawson, 1974e, p. 43).

notion that all referring expressions must have a meaning (ibid, pp. 88, 92), which evidently clashes with Strawson's picture of names without meaning (Cf. Searle, p 125).

**PART TWO**  
**METAPHYSICS**

When the word 'metaphysics' was an anti-word, as I agree it was, the word 'analysis' at the same time was rather a pro-word, and I'm half inclined to say that respectable metaphysics is just analysis *en gros* and analysis is metaphysics *en detail*, as it were

(Strawson, as quoted in Magee, 1971, p. 126)

## Chapter 6: “Natural Metaphysics” Strawson’s Method of Descriptive Metaphysics

[I]t is part of our nature that, other things being as they are, it is natural for us to have the conceptual apparatus that we do have (Strawson, 1967a, p. 318).

Our practices do not merely exploit our natures, they express them (Strawson, 1962b, p. 27)

In learning the nature of things, we learn the possibilities of action; in learning the possibilities of action, we learn the nature of things (Strawson, 1992, p. 78).

### Introduction

In this chapter, I address the question: is descriptive metaphysics about the world? I argue that it is. First, I provide an overview of Strawson’s programme of descriptive metaphysics, clarifying its central concepts in order to show that, even from its original formulation in Strawson’s writings, this project has always been concerned not only with our ways of thinking and talking, but with the nature of the world itself. Following this, I describe the method of descriptive metaphysics, emphasizing its use of linguistic analysis, transcendental arguments, and the four types of metaphysical tasks.

I then discuss the challenges posed to transcendental arguments and Strawson’s response through his adoption of a “catholic” naturalism. Up to this point, my exposition remains exegetical. Hence, I do not attempt to defend or motivate Strawson’s views and arguments, just to present them in a more or less structured way. However, in the section titled *The Marriage of Kant and Hume Under Strawson*, I offer an “original” reconstruction of Strawson’s philosophy, synthesizing his naturalism with his transcendental ambitions. I refer to this as “original”, but in fact, all the elements of this synthesis are found within Strawson’s

work, and several commentators have hinted at such a unification, even though Strawson himself did not explicitly make it. My goal is to present what I consider the best, most coherent version of the programme consistent with Strawson's writings.

Finally, I conclude by addressing and dispelling the misconception that descriptive metaphysics is not serious as it does not concern itself with reality. I counter this view by drawing on commentary that supports Strawson's realist metaphysical claims, affirming that his work indeed seeks to illuminate the structure of the world itself.

## **What is Descriptive Metaphysics?**

Descriptive metaphysics follows the analogy of philosophy as grammar: just as we intuitively use the grammar of our native language without being able to explain its rules, we also use our conceptual equipment effectively without necessarily having a clear or explicit understanding of the principles or theory guiding them. Similarly, just like a grammarian works to systematically explain the rules we naturally follow when speaking a language, so the philosopher strives to systematically uncover the general conceptual framework that we intuitively and unconsciously navigate in our daily practices (Strawson, 1992, p. 7).<sup>276</sup> The main target of such an investigation are the fundamental categories that structure our experience of the world. As Strawson writes:

There are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental characters, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialities of the most refined thinking; they are the commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and yet are the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. It is with these [...] that a descriptive metaphysics will be primarily concerned (Strawson, 1959, p. 10).

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<sup>276</sup> Cf: "We deal, more or less successfully or clumsily, with the world—and with ourselves as part of it—with the help of schemes or systems of ideas or concepts of which we have a *practical* mastery. But practical mastery of our schemes does not entail theoretical understanding of their structures; and a large part of the philosopher's task is to make those structures clear" (Strawson, 1973b, p. 971).

As a result, this metaphysical endeavour raises critical questions: what are the most fundamental concepts or categories through which we structure our thinking and experience of the world? How are these categories interconnected within the overall framework of our thought? And how they are related to notions like existence, identity, and unity, which extend across all categories? (Strawson, 1992, p. 35).

Following from this, the core argument behind a descriptive metaphysics is as follows: first, to investigate the general structure of the world, we must examine the general structure of our thought, which, by being inherently about the world, must be—at least for the most part—capable of comprehending it. Second, the general structure of our thought is—at least for the most part—reflected in our language. Therefore, a philosophical analysis of ordinary language can provide us with a largely accurate ontological picture. The entities we seek in compiling an ontological catalogue are supposed to correspond to what makes the true sentences of our ordinary language true, or to what makes our largely accurate beliefs about the world, as expressed by those sentences, true (Berto & Plebani, 2015, p. 35).

Descriptive metaphysics stands in opposition to revisionary metaphysics. Whereas the former is “content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world”, the latter is “concerned to produce a better structure” (Strawson, 1959, p. 9), assuming therefore, that our actual or current conceptual scheme is in some state of deficit, that it can, and should, be improved. It calls for conceptual revision, for the replacement of those elements that are deemed unfit for our best understanding of reality, and, sometimes, for the reformation of our entire structure of thought.

Notwithstanding, the work of revisionary metaphysics remains intrinsically intriguing due to its visionary spirit. However, it is often driven by the pursuit of a unified and all-encompassing picture of the world and its elements, frequently overlooking how our concepts function in practice. Thus, seduced by some captivating but ultimately twisted model of reality,

it ends up producing absurd and, in most cases, meaningless theories (Strawson, 1992, p. 14).<sup>277</sup>

Although the distinction is not always sharply defined, much of traditional metaphysics throughout the history of philosophy has leaned toward the revisionary approach.<sup>278</sup> It does so not only by continually introducing and employing new concepts or attempting to fix those deemed deficient, but also by asserting, in various ways, that *our existing worldview is not only incomplete*<sup>279</sup> *but fundamentally inadequate*.

Thus, descriptive metaphysics acts as a prophylactic praxis for revisionary metaphysics, and for philosophy itself as, in general, philosophical problems emerge because we are not content to simply observe or follow how we actually use our concepts.

## Preliminary Notions

To analyse Strawson's methodology for descriptive metaphysics, it is crucial to first clarify some key concepts that underpin the theory by addressing the following questions: What is a concept? How are concepts identified? What is a conceptual scheme? How are conceptual schemes individuated? What is the relationship between language and a conceptual scheme? Who exactly constitutes the 'we' in "our conceptual scheme"? What does it mean to claim that one conceptual scheme is "better" than another? Is there a true conceptual scheme, or could different schemes be appropriate for different purposes? (Haack, 1979, pp. 366–367).

### *What is a Concept?*

Strawson conceives of concepts as 'principles of collection and distinction' (Strawson, 1959, p. 228, 1974e, p. 14), understood as rules or guides that direct higher intellectual activities: in

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<sup>277</sup> See: "Descartes is but one example—an illustrious one—of this kind of metaphysics; that is to say, of the production of a captivating and striking world-picture, dominated by a particular interest or a particular attitude, and correspondingly liable to distortion, to exaggeration, and, finally, even to incoherence" (Strawson, 1992, p. 16).

<sup>278</sup> See: "I have spoken of metaphysics as if its principal aim were the reformation of concepts, and its most frequent achievement their deformation" (Strawson, 1967a, p. 87).

<sup>279</sup> And descriptive metaphysics would not deny this.

judgment, that is, in the application of a concept, the subject categorises objects based on whether they possess a certain property or draws inferences from one proposition to another by connecting concepts (H.-J. Glock, 2023, p. 320). Strawson writes in a Kantian mode that “for experience to be possible at all we must become aware of particular items and become aware of them as falling under general concepts” (Strawson, 1966b, p. 72).<sup>280</sup> And this is because (certain) concepts pertain to specific properties. Properties, or ways in which things can be, exhibit a certain generality, therefore serving as a method of classifying things; as such, a concept is not the act of classifying but instead a rule or principle guiding it, sorting objects into those that are, or are not, an instance of the concept.<sup>281</sup> As Strawson puts it:

In the case of most primitive and basic concepts and in the case of many sophisticated ones as well, to possess a concept, or at least to have a full grasp of it, is at least to have a certain recognitional capacity, though it is normally more as well; e.g., to know something of its relation to other concepts, its place in a system of concepts (Strawson, 1998c, p. 325).

Therefore, to possess a concept is to have a set of skills or capacities: first, the ability to recognize and identify a property, a universal, and second, the ability to connect that concept with others and position them within a logical space, a network of concepts (Strawson, 1987a). To possess a recognitional concept *C*, one must have the capacity to identify instances of *C* as *being instances of C*. However, not all concepts function in this recognitional manner (Cassam, 2003, p. 95).<sup>282</sup> Some abstract logical notions, for example, like negation or conjunction, are

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<sup>280</sup> See also: “Thought about the world requires general concepts; and thought about the world requires their application in particular instances” (Strawson, 1975b, p. 6). For Strawson, the data of experience is already laden with “theory”: “Sensible experience is permeated by concepts unreflective acceptance of the general applicability of which is a condition of its being so permeated, a condition of that experience being what it is; and these concepts are of realistically conceived objects” (Strawson, 1979d, p. 129).

<sup>281</sup> Cf: “[T]he fundamental form of affirmative judgement [...] is that in which we judged that some *general* concept has application in some *particular* case” (Strawson, 1992, p. 54).

<sup>282</sup> However, this stands in tension with Strawson’s claim that Cf: “Perception is concept-saturated throughout; and every concept is the concept of a universal” (Strawson, 1998c, p. 327). I believe we can qualify this remark by referring to the concept of perception. Hence, recognitional concepts, the primary concepts involved in perception, are indeed concepts of universals.

not strictly recognitional, instead they allow us to connect and structure other concepts.<sup>283</sup> For these reasons, a concept is not a genuine representation: it does not refer to or signify the objects that the judgments or propositions in which it appears are about (H.-J. Glock, 2023, pp. 321–322).<sup>284</sup> Nonetheless, being intensional objects, recognitional concepts are articulated through predicates; thus, while distinct, they are inseparably tied to the meanings of those expressions.<sup>285</sup> Moreover, like predicates themselves, and like the senses of words,<sup>286</sup> “[a] concept must [...] be accessible to thinkers in general, a shared or sharable possession” (Strawson, 1998n, p. 360).<sup>287</sup>

Recognitional concepts identify properties. In turn, properties correspond to, or are instances of, universals.<sup>288</sup> Strawson’s acceptance of universals and other abstract entities

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<sup>283</sup> For example, having the concept APPLE enables one to recognize apples and differentiate them from oranges. Similarly, possessing the concept RED allows one to identify that some apples are red and distinguish them from green ones. In contrast, the concept of negation allows us to move from the thought that an apple is green to the conclusion that it is not red. For a more detailed view to Strawson’s conception of logical concepts see Heyndels (2022).

<sup>284</sup> Moreover, we are also able to think of specific concepts applying or not applying in different combinations without necessarily identifying the individual items they apply to. “In other words we are capable of explicitly general thinking” (Strawson, 1992, p. 40).

<sup>285</sup> Cf: “Let us focus on Strawson’s concession that to talk of concepts is to talk of the senses of expressions. It is not quite clear what this concession amounts to. Are concepts, for Strawson, identical with the senses of expressions? Or does he hold them to be entities distinct from but in some way inseparably linked with the senses of expressions. Both interpretations fit the wording of the concession. Perhaps Strawson’s speaking of expressions specifying concepts favours the latter reading, since it is a little odd to speak of an expression as specifying its sense. But I do not think this point is decisive against the former interpretation since ‘specify’ is used in a somewhat special way by Strawson (corresponding to the technical use of ‘introduce’ in his earlier account of the subject-predicate distinction in *Individuals*)” (Hale, 1979, p. 278). Based on what I argued above about Strawson conceiving of concepts as principles of collection and recognitional capacities, I argue that he would not fully identify them with the senses or meanings of expressions. Moreover, not all words in a language have senses (onomatopoeic expressions, proper names, for example), and not all words express concepts (again, ordinary proper names, and arguably, all singular terms). In short, I would say that, in line with Strawson’s view, *the sense of an expression gives its meaning and names the concept it expresses*.

<sup>286</sup> Cf: “[T]here is no hope of understanding what concepts are except by seeing them as the creatures of language. They owe their being, such as it is, to words” (Strawson, 1974e, p. 32).

<sup>287</sup> Cf: “All things, of whatever category, have properties; only conscious beings; and perhaps societies, can be said to have concepts” (Strawson, 1998c, p. 325).

<sup>288</sup> In a break from his distinctive compatibilism, Strawson consistently distanced himself from a conceptualist stance, which holds that we only need to acknowledge general concepts without reference to universals. His attention to the debate between realism and nominalism shows that he never really entertained conceptualism as an option (Chakrabarti, 2006, p. 18).

steams from “the mere acknowledgement of something implicit in our commonest and most evident experience” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 83).<sup>289</sup> For a universal to exist, having actual instances is not necessary, though it is sufficient. It is enough to know that a logically possible instance could exist and to understand, in principle, how to recognize it if encountered (Strawson, 1994b, p. 32).<sup>290</sup> In contrast, a particular “is necessarily a particular instance of something general; it must belong to some universal” (Tse, 1998, p. 377). In that sense, universals do not have independent existence, nor can they be reduced to mere aggregates of particulars.<sup>291</sup>

The category of universals includes general entities like numbers, states, qualities, relations, processes, and species, and it is divided into *sortal* and *characterizing* universals (Strawson, 1959, pp. 167–173).<sup>292,293</sup> Like particulars, universals also form a framework defined not by spatiotemporal but by logical relations, such as inclusiveness/exclusiveness, involvement/non-involvement, and hierarchical order. But unlike particulars—and just like with concepts—universals can be referred to by general terms without requiring an empirical

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<sup>289</sup> This is why he calls his position “Platonism demystified” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 83).

<sup>290</sup> Whereas the existence of a particular entails its having some spatio-temporal location, “[t]he existence of a universal implies no more than the logical possibility of its possessing instances (Strawson, 1998d, p. 384). However, this in turn implies that contradictory or logically impossible universals—like a round square—cannot exist.

<sup>291</sup> Although Strawson acknowledges that we ordinarily say that one read a poem or listened to a symphony, he does not endorse the claim that we can literally perceive universals, since these are entirely abstract and therefore lack causal powers (Chakrabarti, 1998, p. 321).

<sup>292</sup> Cf: The primary sense of ‘y is predicated of x’ is ‘x is asserted to be non-relationally tied to y either as an instance of y or as characterised by y’ (Strawson, 1959, p. 171). Roughly, sortal universals sort objects into genera, so they involve concepts like HORSE, APPLE, TABLE. Meanwhile, characterising universals sort objects into species; they further characterise and individuate particular instances of sortal universals. Examples of characterising universals are properties like redness, roundness, brightness, wisdom, beauty, courage, etc.

<sup>293</sup> Later in his career, Strawson (2006) acknowledges a third type of universal, sometimes also called a “trope” or an “abstract particular” (D. C. Williams, 1953a, 1953b), whose instances are individual features like the redness of the apple in front of me or the softness of my mother’s hands; “these are *particular* objects, certainly in space and time and directly perceived. They belong to the category of what I long ago called ‘particularized qualities’ and might perhaps better be called ‘property instances’—and they certainly belong to our ontology of perceptible objects” (Strawson, 1998c, p. 326). However, the endorsing of a category of particularized qualities that belong to our ontology of perceptible objects stands in tension with the claim that universals lack causal powers and therefore cannot be perceived directly (see footnote 5 above).

basis, that is, without designating a particular fact, as the meaning of a general term is sufficient to identify a universal.<sup>294</sup>

To summarise, concepts are either (a) a recognitional capacity that allows us to identify and distinguish instances of a property or universal (e.g., recognizing apples as apples), or (b) a rule for inference connecting concepts and propositions (e.g., moving from “This apple is green” to “This apple is coloured”). Moreover, concepts are non-representational in that they do not denote objects or sets of objects, but rather they function within judgments and propositions. Therefore, possessing a concept involves knowing how it relates to other concepts within a broader logical structure. Finally, concepts are publicly shareable intensional objects articulated through predicates.

### *What is a Conceptual Scheme?*

A conceptual scheme is a framework of concepts, categories, principles and logical relations through which we interpret and understand the world. It provides the structure for our thought, language, and experience of the world. Strawson conceives of a conceptual scheme as a hierarchy of categories organized according to their ontological significance (Haack, 1979, p. 370). He describes this scheme as:

an elaborate network, a system, of connected items, concepts, such that the function of each item, each concept, could, from the philosophical point of view, be properly understood only by grasping its connections with the others, its place in the system—perhaps better still, the picture of a set of interlocking systems of such a kind (Strawson, 1992, p. 19).

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<sup>294</sup> Cf: “Any universal is such that it can in principle be designated in terms whose success in uniquely determining their reference is guaranteed by their meaning alone and hence does not depend on the use of any explicitly or implicitly indexical expression” (Strawson, 1981a, p. 317). This remark is fully illuminated in the context of Strawson’s commitment to the view that all reference to particulars is ultimately demonstrative, hence, indexical; reference to particulars cannot be achieved independently of contextual contribution.

His view proposes a more flexible and inclusive approach—a “catholic approach”—to the ontology reflected by our conceptual scheme; rather than simply distinguishing between what is included or excluded, what is real and what is not, it conceives of an ontological hierarchy with varying levels of priority (Strawson, 1992, p. 46). Moreover, it assumes that our conceptual scheme is a shared possession common to the human species (Strawson, 1972, 1974e).

Concepts within a scheme, however, are more than just individual “building blocks” that are assembled according to general rules. To use a rough metaphor, the elements of our conceptual scheme are not merely like *Lego* blocks with different shapes, where each shape represents a type of concept or category. The picture is more intricate: the shape of a block determines its logical relations—how it can connect with other concepts—but the type of concept is represented by the material of the block. So, instead of just blocks of various shapes, we also have blocks of different materials. More fundamental concepts are made from the most common and durable materials, while more sophisticated or technical concepts are built from rarer materials, which are less prevalent in the entire set of *Lego* bricks.

Some concepts are regarded as more basic or fundamental because they are presupposed by the employment of other concepts. In other words, the ability to work with one set of concepts might depend on the ability to work with another set, but not the other way around, in that regard, “the acquisition of the theoretical concepts of the special disciplines presupposes and rests upon the possession of the pre-theoretical concepts of ordinary life” (Strawson, 1992, p. 21).<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> To use an example inspired by Carnap, my understanding of the concept of *temperature* is grounded in the ordinary notions of heat and cold: I know what temperature is because I grasp what it means to feel hot or cold. Furthermore, the application of the strictly scientific concept of *molecular motion* as an explication of temperature cannot be fully developed without first clarifying how this technical concept connects to the non-technical notion.

Although conceptual schemes shape our experience, we are often unaware of the system we rely on. In most daily activities, we intuitively follow certain patterns of thinking and acting. These patterns are not immediately obvious. One way to uncover them is through language, since language is grounded in the same conceptual system that structures our thinking and behaviour. The very possession of a shared language is assumed when we seek out or rely on existing linguistic resources for suitable expression; however, it is the prior understanding of a concept that drives the use of these linguistic resources for its expression.<sup>296</sup> As Strawson remarks: “the capacity of conceptual thinking underlies the whole process of linguistic development, indeed the very existence of language” (Strawson, 1998c, p. 325).

It is important to realise that conceptual schemes cannot be identified with broad scientific theories or paradigms, such as those of physics, because that would entail that conceptual schemes are either true or false, the way theories are.<sup>297</sup> However, this creates a disconnect between the notion of a conceptual scheme and the post-Kantian idea of transcendental arguments, which aim to establish the necessary conditions for experience or self-consciousness. Yet no one would argue that adherence to a particular scientific theory is a necessary condition for experience (Strawson, 1982c, p. 48). Therefore, it would be a misconception to think of a conceptual scheme as a theory of the world; a scientific theory of the world presupposes a certain conceptual scheme. Is in this sense that Strawson writes: “the common realist conception of the world does not have the character of a ‘theory’ in relation

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<sup>296</sup> See also: “[T]hese remarks call for the qualification that, at least in some cases, the initially and nonlinguistically formed concept may acquire a firmer shape or definition in the light of linguistic development” (Strawson, 1998c, p. 325).

<sup>297</sup> Cf: “We may distinguish, with Wittgenstein, between a language-game and the actual moves people make in playing the game; or, to press the analogy, between the constitutive rules of what is literally a game, say chess or football, and the historical course of actual matches. Football is not won or lost, though football matches are; a conceptual scheme is not true or false, though propositions framed in terms of it are” (Strawson, 1982c, p. 48).

to the ‘data of sense’” (Strawson, 1979d, p. 132).<sup>298</sup> In short, the notion of a conceptual scheme is analytically prior to that of a scientific theory.

In that regard, Strawson criticizes Rorty and Davidson for assuming that those who use the distinction between a content and conceptual scheme interpret ‘content’ as reality, the world, or experience broadly, and they see the role of a conceptual scheme as one of “fitting” or “ordering” this content. In response, he contends that what fills a conceptual framework or constitutes the content of a conceptual scheme is instead a “set of propositions (thoughts or beliefs) in which the interrelated concepts constituting the scheme found essential employment. *Reality or the world is not the content of the scheme but what the contents of the scheme refer to or are about*” (Strawson, 1982c, p. 48, my emphasis). Thus, conceptual frameworks structure our experience of reality, but not reality itself. To think otherwise would veer into some sort of transcendental idealism, a position Strawson rejects.<sup>299</sup> This remark will be important later on when I present Strawson’s naturalist approach.

On the whole, conceptual schemes are not true or false, just like Mercator’s projection is neither true nor false. They are either useful or not, depending on how well they represent what we want and whether they establish the conceptual relations important for our purposes (P. M. S. Hacker, 2003, p. 48). Different schemes draw distinct conceptual distinctions and connections, and thereby establishing different conceptual hierarchies or orderings. The revisionary metaphysician argues that our ordinary conceptual scheme fails to carve nature at its joints, and therefore, must be reformed with sharper, more precise concepts.

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<sup>298</sup> Cf: “In order for some belief or set of beliefs to be correctly described as a theory in respect of certain data, it must be possible to describe the data on the basis of which the theory is held in terms which do not presuppose the acceptance of the theory on the part of those for whom the data *are* data” (Strawson, 1979d, p. 129).

<sup>299</sup> Cf: According to Strawson, transcendental idealism is the model of “the mind producing Nature as we know it out of the unknowable reality of things as they are in themselves” (Strawson, 1966b, p. 16).

## *The Nature of Our Fundamental Concepts*

As mentioned above, the primary goal of Strawson's descriptive metaphysics is to identify, map, and describe "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". We are talking about "such ideas as those of space, time, object, event, mind and body, knowledge, truth, meaning, existence, identity, action, intention, causation, and explanation" (Strawson, 1992, p. 24, 1995, p. 13). These categories are general, basic, irreducible, and, in a special sense, they are also non-contingent or necessary. I will briefly define these special qualities below:

### *General*

These concepts are general in that they serve as the fundamental categories of reality. They ramify throughout our conceptual scheme subsuming "thousands of concepts that are in constant employment in our daily discourse" under "their rule-governed connectedness" (Haack, 2003, p. 59). For example, the concept of a material object is entailed by a multitude of particular concepts, such as those of a rock, a table, or a building (H.-J. Glock, 2012, p. 396)

### *Basic*

They are basic inasmuch as they "are thoroughly pervasive of all thinking" (Strawson, 1992, p. 76). These fundamental metaphysical concepts, being part of the transcendental conditions of experience, are "mediated by the whole network of our epistemic concepts". It is important to clarify here that these transcendental conditions are not psychological but conceptual (H.-J. Glock, 2003a, p. 42). So, their interconnection is not a matter of cognitive psychology, but of conceptual analysis.

### *Irreducible*

They are irreducible, not because they are simple or atomic, but because they cannot be explained away by other concepts without circularity. A concept is primitive, in this regard, relative to another concept or a group of interconnected concepts (Strawson, 1969, p. 187). For instance, for Strawson, the concept of a person is primitive, or analytically prior, to the concept of a body and the concept of a mind because it is presupposed by them;<sup>300</sup> it is irreducible because it is indispensable, in the sense that you would need to have it to possess another relative concept (Burstein, 1971; P. Hacker, 2002; Strawson, 1966a, 1969).<sup>301</sup> Crucially, Strawson characterises fundamentality, that is, the basic status of a concept, as a matter of priority of identifiability, a feature of those concepts we can identify in thought, speech or discourse without having to appeal to other concepts in order to arrive at them:<sup>302</sup> “what is in question is not an order of temporal development, but an order of explanation” (Strawson, 1959, p. 209).

### *Necessary*

Finally, they are necessary because “we can form no coherent or intelligible conception of experience which does not exhibit those features” (Strawson, 1966b, p. 271). In their most fundamental character, these categories change not at all (Strawson, 1959, p. 10). This is what Haack calls the “conceptual invariance thesis” (Haack, 1979, p. 361), the idea that while conceptual change can occur around the edges of the framework, the fundamental structure remains intact.<sup>303</sup> Strawson is appealing here to a *sui generis* conception of metaphysical

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<sup>300</sup> Cf: “[W]hat is in question is not an order of temporal development, but an order of explanation” (Strawson, 1959, p. 209).

<sup>301</sup> Cf: A “conceptual capacity that sets in at the same time as experience of a certain type can [...] be said to originate in experience of that type, despite the fact that neither the experience nor the conceptual capacity is temporally prior” (Cassam, 2003, p. 104)

<sup>302</sup> In this regard, Strawson’s notion of a primitive concept evokes the notion of a basic level category in cognitive psychology. See Rosch et al. (Rosch et al., 1976).

<sup>303</sup> Cf: “Logic cannot do away with that formal structure of human thought. So, with Strawson’s theory, the distinction of subject and predicate in logic has a kind of metaphysical necessity; is not a mere historical, contingent fact; it cannot be illuminated anymore than it can be arbitrarily manipulated” (Tse, 1998, p. 379)

necessity that is not to be identified either with the notion of analyticity, the property of a statement or proposition being true by virtue of its meaning alone, independent of any empirical facts about the world,<sup>304</sup> or with modal necessity, the idea that something must be the case in all possible worlds or scenarios. As a result, these non-analytic, non-contingent<sup>305</sup> (yet not modally necessary) propositions are such that their negation does not result in contradiction, but in human unintelligibility, in an incapacity to conceive of the world in terms that would make sense *for us*.

Again, drawing on Kant's framework, Strawson considers that the notion of '*synthetic a priori*' can be applied to recognise our fundamental categories with a unique character or status:<sup>306</sup> those that describe the "fundamental general structure of any conception of experience such as we can make intelligible to ourselves" (Strawson, 1966b, p. 44). "He sometimes described them, somewhat mysteriously, *as non-analytically but still conceptually necessary conditions*" (Cassam, 2016, p. 915, my italics) or as '*conceptual truths*' (Strawson, 1959, p. 58). Our fundamental categories are synthetic in as much as they are the framework of contact with reality, yet they are a priori since the recognitional capacities they constitute cannot be derived from experience, being themselves essential prerequisites for the possibility of empirical knowledge of objects: "what is a necessary condition of any empirical judgement is not itself the product of any such judgement, i.e. is a priori" (Strawson, 1994d, p. 247).<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Is in this context that he claims that there is no need "of invoking the notion [of analyticity] to preserve the respectability of our metaphysics" (Strawson, 1968, p. 335).

<sup>305</sup> "We are dealing here with something that conditions our whole way of talking and thinking, and it is for this reason that we feel it to be non-contingent" (Strawson, 1959, p. 29).

<sup>306</sup> Cf: "[i]f there is a set of ideas which enter indispensably into such a structure, then the members of this set will surely have a distinctive status" (Strawson, 1966b, pp. 49–50). Although he remarks that Kant himself 'has no clear and general conception of the synthetic a priori at all' (Strawson, 1966b, p. 43).

<sup>307</sup> Regarding the categories, Strawson argues that the recognitional capacities they constitute cannot be derived from experience because these concepts are essential prerequisites for the possibility of empirical knowledge of objects: "what is a necessary condition of any empirical judgement is not itself the product of any such judgement, i.e. is a priori" (Strawson, 1994d, p. 247). For example, "the concept of causal efficacy is not derived from experience of a world of objects, but is a presupposition of it; or, perhaps better, he's already with us when anything which could be called 'experience' begins" (Strawson, 1992, p. 124).

## The Method of Descriptive Metaphysics

The ubiquity of these concepts can be clarified by exploring their necessary connections within our system of thought, which is why Strawson refers to his method as “connective” rather than reductive or atomistic (Strawson, 1990b, p. 184).<sup>308</sup> In this approach, we aim for an anatomy of our conceptual structure without subjecting it to dissection.<sup>309</sup> Our point of departure, again, is the careful examination of our ordinary language usage:<sup>310</sup> natural language mirrors the fundamental role of certain types of referential objects and logical individuals in our worldview, highlighting the primacy of specific types of predication, properties, and relations (Strawson, 1992, p. 69).<sup>311</sup>

Naturally, grammatical distinctions, not being universal across all languages, might be considered relatively superficial and lacking universal importance. However, there are corresponding formal or logical distinctions that are independent of language-specific grammatical categories and therefore possess the necessary universal significance.<sup>312</sup> “[W]hat

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<sup>308</sup> Strawson originally used the word ‘illumination’ to refer to his philosophical method (Strawson, 1963, p. 505).

<sup>309</sup> As Glock specifies, “[c]oncepts are elucidated not by decomposing them into elements which are simple or less problematic, but by tracing their connections with other parts of our conceptual scheme” (2001, p. 527).

<sup>310</sup> Cf: “There is a quite general ambiguity in the notion of ‘our ordinary concept’ of whatever it may be. Should the lineaments of such a concept be drawn from its use, from our ordinary practice, or should we add the reflective accretions, however confused, which, naturally or historically, gather round it? The distinction is hardly clear-cut; but where it can be made, I prefer the first alternative” (Strawson, 1980, p. 265).

<sup>311</sup> Cf: “What are the most general categories of things which we *in fact* treat as objects of reference or—what comes to the same thing—as subjects of predication and what are the most general types of predicates or concepts which we employ *in fact* in speaking of them?’ Or, in other words: ‘what are the fundamental types of individuals, properties, and relations which characterize the structure of our thought and what relations can be established among them?’” (Strawson, 1992, p. 47). Hence, Strawson adopts Quine’s general principle of ontological commitment, which holds that a statement is committed to the existence of those objects required for its truth (H.-J. Glock, 2022, p. 451).

<sup>312</sup> Cf: “In logic, the duality of subject and predicate is a formal schemata, but this formal schemata is grounded in a corresponding structure of human thought; it is just a logical representation of that structure” (Tse, 1998, p. 379).

at bottom underlies and sustains the formal (and grammatical) distinction is precisely [an] ontological or metaphysical distinction” (Strawson, 1994b, p. 23).<sup>313</sup>

Consequently, for the non-reductive analyst there is no obligation to limit the concepts of analysis to a specific set, such as strictly empirical or scientifically rigorous concepts. Connective analysis can make reference to experiential or intensional (mentalistic) concepts as well (P. Snowdon, 2008, p. 173). Moreover, it does not need to produce fully paraphrased sentences that avoid using the very concept under discussion because the link between the constituent concepts under analysis is established through their interrelation with other concepts, even though those additional concepts may not appear directly in the propositions expressing them (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 223).<sup>314</sup> Crucially, although it is conducted a priori, *connective analysis is not infallible*.

Evidently, this type of analysis assumes that concepts congregate, that is, that they are connected in a traceable way, *yet without presupposing semantic holism*, which holds that the meaning of an expression (or in this case, a concept) depends on the meaning of other expressions (concepts): the links between concepts (and between beliefs and statements expressing them) are diverse, not only in kind—they can be logical, causal, associative, and, obviously, semantic—but also in strength and tightness (Martinich, 2023, p. 556). Someone can be a concept-user while being unaware of all these various connections. This is precisely the reason why the work of the descriptive analyst is called for. To continue with the grammar analogy,

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<sup>313</sup> Cf: “The question which I addressed in the second part of *Individuals* is the question: *what is it, in reality and our thought about reality, that underlies and accounts for the formal distinction of the two types of term which enter into this basic combination of a singular reference and predication*” (Strawson, 1994b, p. 22, my emphasis). See also: “Strawson’s metaphysical theory of subject and predicate, as we have seen, goes well beyond the horizon of observation and analysis of behaviour of linguistic expressions. It provides an explanation, a kind of metaphysical explanation, of why certain logical devices like ‘Fx’ and linguistic expressions like singular term versus general term should behave the way they do” (Tse, 1998, p. 381).

<sup>314</sup> E.g.: “the connection between the concept of an event and the concept of causation is provided by a third concept, one that does not itself occur in the judgement, namely that of experience” (H.-J. Glock, 2003a, p. 42)

whereas a lexicographer may settle for a synonym or a rough equivalent, “the philosopher is required to achieve nothing less than the perspicuous exhibition of a concept” (Strawson, 1997b, pp. 229–230).<sup>315</sup>

In that regard, the task of the descriptive metaphysician is similar to the linguistic analyst in that it aims to clarify the actual behaviour of our concepts rather than to modify them. However, the metaphysician’s method differs from the analyst’s in terms of its scope and generality. Whereas a piecemeal analysis of a specific area of human thought can and should presuppose a vast conceptual background, for the descriptive analyst there is no need to delve deeply into the overall structure of our conceptual framework. The goal of the descriptive metaphysician, however, is precisely the revealing of that overall structure (Strawson, 1967a, p. 88). In Strawson’s words:

“You can do effective analytical work in a particular conceptual area while taking an enormous amount for granted about the relations between what’s in the area and what’s outside it. It’s when you feel the pull of connections which run from one area to another, it’s when you feel a sense of the interdependence of the whole structure, it’s then, I suppose, that you’re being consciously metaphysical; and I don’t think you can move in quite the same way then, partly because the connections you’re then concerned with don’t display themselves in quite the same way in our ordinary talk” (Strawson, as cited in Magee, 1971, p. 126).

This is because the connections and structures revealed through a meticulous analysis of the way words are used may not be broad enough “to satisfy our urge for full metaphysical understanding” (Strawson, 1967a, p. 89).<sup>316</sup> This does not mean that the metaphysician can ignore the findings of linguistic analysis. In fact, the method of linguistic analysis provides

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<sup>315</sup> Cf: “[C]onnective analysis aims at rigour in the sense of giving precise, explicit, and linguistically clear descriptions” (Martinich, 2023, p. 555).

<sup>316</sup> Cf: “To understand the foundation of our concepts in natural facts, and to envisage alternative possibilities, it is not enough to have a sharp eye for linguistic actualities” (Strawson, 1967a, p. 89). On this point see also Ross (1974, p. 388).

critical tools for shaping metaphysical solutions, even though by itself it is insufficient to fully arrive at ontological conclusions (Strawson, 1967a, p. 89).

### *Transcendental Arguments*

In addition to analysis, descriptive metaphysics employs transcendental arguments<sup>317</sup> to establish the necessary conditions for the possibility of experience and thought. Transcendental arguments go beyond analysing individual concepts and focus on the conditions that enable anyone to have thoughts or experiences. These are questions regarding Strawson calls ‘conceptual capacities’ and the necessary connections between them. Concept possession, or conceptual and experiential capacity, is the matter in question, not just the content of the concepts themselves (Stroud, 2003, p. 117).

Strawson makes use of two different types of transcendental arguments aimed at tracking the conditions of possibility for an experience of a certain kind: *deductive and elenctic* (H.-J. Glock, 2003a, p. 35). The first one has the following form:

P<sub>1</sub> We have experience (knowledge) of type *K* (or the ability to  $\Phi$ )

P<sub>2</sub> It is a necessary condition for experience (knowledge) of type *K* (or the ability to  $\Phi$ ) that *p*

C Therefore *p*

In simple terms, if we can do or know something, or have a kind of experience, then certain conditions must be in place for that to be possible (Hence, the primary task of descriptive

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<sup>317</sup> In *Individuals*, Strawson argues that philosophical scepticism misrepresents or distorts the fundamental structure of our conceptual framework. Acknowledging his debt to Kant, Strawson termed “transcendental argument” a kind of argument that counters scepticism by showing that such distortions are self-defeating (Strawson, 1966b, p. 15).

metaphysics is to identify this conditions). Since we do have this ability, knowledge, or experience, those conditions must be true.<sup>318</sup>

The other type of transcendental argument is elenctic, designed to show that sceptical doubts are self-defeating or inconsistent, as the sceptic questions the validity of the conceptual framework needed to even raise the sceptical concern in the first place (H.-J. Glock, 2022, p. 445).<sup>319</sup> Instead of seeking ways to identify necessary conditions or characteristics of reflective experience, elenctic arguments focus on outlining uniquely sufficient conditions by showing the incoherence of sceptic and revisionary proposals (Cassam, 2016, p. 916).<sup>320</sup>

To use an example: the sceptic questions the concept of numerical identity, that is, whether an object can remain the same after being observed at different times, and thus questions our knowledge of enduring, objective objects. However, the very act of doubting numerical identity relies on the sceptic already having a grasp of the criteria necessary to distinguish between numerical and qualitative identity—the very distinction being challenged.<sup>321</sup> In short:

[The sceptic] pretends to accept a conceptual scheme, but at the same time quietly rejects one of the conditions of its employment. Thus his doubts are unreal, not simply because there are logically irresolvable doubts, but because they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense [...] *for the whole process of reasoning only starts because the scheme is as it is* (Strawson, 1959, p. 35 my emphasis).

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<sup>318</sup> Cf: “Typically, a transcendental argument [...] claims that one type of exercise of conceptual capacity is a necessary condition of another” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 17).

<sup>319</sup> Cf: “The sceptic is, strictly, not one who denies the validity of certain types of belief, but one who questions, if only initially and for methodological reasons, the adequacy of our grounds for holding them” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 2).

<sup>320</sup> Cf: “How is it, after all, possible to establish that experience must exhibit such-and-such general features? We do our best to find out what must be so if something else is, and we test what we find against the best potential counter examples we can muster” (Strawson, 1966b, p. 271).

<sup>321</sup> I am only showing this as an example of a transcendental argument as used by Strawson. I do not vouch for its validity or soundness.

Overall, transcendental arguments are supposed take us from claims about knowledge to conclusions about what must exist, without thereby relying on any form of transcendental idealism (H.-J. Glock, 2012, p. 417). Briefly:

P<sub>1</sub> We have knowledge of objects of type *O*

P<sub>2</sub> If we have knowledge about objects of type *O*, then objects of type *O* have such-and-such properties

C Objects of type *O* have such-and-such properties

Essentially, the fact we can know something about objects implies that these objects must have definite characteristics that enable such knowledge. In other words, our ability to know about objects is not random—it depends on the objects having particular properties. If we can reliably know something about them, then those properties must exist in the objects themselves to allow such knowledge. This is the actual reasoning behind Strawsonian transcendental arguments: certain features of reality must be true because without them, our knowledge (or experience) of reality would not be possible.

### *The Four Strands*

Strawson distinguishes between two general aspects or tasks of a metaphysical investigation: *the analytic* and *the imaginative*. He further separates the analytical strands into *the therapeutic* and *the systematic*; and the imaginative strands into *the explanatory* and *the inventive* (Strawson, 1956a, p. 36). Descriptive metaphysics is, to a degree, engaged with all of these tasks; it is, as it were, the culmination of all of them. Below I will briefly characterise them:

### *The Therapeutic Task*

The metaphysician describes our conceptual scheme to dispel philosophical paradox and metaphysical illusions. In Strawson's words:

the message is: don't look for anything underlying. Look at the concepts which puzzle you actually in use in the various human concerns ('forms of life' in Wittgenstein's phrase) which gives them their whole significance. Get a clear view of *that*—admittedly not an easy thing to do—and then you will be free. Don't try for a general theory (Strawson, 1992, p. 27)

### *The Systematic Task*

The philosopher analyzes and organizes our existing conceptual scheme, uncovering the core concepts that shape how we understand reality, thereby delineating *the bounds of sense* and providing an accurate and detailed cartography of our system of thought<sup>322</sup> This investigation is to be contrasted with a purely historicist conception of metaphysics, (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 226) for it is concerned with the very presuppositions of any experience of reality that is humanly intelligible.

### *The Explanatory Task*

The philosopher shows how our concepts are grounded in natural facts to highlight the non-contingency of our ordinary conceptual scheme:

For fully to understand our conceptual equipment, it is not enough to know, to be able to say, how it works. We want to know also why it works as it does. To ask this is to ask to be shown how the nature of our thinking is rooted in the nature of the world and in our own natures. This is not an impossible enquiry; for it is quite possible to imagine our experience being different in fundamental ways, and then to consider how our conceptual apparatus might naturally be adjusted to accommodate these differences. In seeing this, we see also how our concepts, as they are, are rooted in the world, as it is (Strawson, 1956a, p. 36)

The main goal of the explanatory approach is then to tackle the worry that just describing our conceptual scheme does not explain why we should prefer it over others. The answer is that

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<sup>322</sup> Which might offer therapeutic effects itself, even if that is not its main goal.

adopting our conceptual scheme is not an arbitrary matter; we are naturally bound to it (Heyndels, 2019, p. 411). Furthermore, some aspects of our conceptual scheme are essential, making them immune to sceptical doubts or revisionist changes. Describing these features validates them, as certain concepts not only play a central role in our current scheme but must do so in any scheme we can comprehend (H.-J. Glock, 2022, p. 447). This is what is also called the *validatory project* of metaphysics.

Validatory metaphysics aims to prove that our current conceptual framework is legitimate and therefore does not need to be changed. The effort is to explain not only how our concepts and forms of discourse function, but also why we have the particular concepts and forms of discourse that we do, and what possible alternatives exist. “This is not a historical enquiry. It attempts to show the natural foundations of our logical, conceptual apparatus, in the way things happen in the world, and in our own natures” (Strawson, 1967a, p. 86).

### *The Inventive Task*

This project is set to test the limits of our conceptual scheme by envisioning alternatives to it. This kind of philosophical reflection explores how, keeping the actual nature of the world as it is, we might see it differently by using a different conceptual framework. It then elaborates on and the ways it differs from, but is still connected to, our current ways of conceptualising reality (Strawson, 1956a, p. 36).

Propositions from this philosophical approach often suggest that if our circumstances or we ourselves were different, we might use different concepts, lose some, or change the importance of certain ones. This is because a full understanding of a concept might only be achieved by comparing and contrasting different conceptual schemes (Strawson, 1967a, p. 86).

It is important to remark here that such comparison is performed from within our own conceptual scheme.<sup>323</sup>

These imaginative reflections rely on our understanding of the fundamental concepts of experience and our first-person perspective on the world. (Gomes, 2023, p. 401). Nonetheless, these notions are the basis of our experience, making it increasingly harder to grasp alternatives that are very different from our actual experience. The idea is that our experience has a core structure shaped by certain fundamental principles, and the further we move away from this structure, the harder it becomes to comprehend or conceive human experience (Bird, 2003, p. 82). By envisioning contrasting conceptual schemes, we acquire a firmer grasp of the actual foundations of our framework of thought.

However, there is no comforting epistemological theory behind the strictly interpreted Strawsonian project. The metaphysical investigator can only explore whether one thing could exist without another, test claims of necessity, and defend them from objections. Understanding why something that seems possible is actually impossible strengthens the necessity claim, which is the best we can do in establishing necessities without direct proof (Stroud, 2003, p. 120)

Ultimately, it might seem pointless to separate between these different strands because they often overlap in philosophy. But it is useful since one method can sometimes be the main focus in a philosopher's work, and identifying it can help us understand their approach better (Strawson, 1956a, p. 36).

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<sup>323</sup> This is relevant because, as it will be shown in the next chapter, the radical revisionist, claiming objectivity, seems to assume a standpoint outside of our own conceptual scheme.

## The Challenge of Ambitious Transcendental Arguments

One of the strongest objections to Strawson's descriptive metaphysics is the overly ambitious nature of his transcendental claims, which some have argued can only establish sufficient conditions of experience, failing thus to justify their claim to knowledge of the world. Roughly:

P1: Transcendental arguments aim to show that certain assumptions (like the existence of an external world) are necessary for coherent experience.

P2: These arguments only establish that we *must* think this way, not that the world *actually is* that way.

P3: Demonstrating a necessary assumption for coherent thought does not prove the assumption to be true.

Conclusion: Therefore, transcendental arguments fail to refute scepticism because they show only what we must assume, not what is objectively true (Stroud, 1968, 1979).

That is, transcendental arguments do not bridge the gap between our necessary assumptions and the actual existence of an external world. As Strawson himself notes:

“It is maintained that analytic transcendental arguments must be at best inconclusive in that they establish only sufficient conditions of experience [...] or rule out only some alternatives, but not every imaginable alternative, to our present “knowledge-forms”” (Strawson, 1982c, p. 46).

Strawson would need to demonstrate that *a statement about the actual nature of the world can be derived from a statement about how we perceive or make sense of the world*. The problem here is showing how such a leap from our conceptual framework to objective reality could ever be justified (Stroud, 1968, p. 246). Strawson's response to this challenge is the adoption of a form of naturalistic approach inspired by certain epistemological views of Hume and Wittgenstein.

## *Strawson's Catholic Naturalism*

Strawson's naturalism steams from an anthropological perspective—rather than a scientific one—and is inspired by his reading of Hume and Wittgenstein regarding naturally held beliefs, such as the existence of physical bodies. The central thought is that certain beliefs are naturally induced—beliefs we are bound to hold due to our human nature (the Humean element)—and these beliefs form the natural foundation of all our belief systems (the Wittgensteinian element).<sup>324</sup> They provide the framework for belief and, as such, are beyond questions of epistemological justification (Strawson, 1998b, p. 242). This naturalism rejects both eliminativism and reductionism, aiming to understand our conceptual framework without seeking to revise or simplify it (H.-J. Glock, 2022, p. 442). It is grounded in the conviction that the “set of ideas, or schemes of thought, employed by human beings reflect, of course, their nature, their needs and their situation” (Strawson, 1966b, p. 40), and the we, as human beings, are part and parcel of the natural world ourselves.<sup>325</sup>

“[These] beliefs are framework beliefs that make possible, and are presupposed by, ordinary experiential takings, beliefs, and actions” (Adams, 1998, p. 72).<sup>326</sup> Thus, they function, at best, as *hinge-propositions*<sup>327</sup> of a certain kind, reflecting commonsense certainties in the style of Moore and Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1969).

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<sup>324</sup> Cf: “As Wittgenstein put it: ‘When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)’” (Strawson, 1976a, pp. 116–117).

<sup>325</sup> Cf: “the notion of existence the same thing as existence in nature; to think that whatever exists at all exists in nature. And this disposition no doubt has its roots in the fact—grateful to Marxist ears, though not to them alone—that thought is fundamentally, for us, at the service of action or practice; and what in practice or action we have to deal with are, as we ourselves are, natural objects and events” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 75)

<sup>326</sup> Strictly speaking, terms like ‘belief’ and ‘proposition’ fail to fully characterise these basic convictions (See Strawson, 1998f, p. 370), given their unreflective character and the unique level of certainty with which their held. However, for simplicity, I will refer indistinctly to them as beliefs and propositions.

<sup>327</sup> See (M. Williams, 2018). They are called “hinge-propositions” because they are the hinges on which the door of knowledge turns, roughly, propositions that serve as foundational assumptions beyond the scope of rational justification, defense, or critique.

Crucially, the sources of our belief-systems are our natural social practices and attitudes—rather than individually held beliefs.<sup>328</sup> They hold a unique status because altering them could lead to intolerable and potentially self-undermining effects on our entire belief system (H.-J. Glock, 2023).<sup>329</sup> “They are, one might say, outside our critical and rational competence in the sense that they define, or help to define, the area in which that competence is exercised” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 15).<sup>330</sup> It is in this sense that Strawson proclaims: “Reason presents us with doubts which reason cannot dispel; and nature overrides them” (Strawson, 1981b, p. 3).

Strawson names only a few of these foundational convictions, the scaffolding of our entire epistemic building, namely: the reality of the external world, the reality of the past, the reality of other minds, and the reality of our subjective experience.

### *The Marriage of Kant and Hume under Strawson*

Up to this point, my aim has been to provide a detailed characterization of Strawson’s conception and method of descriptive metaphysics, with a particular emphasis on demonstrating how, from its initial formulation in his own writings, Strawson conceived descriptive metaphysics as reaching out to the world—that is, as a project aimed at revealing truths about the nature of reality. What I am proposing now is different. I am here arguing for a particular reading of Strawson’s work that, while not explicitly formulated by him, integrates elements that are evident in his writings. My intention in doing so is to offer a new approach

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<sup>328</sup> In this regard, Strawson goes beyond Humean naturalism by adopting a Wittgensteinian form of *social naturalism* (Strawson, 1985c, p. 19).

<sup>329</sup> Cf: “They are not merely fortunate contingencies which make the acquisition and spread of knowledge *easier*. They are closer to being conceptual truths, conditions for the possibility of the existence and application of our concepts of knowledge, accuracy, truth” (Strawson, 1974a, p. 106).

<sup>330</sup> Here lies “the great importance, *at any stage at which reasons, criticism, inference are in question*, of bodies of pre-existing knowledge or believe to provide an indispensable background for these reflective operations” (Strawson, 1974a, p. 106).

to addressing the challenge against transcendental arguments while preserving the validating goal of Strawson's early descriptive metaphysics.

Although Glock (2012, p. 396) claims that Strawson renounced the validating ambitions of *Individuals* in his later work,<sup>331</sup> it seems to me that it is possible to hold on to them by bringing together the Kantian and the Humean aspects of his philosophy. The dilemma is presented in this way:

If we follow the Humean view, and restrict the range of modal truths in his way, philosophy can only be about or expressive of thought and conceptual relations, and cannot reveal the nature of the world. If we follow Kant, and hope for a more ambitious metaphysics, we may be able to acquire knowledge of necessary truths about the world through philosophy, but in so far as the truths are necessary, they will reflect something in the structure of thought (Morris, 2017, p. 6).<sup>332</sup>

If we follow Hume's view, metaphysics is limited to mere conceptual analysis and cannot uncover the true nature of the world. By contrast, Kant's approach allows metaphysics to discover necessary truths about the world, but these truths are shaped by the way our minds

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<sup>331</sup> In all fairness, Strawson himself wrote: "Having given up the unreal project of wholesale validation, he will embrace the real project of investigating the connections among the major structural elements of our conceptual scheme. This project remains valid even if our transcendental arguments are not strictly conclusive, i.e., do not successfully establish quite such tight and rigid connections as they initially promise. For they do at least indicate, or bring out, conceptual connections, even if only of a looser kind. And to bring out such connections—to exhibit the major features of our conceptual scheme as forming, not a rigidly deductive system, but a coherent whole whose parts are mutually supportive and mutually dependent, interlocking in an intelligible way—to do this may well seem to our naturalist the proper, or at least the major, task of analytical philosophy. (As indeed it seems to me: whence the phrase 'descriptive—as opposed to either "validatory" or "revisionary"—metaphysics'.)" (Strawson, 1982c, p. 50). In spite of this, as my argument in this section will try to show, there is no need to abandon the validating task of descriptive metaphysics when it is contextualised within the naturalist framework presented by Strawson himself.

<sup>332</sup> Strawson's Kantian approach shows how our concepts are linked but does not tackle the sceptic's demand to justify the whole conceptual system. Humean strategies, on the other hand, argue that seeking justification is unnecessary, as reasons do not apply in this context, thus indirectly responding to the sceptic (Callanan, 2011, p. 274).

structure and understand reality, so they are still not about the world as it is in itself. In short, whichever way we go with descriptive metaphysics, it seems we cannot really reach the world.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that Strawsonian metaphysics can bridge the gap between our thought and reality. To begin with, although Strawson presupposes epistemological realism rather than providing an argument for it (Simco, 1971, p. 425), it is clear that such a crucial assumption can find at least a partial justification in his belief that “knowledge must be subject to its objects, epistemology to metaphysics” (Strawson, 1992, p. 12).

My argument hinges on the idea that our conceptual scheme, as a product of Nature, must be at least partially reliable because it has evolved to help us interact with reality successfully.<sup>333</sup> Strawson’s Humean naturalism suggests that our foundational concepts, such as cause and effect, time, and identity, are not arbitrary inventions but *are grounded in our natural experience of the world*.<sup>334</sup> They have been shaped by evolution to serve practical purposes in our engagement with reality.<sup>335</sup> In Stroud’s own words:

[I]f certain ways of thinking are required for the possibility of any thought and experience at all, then what we think in thinking in those ways has a special, and a specially invulnerable, standing. It must be accepted or acknowledged by anyone who thinks or experiences anything. It could not consistently be exposed as a mere metaphysical illusion, as nothing more than a

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<sup>333</sup> Cf: “Beliefs involve concepts and the concepts which figure in our most primitive and least theoretical beliefs only acquire meaning for us, only *are* concepts for us as being just those concepts which enter most intimately and immediately into our experience of the world. They are what—special training —apart we experience the world as exemplifying, what we see things and situations *as* cases of. Correlatively experience is awareness of the world as exemplifying *them*” (Strawson, 1974a, p. 107).

<sup>334</sup> Cf: “These concepts are seen as the basic assumptions of our conceptual scheme, meaning the world must be structured in a way that allows it to be represented and understood through them” (Simco, 1971, p. 428).

<sup>335</sup> Cf: “Why should not “the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false” (Wittgenstein) be itself the outcome of a natural evolutionary process?” (Strawson, 1998g, p. 289).

widely held belief that for all its familiarity fails to capture the way things really are (2003, p. 118).

Although solely recognising that these fundamental beliefs cannot be dismissed as metaphysical illusions leaves a significant gap between acknowledging their non-illusory status and affirming their truth,<sup>336</sup> I argue that embracing Strawson's catholic naturalism offers a strong explanation for the origins of our conceptual scheme. In doing so, it also provides a justification for its adequacy.

For "it cannot be a consequence of any thesis which is not itself self-contradictory that abnormality is the universal condition" (Strawson, 1962b, p. 12). The mere fact of our success as a species ensures, at least, that our basic cognitive demands and expectations are met. We cannot be that far-off from the truth as the sceptic fears. Such sceptical angst is ill-founded, almost paranoid. For instance, consider the concept of causality. If this concept were entirely disconnected from how the world actually works, our ability to predict outcomes and interact with the environment would be severely impaired. Yet, humans are remarkably adept at predicting causal relations in everyday life—whether in navigating physical spaces, using tools, or understanding social interactions. The success of our species in mastering these interactions supports the idea that our conceptual framework accurately reflects at least some aspects of reality. Our ability to manipulate the world effectively—building structures, developing technology, and overall thriving as a natural species—indicates that our conceptual scheme, while not infallible, is still broadly successful in reflecting the world.

To frame it as an elenctic transcendental argument:

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<sup>336</sup> However sympathetic he is to Strawson's view, this seems to be, ultimately, Stroud's position. See his "Metaphysical Dissatisfaction" (Stroud, 2022).

**Premise 1:** Our conceptual scheme is a natural product, shaped by Nature to facilitate our interaction with the world.<sup>337</sup>

**Premise 2:** If our conceptual scheme were entirely disconnected from reality, our experiences and interactions with the world would be severely flawed, and we would consistently fail in our attempts to understand and act upon the world.<sup>338</sup>

**Premise 3:** As a species, we have been highly successful in navigating, understanding, and acting on the world, which demonstrates that our conceptual framework is effective and at least partially reflects reality.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, our conceptual scheme is not entirely mistaken, and we are justified in trusting ambitious transcendental arguments to provide us with truths about the world.

In short, our continued success as a species shows that our conceptual scheme must align with reality to a significant degree, reinforcing the idea that Strawson's transcendental arguments can be trusted to provide genuine insights about the world.<sup>339</sup>

Although Strawson never explicitly formulates such an argument, all of its premises are supported by his work, and its structure aligns with Strawson's distinctive line of reasoning.

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<sup>337</sup> Cf: "A general concept is general in this sense: it is capable, in principle, of being exemplified in a number of different particular cases. [...] *So It must be possible in principle for us—if we are to have any use of concepts at all—to encounter in experience different particular cases and distinguish them as different while also recognizing them as alike in being all cases apt for the application of the same concept*" (Strawson, 1992, p. 54).

<sup>338</sup> Cf: "But it does follow, I think, that our sensible experience could not have the character it does have unless— at least before philosophical reflection sets in—we unquestioningly *took* that general view of the word to be true" (Strawson, 1979d, p. 129).

<sup>339</sup> Cf: D'Oro also attempts to close the gap between the descriptive metaphysics of *Individuals* and that of the *Skepticism and Naturalism*. However, her argument relies on different premises, contending that the earlier descriptive metaphysics was not really 'validatory' while the later metaphysics was not really 'Humean' (D'Oro, 2023, p. 513). My argument is somewhat the inverse version of hers: if we take the descriptive metaphysics of *Individuals* as validatory by supplementing them with Strawson's soft naturalist's framework, *the sceptic of Skepticism and Naturalism is taken to be idle because he is meaningless*.

Notably, one of his most characteristic phrases is “the facts as we know them” (Strawson, 1962b, p. 2). In descriptive metaphysics, we begin with the facts as we know them—grounded in the realist belief that we have genuine access to the world. I find it difficult to imagine any other starting point; without this first step, descriptive metaphysics would fail to even get off the ground.

Before concluding this section, I would like to present a series of perspectives from other Strawson scholars that support my position. First, Glouberman wrote already in 1976 that:

*“Strawson is doctrinally a naturalist; he believes that it is not merely for reasons of convenience or lack of alternative that we begin with the conceptual scheme expressed in and by ordinary language. His doctrinal tendency is realistic, on account of the strong realistic associations of the natural conceptual apparatus. Methodologically, his approach is often unnatural. When an account of some concept has doctrinally unpalatable consequences, Strawson neutralizes any putative threat by treating these consequences as merely methodological”* (1976, p. 382, my emphasis).

As a result, Glouberman suggest that a possible interpretation of the conjunction of naturalism and realism in Strawson’s doctrine is the idea that *“our conceptual scheme is a natural possession given the nature of the world on the one side, and the nature of our nature, on the other”* (1976, p. 368, my emphasis).

Regarding Strawson’s conception of experience, Glock writes bluntly: “In experiential judgements concepts are applied to the objects of experience, namely particulars that are mind-independent, punkt!” (2023, p. 328).<sup>340</sup> Similarly, Cassam declares that “Kant argues from mind to world, Strawson from world to mind” (2016, p. 912)<sup>341</sup> and Simco claims that “Strawson

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<sup>340</sup> Cf: Glock suggest a similar position when he holds that “it is unclear whether we could be consistently mistaken in applying our words in standard situations, as the objection [against ambitious transcendental arguments] suggests” (2001, p. 526).

<sup>341</sup> Moreover, Cassam seems to hold that, in contrast to Kant, Strawson contends that “a priori concepts can reflect the structure of reality as it is in itself” (2003, p. 96).

would want to say that our conceptual structure is the way it is because the world, or human experience, is the way it is” (1971, p. 427).<sup>342</sup> Finally, Heyndels specifies that:

By explaining how our concepts are embedded in, and extensions of, our natural lives, the philosopher emphasizes the non-arbitrariness of our conceptual scheme. While some conceptual variations are certainly conceivable, they are so only against a ‘general background’ that reflects our human nature, needs and situation (2019, p. 412).

This general background is the very riverbed of our conceptual scheme, the scaffolding of our belief-system, whose elements provide the framework for all reflective beliefs and are therefore beyond matters of justification: we are bound by our very nature to hold these convictions. To put in Stroud’s own words:

if it is true that we must believe in such things, then we do believe in them. So we can see our being unavoidably caused to believe in them as an indication that the way we are unavoidably caused to believe things are is, in certain respects, just the way things are (Stroud, 2003, p. 121).<sup>343</sup>

Hence, there is enough evidence to support the view that Strawson saw our conceptual scheme as a product of Nature. Therefore, as something shaped by Nature to enable our interactions with the world, we can be confident that it provides us with at least some fundamental truths about the nature of reality, for “[t]hinking is an activity which we engage in not only in the

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<sup>342</sup> See also: “First, Part I of *Individuals* concentrates on concepts and commits him to the world being such that it can be reflected by the concept of objective particulars. Second, Part II of *Individuals* concentrates on concepts and their relationship to language, and commits him to the world being such that it can be reflected in language by feature-placing statements. It seems to me that this really leaves us with only one claim about the world” (Simco, 1971, p. 429). However, as Professor Glock noted in correspondence with me, this seems to confuse the question of whether objects of experience are mind-independent with the question of whether the conceptual scheme that treats them as mind-independent accurately reflects a *de re* reality.

<sup>343</sup> I am aware this quote can be misleading in that Stroud did not really share neither my nor Strawson’s enthusiasm about these unavoidable convictions. However, I could not stop myself from using it as it was what initially sparked my naturalist-cum-validatory reading of Strawson.

world of things, but by means of things in this world, supported and sustained by them” (Westphal, 2003, p. 137).

## **Is Descriptive Metaphysics Really about Reality?**

### *Descriptive Metaphysics Is Not About the World*

Despite the support presented above for the view that descriptive metaphysics can provide insight into the structure of reality, a widespread critique of Strawsonian metaphysics remains. This objection argues that it falls short serious metaphysics because it is primarily concerned with analysing our conceptual scheme, rather than directly investigating the true nature of the world itself. It is claimed then that descriptive metaphysics merely reflects how we think about the world, without revealing its fundamental reality.

Contemporary orthodoxy in ontology frequently upholds a commitment to *serious metaphysics*, a methodological approach that aims to discover the fundamental aspects of reality without relying solely on conceptual or linguistic analysis, not even when combined with empirical findings from the natural sciences.<sup>344</sup> The idea behind this particular objection to Strawsonian metaphysics is that serious philosophy should focus not on “mere words” but on the nature of the things words name. Some contemporary philosophers have raised this concern about Strawson's project of descriptive metaphysics. Below, I provide a few examples:

First, Timothy Williamson affirms that “[c]ontemporary metaphysicians firmly resist attempts to reconstrue their enterprise as the analysis of thought—unlike Sir Peter Strawson, who defined his “descriptive metaphysics” as “content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world”” (2007, p. 19). On Williams’ view, contemporary metaphysics

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<sup>344</sup> The propositions arrived at by means of serious metaphysics possess therefore the status of ‘epistemically metaphysical’ (Sider, 2009).

construes their task as the analysis of reality itself, not our thought about it. Moreover, P. M. S. Hacker admonishes Strawson's view of metaphysics because:

It yields no knowledge of reality, let alone insight into the necessary structure of reality—but only insight into the forms and structures of our thought about reality. It might indeed be said to be the legitimate heir to what used to be conceived of as metaphysics, but a dethroned heir, deprived of the ancestral crown and orb. It is metaphysics without its nimbus [...] Strawson, it therefore seems to me, saved the letter of traditional metaphysics, but abandoned its spirit (P. M. S. Hacker, 2003, p. 62).<sup>345</sup>

Finally, Hans-Johann Glock himself, who otherwise seems to support the feasibility of descriptive metaphysics' validatory task,<sup>346</sup> has written that: “[Strawson] rejects Wittgenstein's therapeutic image, according to which the only value of such elucidation lies in dispelling confusions. *Although philosophy does not yield new knowledge about the world, it provides a positive contribution to our self-understanding*” (2001, p. 527, my emphasis). Furthermore, he holds the view that “[t]he most striking feature of descriptive metaphysics is its Kantian provision that metaphysics is a second-order discipline. Instead of scrutinizing the essence of reality it reflects on our conceptual scheme, the fundamental structure of thought and discourse” (H.-J. Glock, 2023, p. 313).

In the next section, I will refute these claims by demonstrating that descriptive metaphysics is not merely about words, but ultimately about the world.

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<sup>345</sup> See also: “[D]escriptive metaphysics does not aim to describe the necessary, superphysical, structure of reality—about which it may well remain altogether sceptical” (P. M. S. Hacker, 2003, p. 55) and “Metaphysics thus construed yields no insight into reality, but only into our forms of description of reality. So it is just more grammar, in Wittgenstein's extended sense of the term” (2003, p. 59). In contrast, Michael Morris writes: “It is true that the metaphysics is said to be merely “descriptive” (Strawson, 1959, pp. 9–12), but I think this undersells what he actually does” (Morris, 2017, p. 23, fn 20).

<sup>346</sup> Cf: “the contrast between the traditional task of metaphysics, and the remit of descriptive metaphysics seems to vanish; indeed, the order of priority between discourse (language, thought) and reality seems reversed” (H.-J. Glock, 2017, p. 224)

*Descriptive Metaphysics is about the World.*

While it is true that Strawson's methodology consistently treats philosophy as a second-order investigation into the nature of our concepts, this approach is adopted primarily for the sake of simplicity and perspicuity. As he writes:

By talking about our conceptual structure, the structure of our thoughts about the world, rather than, as it were, directly about the world, we keep a firmer grasp of our own philosophical procedure, a clearer understanding of what we are about (Strawson, 1992, p. 33).

Indeed, philosophical discourse is framed in terms of conceptual elucidation and description, yet the propositions reached through metaphysical analysis are undeniably about the world.<sup>347</sup> This is because our concepts, and ultimately our entire conceptual scheme, are fundamentally about the world.<sup>348</sup> Ultimately, if our judgments are to be true "then the concepts employed in those judgements must in general be concepts of kinds of things which actually are in the world and of properties which those things actually have" (Strawson, 1992, p. 63).<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Cf: "An infelicity in Strawson's description of himself as a descriptive metaphysician is that it cannot be said that he is engaged in a merely descriptive exercise. There are in his discussion claims advanced on the basis of arguments about what must be so, what could not be, explanations of our thinking, and defences of it against sceptical objections. It is, therefore, quite wrong to think of his strategy as purely descriptive" (P. Snowdon, 2008, p. 176). Strawson even applies a similar line of argument in relation to McDowell's philosophy: "McDowell aligns himself with what he calls Wittgenstein's 'quietism'. He draws a contrast between, on the one hand, what he calls 'ordinary' or 'constructive' philosophy, post practitioners confront what they see as deep philosophical questions or anxieties by constructing philosophical theories, and, on the other hand, the correct (Wittgensteinian) course, which is to diagnose the source of such philosophical anxieties and so to set out the facts as to reveal these worries, recurrent so they are and will be, as baseless. I have no quarrel with this description of the correct method; but its practise is a matter of supreme difficulty and its success, as achieved here, in giving the quietus to such anxieties is hardly to be called a manifestation of 'quietism'; rather it deserves, if anything does, the title of 'constructive philosophy' (Strawson, 1994a, p. 13).

<sup>348</sup> Cf: "It has sometimes been suggested that logic is the basis of metaphysics. If the arguments of Part I [of *Subject and Predicate*] are sound, it might seem that the order should be reversed; for distinctions of ontological category are found to lie at the basis of logic. Conflicts in claims of priority, however, are idle and unnecessary. Better to acknowledge an intimate mutual involvement" (Strawson, 1974e, p. ix). In this context, Sen notes that: "Even in *Individuals*, Strawson contributes not only to the investigation of conceptual schemes but also to the enquiry into 'what there is', or ontology. Strawson himself shows, intermittently, a tendency to underplay the importance of this aspect of the metaphysical inquiry to which he has made so significant a contribution" (2006, p. 17).

<sup>349</sup> Cf: "One thing which seems undeniable is that Strawson takes language to reflect the way we think about the world, and the way we think about the world to reflect the way the world is" (Simco, 1971, p. 424).

Moreover, Strawson's metaphysics aligns with a widely accepted methodological assumption in analytic ontology: the principle of *semantic literalism*. Semantic literalism is the view that a semantic theory that links language and logic with the fundamental nature of reality, if correct, would reveal the structure of reality through its ontological commitments, that is, through the entities it postulates as its semantic values (Morris, 2017, p. 19). Therefore, Strawson's preoccupation with a proper theory of semantics and the development of a universal grammar that reflects the fundamental semantic categories deployed in our conceptual scheme fits perfectly with the tenets of semantic literalism; the pivotal connection between Strawson's semantic project and his overall metaphysical programme involves an inference to the best explanation: the reason it seems as though our assignments of semantic values work is because they are actually right (Morris, 2017, p. 20).<sup>350</sup> In the end, the production of a semantic theory can also be put into the service of ontological illumination.

In that regard, contemporary metaphysicians are not really foreign nor unsympathetic to the idea that the best semantic theory for our natural languages and logical systems reveals the underlying nature of reality (Morris, 2017, p. 19). As an example, two of the preeminent figures of what I have referred to as "serious metaphysics", namely, Ted Sider and Timothy Williamson,<sup>351</sup> are rather approving of this view. Hence, it does not seem to me that the Strawsonian project of descriptive metaphysics, once we understand it actually purports to

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<sup>350</sup> Cf: "If, as widely held, to be an object of reference is the mark of an existent individual, an entity, then universals and, indeed, abstract objects generally (e.g., numbers, propositions, facts) must be recognized as such" (Strawson, 1998d, p. 383). However, "[i]n standard logic the burden of reference may be carried (some would say should exclusively be carried) by the individual variable (the ghost of the individual designation or name) under standard  $\forall$  or  $\exists$  quantification. In natural languages, on the other hand, a whole host of plural expressions or of indefinite singular terms may form part of the subject term and hence help to specify, more or less, indefinitely, the objects of reference" (Strawson, 1998d, p. 384). An important task, then, of the stating of a semantic theory in the framework of semantic literalism, would be the parsing of the multifarious linguistic expressions that can be used to refer in a natural language. This assumption underpins Strawson's core concern with referential expressions in ordinary language. A semantic theory should tell us not only which expressions in a language can be used to refer, but also how can they perform this referential usage. Importantly, neither semantic literalism nor Strawson endorse the "thesis of the priority of syntax over ontology", which holds that determining whether an expression refers to an object depends solely on its syntactic role within a sentence (Morris, 2017, p. 23, fn 33).

<sup>351</sup> See, for example, Sider (2009, 2013) and Williamson (Williamson, 2004, 2007).

provide truths about the structure of the world,<sup>352</sup> is any less serious than mainstream contemporary ontology. Descriptive metaphysics has always been about the world. In Strawson's words:

It is not just that without experience of the real we should not be able to form true beliefs about it; It is that the very concepts in terms of which we form our primitive or fundamental or least theoretical beliefs get their sense for us precisely *as* concepts which we should judge to apply in possible experience situations (Strawson, 1992, pp. 52–53).

In short, if we were unable to apply certain concepts in sensorily favourable conditions, we would not possess any concepts at all. Hence, “[o]ur natural metaphysics is vindicated” (Strawson, 1995, p. 9).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed the question: is descriptive metaphysics about the world? My answer is yes: *Strawson's descriptive metaphysics not only maps our conceptual schemes but also provides insights into the nature of reality itself.* To support this, I have explored the key concepts central to his methodology, showing that descriptive metaphysics offers a detailed cartography of our conceptual structures through linguistic analysis and transcendental argumentation, therefore dispelling the misconception that Strawson's offers no bearing on reality by arguing that it attempts to reveal how the world must be structured for our concepts to hold.

Additionally, I have presented Strawson's project within the context of his Wittgensteinian naturalism and reconstructed his method of philosophical elucidation. This reconstruction responds to challenges against transcendental arguments while reclaiming the validating goals at the core of *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense*. While Strawson did not explicitly articulate this synthesis, I have shown that it aligns with both the letter and spirit of

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<sup>352</sup> The question whether it actually does provide us with these truths is still open for debate. However, my goal in this chapter has been to argue that, as conceived by Strawson, it lays claim to being able to do so.

his philosophy and provides a compelling framework for addressing future engagements with descriptive metaphysics.

## Chapter 7

### “Against Revision”

#### Prolegomena to Any Future Descriptive Metaphysics

The only questions we need take seriously are serious questions (Strawson, 1974a, p. 105).

Reason is the servant of Nature; and ought to be no more (Strawson, 1981a, p. 322).

I think perhaps it is this intimate and necessary relation of belief, concept, and experience—  
belief about the world, concepts of the objective, and experience of the world—that is the  
most interesting philosophical truth at the bottom of the muddle about foundations  
(Strawson, 1974a, p. 108).

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I present and examine the concept of *radical conceptual revision*, which aims to modify or replace core elements of our conceptual framework. The first section explores how such revisionary metaphysics can lead to incoherent or impractical outcomes. I introduce the idea of radical conceptual revision as a foil to illustrate the strength of descriptive metaphysics in countering extreme revisionary proposals and preserving the coherence of our conceptual scheme.

Next, I discuss the potential for conceptual change within the limits set by descriptive metaphysics. Here, I argue that although revisionary metaphysics and descriptive metaphysics are often perceived as opposing approaches, they can be complementary. Descriptive metaphysics not only prevents misguided revisions but also offers a framework for gradual and grounded modifications. For this I propose a dynamic conception of descriptive metaphysics, focusing on how even fundamental concepts undergo recontextualization over time. This section highlights the significance of understanding not only the static core of our conceptual scheme but also its evolving elements. I advocate for a diachronic perspective that takes into

account the historical transformation of our framework of thought. Finally, I emphasize the reciprocal relationship between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics. While descriptive metaphysics sets constraints on revisionary proposals, successful revisions also contribute new data for descriptive analysis. This cyclical relationship shows how the two approaches are mutually dependent, with descriptive metaphysics acting as a guiding framework for any meaningful conceptual innovation.

In conclusion, I aim to present a reinvigorated vision of descriptive metaphysics, one that retains its core commitment to conceptual self-understanding while embracing modest and methodologically sound innovations.

Importantly, this chapter differs from the previous six chapters (although Chapter 6 does offer an original “constructive” interpretation of Strawson’s project of descriptive metaphysics) in that it is not primarily a work of exegesis and reconstruction. Rather, it represents my own attempt to update descriptive metaphysics, making it more compatible with contemporary analytic ontology. As such, this chapter deliberately moves beyond Strawson’s explicit formulations and occasionally stands in opposition to them. In particular, it advocates for a vision of descriptive metaphysics that embraces the possibility of modest (and fruitful) conceptual innovation originating from within philosophy itself but grounded in and guided by descriptive metaphysics.

## **The Prospect of Radical Conceptual Revision**

Revisionary metaphysics seeks to modify our existing conceptual framework by proposing an alternative that is better suited for certain purposes—such as scientific inquiry—rather than our everyday thinking about the world (Macdonald, 2007). Moreover, some metaphysicians’ writings could be interpreted as suggesting we adopt a different conceptual scheme altogether. However, they often mix aspects of the new and old schemes, leading to (*prima facie*) absurd conclusions like denying that others feel pain or that objects around us are truly coloured (P.

M. S. Hacker, 2003, p. 65). Some would argue, for example, that revisionary metaphysicians like Descartes,<sup>353</sup> Leibniz, and Berkeley aim to correct our worldview, not by changing empirical beliefs like scientists, but by rejecting our entire conceptual framework. They believe our ordinary way of thinking is misleading and does not reflect the true nature of reality (H.-J. Glock, 2012, p. 394). In short, “[revisionary metaphysics] is not presented as a conceptual or structural revision by means of which we might see things differently; it is presented as a picture of things as they really are, instead of as they delusively seem” (Strawson, 1967a, p. 87).

Now, imagine that our fundamental ways of thinking, the foundations of our conceptual scheme, are represented by propositions  $P_1$  to  $P_N$ . A system is considered revisionary if it claims one of these propositions ( $P_1$ , for example) is wrong. However, it would not be revisionary if it accepted all of them and simply wanted to add a new proposition  $Q$  to our basic thinking. “Strawson’s original two categories are [therefore] not exhaustive. The metaphysician wanting to add  $Q$  is neither revisionary, nor, in the original sense, descriptive. They count as constructive but non-revisionary metaphysicians” (P. Snowdon, 2008, p. 177).<sup>354</sup>

This distinction between revisionary and constructive metaphysicians, or as I call it, between *radical revisionary metaphysics* and *moderate revisionary metaphysics*—or simply, revisionary metaphysics—helps clarify how our conceptual scheme might be altered. In that regard, one of the main targets of Strawson’s transcendental arguments is sceptical objections that aim to undermine or disprove our epistemic justification for certain kinds of experiences. For instance, the sceptical doubts addressed in *Individuals* question our justification for believing in

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<sup>353</sup> Cf: “Descartes, for example, was not recommending that we adopt a new form of language. He was trying to describe the world and the fundamental kinds of substance that exist in it, to characterize their essential natures and their modes of interaction” (P. M. S. Hacker, 2003, p. 62).

<sup>354</sup> See also: “Strawson’s characterization of the useful distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics is a distinction between two different kinds of conceptual scheme: one consonant with everyday common sense and linguistic usage, the other attempting to replace that scheme with another. His preferences clearly on the side of the descriptive, Strawson refuses in Kantian fashion to propose the question which scheme might be correct of the world. This is Königsberg with an Oxford accent, Metaphysics Lite rather than full-strength” (Simons, 2013, p. 718).

objective, mind-independent objects or in the reality of other minds. Strawson counters these doubts by arguing that the sceptic covertly relies on the very conceptual scheme he seeks to reject.<sup>355</sup> For this reason, he suggests conceiving of the sceptic “not as one who poses a real problem, calling for resolution by rational argument, but one who simply calls attention to a logical possibility, while conceding that it has no practical, or theoretical, consequences of any moment” (Strawson, 1998g, p. 291). Such a sceptical position, when paired with a positive view or alternative—a worldview that purports to correct the errors in our ordinary conceptual scheme and justify our epistemic claims to reality—can be recast as a revisionary stance, proposing a modification of our conceptual scheme in favour of a more suitable alternative.<sup>356</sup>

Therefore, Strawson’s response to radical scepticism in *Individuals* is twofold: either the sceptical threat contradicts our deeply held beliefs and practical concerns, in which case it can be ignored as it opposes our unavoidable practices, or it becomes relevant to our practices, but then it shifts from being a negative sceptical threat to a positive alternative metaphysical proposal (Callanan, 2011, p. 271).<sup>357</sup> Yet both the radical sceptic and the radical revisionist suffer from a similar one-sided perspective: they overlook the essential nature of our basic concepts, dismissing them as too vague for their higher purposes. In trying to refine these concepts, they miss their fundamental role in everyday thought and understanding, distancing themselves from the very same practices they aim to critique or improve:

Instead of examining the actual use that we make of [a certain notion or concept], the philosopher measures it by some perhaps inappropriate standard (in this case some standard

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<sup>355</sup> Cf: “[in *Individuals*] [t]he sceptic features primarily not as someone who doubts the possibility of knowledge but as someone who distorts our conceptual scheme” (H.-J. Glock, 2003a, p. 21).

<sup>356</sup> “Sceptical doubts, if they are not doubts raised within a presupposed framework which may be overturned by transcendental argumentation, must then be doubts which are effectively revisionary metaphysical proposals in disguise” (Callanan, 2011, p. 270).

<sup>357</sup> Cf: “Strawson is in effect saying to the ‘revisionary’ metaphysician: ‘surely you can’t think that this is an account of the way we think; would it not save your face if you called it a new proposal?’ ” (Urmson, 1961, p. 258).

of clarifiability), and because it falls short of this standard, or seems to do so, denies its reality, declares it illusory (H. P. Grice & Strawson, 1956, p. 17).<sup>358</sup>

Hence, “[a]bsolute scepticism represents everything as illusory. It thus distinguishes illusion from truth, presupposing a criterion for distinguishing them, and so contradicts itself” (Bird, 2003, p. 73). In turn, radical revision represents our entire conceptual scheme as inadequate. It thus distinguishes inadequacy from adequacy, presupposing a criterion for distinguishing them, and so, Strawson argues, contradicts itself. Thus, both absolute scepticism and radical revisionism contradict themselves by relying on the very criteria they seek to reject. It is this kind of contradiction that Strawson addresses by emphasising the pivotal distinction “between the ways we might like to revise our ways of thinking about things and the way in which we actually do think about things” (Callanan, 2011, p. 271, fn. 12). It is precisely the recognition of the fundamental, irreducible and irreplaceable nature of the concepts at the core of our framework of thought that “warrants the categorization of the radical sceptic as a revisionary metaphysician” and at the same time justifies one in ignoring him.

### *What is Radical Conceptual Revision?*

Radical conceptual revision involves altering our conceptual framework at its most basic level by targeting the core concepts and structures that underpin it. This revision can take two main forms: *Local Radical Revision* and *Global Radical Revision*. Local Radical Revision suggests replacing—and thereby eliminating—at least one fundamental concept, like our ordinary concept of a material object. In contrast, Global Radical Revision proposes replacing the entire conceptual scheme with a completely different one. Extreme as it sounds, “it has a certain

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<sup>358</sup> Cf: “It is almost as if Quine had expected too much of logical necessity (conceptual truth) and in his disappointment at its not coming up to expectations, had declared there was no such thing” (Strawson, 1955a, p. 231).

appealingly dramatic and exciting quality, like most metaphysical nonsense” (Magee, 1971, p. 124).

It is crucial to note that I am presenting this idea hypothetically, not claiming that any philosopher has explicitly advocated it in either form. Nevertheless, it is plausible to interpret certain revisionary stances as hinting at least at local radical revision. The key point is that, due to the interconnected and hierarchical nature of our conceptual scheme, eliminating even one fundamental element could risk collapsing the entire structure (Simco, 1971, p. 426).

### *Against Radical Conceptual Revision*

As well as being descriptive, Strawson’s practice is also anti-revisionary (P. Snowdon, 2001, p. 341) “which amounts to a defence of the extant conceptual scheme, or a criticism of a suggested revision”.<sup>359</sup> In that regard, an essential part of descriptive metaphysics is preserving the fundamental structures of our conceptual scheme and setting limits for conceptual revision, for *conceptual engineering*.<sup>360</sup> This approach is not inherently reactionary, but rather cautious, preventing the revisionary metaphysician from pursuing prospects that are either impossible or meaningless.

Yet revisionists challenge this caution by arguing that there is no absolute necessity in adopting any particular conceptual scheme. And this holds true: if we understand necessity in a *modal* sense, it is possible that we could have had an entirely different conceptual scheme. However, the kind of experience made possible by such a scheme would be unrecognizable to us and fundamentally disconnected from our actual experience of the world. It is in this way

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<sup>359</sup> Haack refers to this aspect of Strawson’s theory as the *conceptual invariance thesis*, the view that metaphysics should resist conceptual change (Haack, 1979, p. 365). In addition, Strawson’s stance has been called “methodologically conservative” because it seeks to safeguard certain core beliefs from possible revision. Specifically, it argues that no significant change is necessary to the way we ordinarily view the world (Callanan, 2019, p. 423).

<sup>360</sup> “Carnap distinguished ‘descriptive’ work in syntax, semantics, and pragmatics from the ‘pure’ work in these areas undertaken as what he called ‘conceptual engineering’ (Carus 2007: 39)” (Thomasson, 2017, p. 109).

that Strawson sees our conceptual scheme as non-contingent—it's not just a matter of chance, but essential to how we make sense of our experience.<sup>361</sup> Nevertheless, granted that there is in fact *no absolute necessity* about any particular scheme, *it still does not follow that there are no necessities within any conceptual scheme once adopted* (Strawson, 1955a, p. 231).<sup>362</sup>

The idea that there are necessities within our conceptual scheme is closely tied to our reliance on an established framework of knowledge. Although no belief is completely immune to questioning, most serious inquiries in history, science, or practical matters assume a large body of accepted knowledge. In general, when we engage in reasoning or criticism, we rely on this pre-existing knowledge as a necessary background, and it is within this context that empirical observation serves to verify or check our beliefs (Strawson, 1976a, p. 116).<sup>363</sup> “Doubts and questions arise within frameworks of knowledge and assumption. And about the general frame of all these frameworks no serious doubt or question is, or could be, ever raised” (Strawson, 1974a, p. 105).<sup>364</sup>

However, the interconnected nature of our beliefs and concepts challenges the traditional idea of a foundationalist structure. The image of a hierarchical structure of beliefs and concepts, where higher items depend on lower ones as evidence or reasons, does not really

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<sup>361</sup> Cf: “The point of substance (or one of them) that Quine is making by this emphasis on revisability, is that there is no absolute necessity about the adoption or use of any conceptual scheme whatever, or, more narrowly and in terms that he would reject, that there is no analytic proposition such that we *must* have linguistic forms bearing just the sense required to express that proposition. But it is one thing to admit this, and quite another thing to say that there are no necessities within any conceptual scheme we adopt or use, or, more narrowly again, that there are no linguistic forms which do express analytic propositions” (H. P. Grice & Strawson, 1956, p. 28)

<sup>362</sup> Participation in some or another such framework, Strawson claims, is “original, non-rational [...] in no way something we could choose or give up” (Strawson, 1966b, p. 131, fn 7) and so, he holds, is beyond questions of justification. Moreover, as we will see below, even if evaluation and comparison between competing conceptual schemes requires a point of view inaccessible to us, then even the modal claim about no framework of thought being absolutely necessary remains idle.

<sup>363</sup> Cf: “[M]any of the observations regarded as relevant to some disputed belief are observations that the observer could not even make, let alone appreciate the relevance of, were it not for the presence in his belief-system of many other beliefs or assumptions which are not themselves in question at the moment of observation” (Strawson, 1974a, p. 105).

<sup>364</sup> Strawson's argument here relies, of course, on his conception of a Catholic naturalism.

capture how an individual's belief system is organised. Neither does it represent the structure of our conceptual framework. While beliefs are indeed interconnected in complex ways, they do not function like a structured argument. Moreover, in many cases, the more firmly established a belief is—and I argue that the same can be said about our basic concepts—the less relevant it seems to ask for reasons behind it (Strawson, 1976a, p. 115). For instance, asking for the reasons behind my holding my belief that my father's name is Cuauhtémoc or that the word '*nabkhiir*' means bat in Estonian seems uncalled for: "What do you mean *how* do I know this?" Hence, the foundationalist picture misrepresents the actual structure of our web of belief. Same with the structure of our conceptual scheme. It is not simply that our basic concepts are securely locked at the foundation of the conceptual edifice, providing the rock-hard footing upon which its many stores rest (as the Cartesian would imagine), but that the entire construction is imbued with these basic concepts. What here is needed is a new picture, a slightly but importantly modified metaphor: instead of the deep-reaching pillars of the Earth grounding the wooden building of thought, think of a Gothic cathedral where stone, the essential material that gives substance to the whole architecture, represents the basic concepts of our conceptual scheme. Due to their pervasive, almost ubiquitous character, these notions furnish the whole conceptual system, just like stone gives substance to a church; the finer, more delicate materials, such as mortar, metal, wood, glass, etc., stand for our more sophisticated concepts in an ascending order of precision and technicality; all of these building-blocks are incorporated and woven together in a variety of shapes and forms: columns, pilasters, arcades, cornices, finials, stained glass panels—even gargoyles—yet they all rely, hang on and latch on to the stone, the very frame of this cathedral of concepts (Strawson, 1976a, p. 115).

Thus, while conceptual schemes may change or evolve, Strawson contends that there are certain categories that remain constant:

Indeed I see no reason to dismiss the possibility that advances in natural science may produce further equally radical, or even more radical, modifications of our general world view. But equally I see no reason to doubt that certain things, certain categories, remain fixed: as the reality of the past, the existence of the external world and of other minds (Strawson, 1998n, p. 359).

There are fundamental boundaries beyond which our basic understanding of experience breaks down. In other words, certain structural features of experience are so deeply embedded in how we perceive and interact with the world that without them, the very notion of having an experience would no longer make sense to us. For instance, elements like the persistence of objects, the passage of time, and the distinction between self and other are foundational to how we make sense of the world. If these core elements were altered or removed, our entire framework for understanding and interpreting experiences would collapse, rendering any alternative framework unrecognizable or incoherent to us (Strawson, 1992, p. 26). The fundamental elements of our conceptual scheme are “internal to the structure of all thinking, so that the attempt to question it, which is tantamount to an attempt to reject our conceptual scheme in its entirety, leaves us without the resources for any coherent thought at all” (Strawson, 1998g, p. 291).

In response to attempts to revise or challenge the conceptual scheme, Strawson is clear about the consequences of such efforts. He critiques proposals for reforming language as being arbitrary and impractical—changes that, if seriously pursued, would render communication unbearably cumbersome. At more complex or theoretical levels, such reforms would even make meaningful discourse impossible (Strawson, 1987b, p. 91).

This raises a key question: what standards do we use to judge whether our concepts are appropriate or correct, in other words, valid? Without defining these standards, the question itself becomes meaningless. It is like asking if the law is legal or if art is artistic. While

we can question the legality of specific actions or regulations, it is nonsense to question the legality of the *entire legal practice* since the standards of judgment come from the legal system itself.<sup>365</sup> This is what Hieronymi calls *the broadly Wittgensteinian thought: It does not make sense to criticise a practice using concepts that get their meaning from that same practice* (2020).

Therefore, we can only compare two conceptual schemes if we assume there is a metaphysically absolute perspective from which we can evaluate and judge them.<sup>366</sup> Without such a standpoint, it becomes impossible to claim one scheme is superior or more accurate than another, as all judgments would be bound by the very frameworks we aim to compare. “But there is no such superior standpoint—or none that we know of; it is the idea of such a standpoint that is an illusion” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 38). This leads to Strawson’s rejection of attempts to step outside of our conceptual scheme entirely,<sup>367</sup> to dismiss the

invitation to step outside the entire structure of the conceptual scheme which we actually have—and then to justify it from some extraneous point of vantage. But there is nowhere to step; there is no such extraneous point of vantage. [...] This is not to say that the structure can never be modified. It can be modified from within itself by the advance of knowledge gained from within (Strawson, 1992, p. 64).

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<sup>365</sup> Cf: “But to what standards are we appealing when we ask whether the application of inductive standards is justified or well grounded? If we cannot answer, then no sense has been given to the question. Compare it with the question: Is the law legal? It makes perfectly good sense to inquire of a particular action, of an administrative regulation, or even, in the case of some states, of a particular enactment of the legislature, whether or not it is legal. The question is answered by an appeal to a legal system, by the application of a set of legal (or constitutional) rules or standards. But it makes no sense to inquire in general whether the law of the land, the legal system as a whole, is or is not legal. For to what legal standards are we appealing?” (Strawson, 1952, p. 257).

<sup>366</sup> It could well be, however, that far in the future we recognise that an aspect we now consider fundamental to our conceptual scheme is no longer taken to be so. Nonetheless, to engage in this sort of imaginative enterprise would be to fall into revisionary temptation and could risk losing sight of what is indispensable to us *now*.

<sup>367</sup> One could perhaps consider, according to Strawson’s own criticisms in *Individuals*, that what Leibniz was trying to do was this, to except outside our conceptual scheme. However, I pass no judgment on this; as I mentioned before, in order not to raise fingers at anyone, my conception of radical conceptual revision is entirely hypothetical.

In short, radical changes to our conceptual scheme risk destabilizing it due to its interconnected nature, and any critique of the scheme relies on its own concepts, as there is no external standpoint to evaluate it. As Strawson observes, “[w]e cannot coherently question everything at once; a radical and all-pervasive scepticism is senseless; but one of the things we learn from experience is that selective scepticism is wise” (Strawson, 1976a, p. 117). This suggests that while stepping outside our scheme is impossible, selective, internal revisions remain both feasible and essential.

## Science and Metaphysics

But what drives these selective, internal revisions? For Strawson, a key force behind the evolution and change of our conceptual scheme is the scientific spirit—the ongoing production of knowledge within our scientific practice. Over the past four centuries, the progress of science as an established practice has not only provided us with new insights but has also corrected many mistaken beliefs, ranging from the nature of the physical world to the understanding of our subjective experience.

The conceptual revisions introduced by science are not only undeniable but also required and welcomed. They have given us an understanding of the world that is unparalleled in any other period of history. It is understandable, then, that our enthusiasm and trust in science can sometimes lead to what Strawson calls *scientism*—the belief that scientific knowledge is the only real knowledge, or at least the only one that matters. This view suggests that our ordinary, pre-theoretical, or pre-scientific perspectives must be entirely reshaped to align with our best scientific theories.

While traditional scepticism raises purely theoretical doubts that are not practically viable as a lived stance, the situation is different with the scientistic perspective. Unlike the sceptic’s abstract doubt, the scientistic standpoint offers a quasi-practical framework that we can occupy and engage with in real-world inquiries, shaping how we interpret and explain

phenomena through reductionist or scientific lenses. This perspective does not just question; it proposes a concrete alternative way of seeing and understanding the world (Strawson, 1995, p. 8). For instance, reductive scientism claims that reality is solely constituted by particles moving in space-time. Thereby, it suggests that mental, moral, and abstract experiences are either not truly real or can be reduced to physical processes (H. Glock, 2001, p. 527). In the case of physical attributes like colour, for example, the scientistic approach would claim that these are merely subjective and therefore not real. Yet common-sense realism holds that we are aware of physical objects through immediate perception. From this perspective, we are directly aware of stable physical objects that have visual and tactile properties and cause our ongoing perceptions of them (Strawson, 1979d, p. 135).

### *The Objectivist and the Engaged Stance*

To deal with this tension, Strawson introduced his notion of a *dualistic attitude* towards reality in “Freedom and Resentment” (1962b), which remains one of his most influential contributions. On one side, there is the *engaged* or *participatory stance*, where our subjective experience is deeply intertwined with reality. In this stance, our ordinary moral, aesthetic, and perceptual judgments genuinely apply to the world, allowing us to see things, persons, and actions as possessing authentic moral, visual, tactile, aesthetic, semantic, and abstract properties. On the other side, there is the *objectivist* or *detached stance*, which is more rigid and stringent but difficult to maintain for long (which is why I refer to it as “quasi-practical”). In this stance, we see the world through a naturalistic, deterministic lens, stripping it of its intensional, abstract, and subjective qualities. Here, the world shifts from a space of reasons and motives to a realm of causes and effects, suitable for scientific description.

These two attitudes stand in stark opposition and cannot be occupied simultaneously. Moreover, given that the engaged stance is our natural, default way of relating to the world, the detached stance cannot be sustained for long periods. Eventually, we must return to the

ordinary, engaged stance, for “we cannot for long harbour inconsistent beliefs on matters that really concern us without severe stress and loss of power to achieve effective action” (Strawson, 1974a, p. 107).

The key to resolving this metaphysical dissonance, this clash of realities, is to recognize that there is, again, no absolute metaphysical standpoint, no “view from nowhere”. Both of our attitudes toward the world—the engaged and the detached—are genuine and valid, each serving its own purpose. When we let go of the idea of an absolute viewpoint, we can see that our concept of reality depends on the perspectives we occupy (Strawson, 1985c, p. 38). We adjust our standards based on the context of interpretation, of our point of view. These adjustments do not involve instability, nor do they lead to internal conflict; rather, the perceived opposition disappears when we recognize the relativity of our points of view (Strawson, 1979d, p. 143).<sup>368</sup>

The detached, scientific stance is not an entirely separate conceptual scheme but rather an intellectual attitude—a way of examining the world through a particular lens. As Strawson explains, “Of course, the scientific point of view is not, in one sense, a point of view at all. It is an intellectual, not a perceptual, standpoint” (Strawson, 1979d, p. 143). This stance has only developed relatively recently in human history and, despite its unique rigor, remains an extension of our ordinary conceptual framework, not a replacement. After all, “[s]cience is not only the offspring of common sense; it remains its dependant” (Strawson, 1979d, p. 145).

Even when our scientific worldview clashes with our ordinary understanding, it is still part of the same conceptual scheme. For instance, our latest advances in subatomic physics might challenge the ordinary notion of causality—causality as ordered in time, with cause

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<sup>368</sup> Cf: “Once relativity of description to standpoint is recognized, the sentence is seen to contain no contradiction; and, if it contains no contradiction, the problem of identification is solved” (Strawson, 1979d, p. 145)

preceding effect. However, even in these most abstract domains, scientists still presuppose the basic concept of causality to reach even the most unintuitive conclusions—like causality not being time-ordered (Strawson, 1985b, pp. 131–132). Although the elevated and precise concepts of scientific discourse sometimes filter into our ordinary understanding of certain phenomena (such as the nature of light, fire, or heat), they do so without significantly altering the foundational structures and basic concepts of our thought framework. This is generally appropriate because the sophisticated concepts of science are only truly relevant in specialized scientific contexts. For our everyday, practical human purposes, adopting a strictly scientific discourse or attitude would be both impractical and ultimately harmful, which reflects Strawson’s point that “it would not necessarily be rational to choose to be more purely rational than we are” (Strawson, 1962b, p. 28, fn. 4). As noted earlier, such an attitude is not entirely sustainable, and if it were to dominate our thinking, it would likely indicate a departure from healthy, engaged human experience.<sup>369</sup>

### *The Argument Against Radical Conceptual Revision*

I am now going to present my own argument against radical conceptual revision. I want to emphasise that the notion of *radical conceptual revision*, as I have outlined it above, is my own and is not directly found in Strawson’s writings. Consequently, the argument I will present against it, though inspired by Strawson and consistent with his general strategies, is also not part of his work. As previously discussed, radical conceptual revision can appear in two main forms: local and global. I will begin by addressing the global version.

Global radical revision argues that our entire conceptual scheme is fundamentally flawed and must be replaced with a completely different one. My argument against this position has two main points. First, it seems highly implausible that such a comprehensive replacement

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<sup>369</sup> At its core, the sceptical itch—whether in the form of a transcendental doubt or a revisionary proposal—goes against our most basic beliefs and practical concerns (Callanan, 2011, p. 271).

could ever be achieved. How would one entirely eliminate our existing conceptual scheme and impose a new one? Short of considering science-fiction scenarios involving artificial implantation of a new scheme or some other form of massive brainwashing, it is actually hard to imagine how this could be accomplished. One might argue that the replacement does not have to happen all at once but could be a gradual process aiming for a complete overhaul. However, if the revision were gradual and piecemeal, it would no longer count as a global proposal, but rather as a series of localized revisions.

Second, the revisionist might counter that, even if his proposal is not practically feasible, that does not cancel its theoretical possibility. And if it is theoretically possible, we should still take it seriously.<sup>370</sup> To this, I argue that the radical revisionist's proposal is not serious, for it assumes there is a way to evaluate and compare his preferred conceptual scheme with the one we currently use. But for this comparison to work, he must be able to stand outside both conceptual schemes to judge them, implying access to a broader, more encompassing conceptual scheme. It seems to suggest that the philosopher proposing such a revision is claiming special exemption from rules that supposedly apply to everyone, as if he could see the world as it *truly* is (Stroud, 2003, p. 121). However, as I have already argued, there is no such view from nowhere, no *cosmic exile* (Quine, 1960, p. 275) from which we can evaluate our conceptual framework externally. You cannot simply step outside of your conceptual scheme to assess it.

If the revisionist lacks access to this ultimate metaphysical standpoint, then he must be evaluating from within our current conceptual scheme, which he simultaneously claims is wholly inadequate and unsuitable. Yet this is clearly inconsistent: how can one assess the validity and adequacy of a proposal using a conceptual scheme deemed fundamentally flawed?

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<sup>370</sup> This is related to what has been called the *crucial objection* (Hieronimi, 2020): Even if it is not practically possible to engage in revision, that does not mean we should not try were we able to do so.

As MacIntyre puts it: “since it is only in terms of that scheme that errors are identified, the notion of the scheme itself being in error, the notion of overall error, could never find application” (1994, p. 121).<sup>371</sup>

The revisionist therefore faces a dilemma: either he is correct that our conceptual scheme is entirely wrong, in which case there is no reliable way to evaluate his alternative; or, his proposal is legitimate, but that would mean our current conceptual scheme is not as fundamentally flawed as he claims. In either case, the revisionist’s stance collapses under its own assumptions.<sup>372</sup>

This is the synthesized form of my argument, which I will now apply to the notion of local radical revision:

### ***Against Global Radical Revision***

#### *The Practical Possibility*

P1: Global radical revision claims that our entire conceptual scheme is fundamentally flawed and must be completely replaced.

P2: Achieving a complete replacement is practically implausible without resorting to extreme measures like brainwashing or artificial implantation.

#### *The Theoretical Possibility*

P3: The revisionist’s claim assumes an objective standpoint outside our conceptual scheme where he can objectively compare between competing conceptual schemes

P4: No such external standpoint exists; evaluations must occur within the current scheme.

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<sup>371</sup> Note that I am assuming the ambitious validating stance of descriptive metaphysics I presented in the last chapter. Of course, if we renounce any validating aspirations, the theoretical possibility of error rises.

<sup>372</sup> This echoes Strawson’s sentiment when he writes that: “It is not merely a matter of dismissing the demand for a justification of one’s belief in a proposition on the ground that one can’t help believing it. That would be weak indeed. The position is, rather, that the demand for justification is really senseless” (Strawson, 1998g, p. 370). Therefore, I agree with Callanan (2011, p. 275) when he claims that it is not the Humean naturalist in Strawson who justifies him in ignoring sceptical threats, but rather the Wittgensteinian naturalist and his view of a bedrock of beliefs that gives the Strawsonian the proper grounds to disregard the sceptic/revisionist: “Not only do the sceptic’s proposals only make sense within a backdrop of pre-dated practical disregard for their cogency, but they also would prove inefficacious in regard to our practical lives’ continuation” (Callanan, 2011, p. 276).

P5: Therefore, either the revisionist cannot reliably assess our ordinary scheme and the proposed replacement, or our actual scheme is not as fundamentally flawed as claimed.

Conclusion: The revisionist's position fails because it is either practically inconceivable or conceptually incoherent.

In the case of local radical revision, the revisionist aims to replace a specific fundamental concept. However, given the interconnected nature of our conceptual scheme, removing even one fundamental concept risks unravelling a substantial portion of the entire framework. For instance, consider Berkeley's proposal to eliminate the concept of a material object. How many of our concepts implicitly assume or analytically entail the notion of a material body? Likely thousands. Even our abstract concepts often rely on spatial metaphors and associations with physicality. To paraphrase Putnam, such a proposal "makes no more sense than the idea of taking away the Cheshire cat and leaving the grin" (1998, p. 283). By removing a fundamental concept, the revisionist risks pulling entire clusters of interconnected ideas, causing irreparable damage to the structure of our thought.

Here, the local revisionist faces a problem similar to that of his global counterpart: the feasibility of such a project. Although not as implausible as eliminating the entire scheme, the localised proposal still entails altering the structure so substantially that it raises practical concerns. How could such a massive transformation ever be achieved? More importantly, why would we commit to it, given the profound disruption it entails? The cost seems unacceptably high, and the change remains far too radical to justify. To be clear, *the revisionary challenge is not being dismissed by merely claiming certain beliefs are infallible; it is rejected because it would mean abandoning concepts essential to human thinking* (H. Glock, 2001, p. 527).

Nonetheless, the *crucial objection* remains: even if such a revision were possible, should we pursue it? No, or so I argue; the central issue here is the attitude we adopt towards the validity of our conceptual scheme. The local revisionist cannot claim that our entire system of

thought is flawed, as that would automatically align him with global revisionism. Hence, he must acknowledge that our conceptual scheme is at least partially adequate for our purposes.

On top of that, if the revisionist's aims are strictly scientific, we can invoke a Strawsonian relativist response and remind him that the perceived tension dissolves when we recognize that we can occupy both perspectives at different times. For our ordinary, practical human concerns—the ones that arguably matter most—our existing conceptual scheme is more than enough. However, if the revisionist's goals are metaphysical and concern “the true underlying structure of the world,” then it is crucial to point out that our conceptual scheme is both our starting point and our finish line, akin to Neurath's raft.<sup>373</sup> We must be cautious not to dismantle it while attempting to repair it, lest we risk sinking altogether.

Nonetheless, such picture challenges the revisionist's idea that we always have the option to make either a minor change to the periphery of our belief system or a more radical overhaul of the entire structure, guided by practical considerations like simplicity and convenience (Strawson, 1955a, p. 232). On the contrary, the revisionist must be extremely cautious about which changes to make. While descriptive metaphysics allows for conceptual evolution, such changes cannot come at the expense of destabilising the entire framework of thought. Any proposed revision must include a clear plan detailing the precise connections and interrelations between the concepts involved, allowing for a thorough cost-benefit analysis. But this is, of course, the main role of descriptive metaphysics—to provide the detailed map necessary before any serious consideration of conceptual reform can take place. Hence, revisionary metaphysics presupposes descriptive metaphysics.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Neurath's *raft metaphor* suggests that our knowledge and conceptual framework are like a raft that we must repair while staying afloat, as there is no solid ground or external standpoint to step onto. We cannot rebuild the entire raft at once; instead, we make adjustments piece by piece from within. See Sosa (2008).

<sup>374</sup> Cf: “[A]gainst Carnap, Strawson had argued that understanding our actual conceptual scheme is a precondition for constructing a philosophically superior one” (H. Glock, 2001, p. 525). Whether Carnap himself would deny this is an open question that I cannot address here.

In short, radical conceptual revision—whether global or local—cannot be taken seriously, not even as a theoretical possibility. The revisionist’s approach dismisses even the most reasonable assumptions and is willing to sacrifice the aspects of our conceptual scheme that make it humanly intelligible, all in pursuit of a supposedly more refined access to reality. However, this indicates that it is far more rational to place trust in our fallible but functional conceptual scheme than to accept the revisionist’s extreme conclusions. Moreover, this approach also sets boundaries for conceptual revision by establishing, as we will see in the next section, descriptive metaphysics as the necessary framework for any revisionary approach.

### **Is Revision Still Possible?**

Contrary to what some might argue, Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics is not entirely conservative: he was open to conceptual changes, provided they do not lead to the kind of absurd conclusions and consequences typically associated with radical revisionism. For instance, he writes:

Concepts, however basic they may appear, are not exempt from criticism. Our schemes might be inadequate or we may, as Hume classically maintained in the case of causation, mean more than there is to be meant. So logical analysis of concepts must be supplemented by “factual” analysis of the realities the concepts relate to (Strawson, 1973b, p. 971).

Thus, to fully understand our concepts, we must go beyond their logical structure and consider how they relate to real-world phenomena. Thus, effective analysis combines internal coherence with practical relevance, ensuring our concepts align with actual experiences. In this context, it becomes evident why science, as a discipline grounded in empirical inquiry, plays a central role in conceptual evolution. Thus, Strawson remarks that:

“[T]he results of empirical investigations may call for conceptual adjustments or revision. [...] As the historical modification of the conception of physical space sufficiently shows, it would be folly to do so. Neither do I wish to dispute the view that certain ideas which have, or have

had, some currency are inherently incoherent, confused, or empty: e.g., those of the simple, immaterial imperishable soul-substance or spirit. If their elimination is what the exercise of the critical spirit accomplishes, *viva!*” (Strawson, 1998l, pp. 64–65).

Scientific practice is a primary driver of conceptual change, continually introducing new concepts, refining existing ones, and, at times, even discarding outdated ones. And these conceptual changes, though originating in theoretical discourse, eventually reshape our practical understanding and daily lives. Successful revisions transform not only abstract thought but also how we perceive and interact with the world. For example, scientific ideas like “gravity” began in theory but fundamentally altered our understanding of nature.<sup>375</sup> In that regard, theoretical ideas will always have practical consequences. Likewise, what seems justified in practice will influence our theoretical beliefs (Andras, 2012, p. 114).

Where my interpretation diverges from, and perhaps even opposes, Strawson’s original stance is in accepting philosophically driven conceptual innovation, provided it operates within the framework of descriptive metaphysics. In contrast, Strawson appears to be largely sceptical about the prospect of conceptual innovation emerging from philosophy itself, as opposed to developments within the natural or social sciences:

[I]f it is conservative to resist essentially ineffective philosophical dreaming, constructions of the kind I’ve just described, then I’m all for conservatism. It’s true that the conservatism I disavow may get muddled up in people’s minds with the conservatism I acknowledge; and this may happen because people get overexcited about the imagined implications of advance in some specialized field; and then you get metaphysics in the bad sense. It seems to me the real implications of conceptual innovation in some specialized field come out in the difference those innovations make within the specialized field and sometimes perhaps in the field of social

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<sup>375</sup> Cf: “[W]hen certain of our beliefs about the efficacy of some of these practices turns out to be false, then we may have good reason for dropping or modifying those practices” (Strawson, 1962b, p. 27).

life at large; and perhaps therefore in ethics. But ethics is something I've not very much ventured into (Magee, 1971, p. 126).

Strawson seems to believe that conceptual innovation arising from philosophy regarding the periphery of our conceptual scheme has, if anything, a rather limited scope, for philosophy has no privileged knowledge about how to change conceptual schemes in specialised fields.<sup>376</sup> In contrast, I argue that philosophically driven conceptual innovation—when grounded and guided by a solid descriptive metaphysical framework—can have valuable and desirable outcomes. Not all philosophical efforts at conceptual change are incoherent, absurd, or mere products of metaphysical imagination.

Hence, alongside science, philosophy is likewise engaged in the ongoing process of conceptual modification. Strawson acknowledges that while philosophers may advocate or approve changes in our collection of words and concepts, their primary task is to understand and make sense of what already belongs to that collection (Strawson, 1962c, p. 693). However, he does not outright reject the idea that some revisionary efforts could eventually refine and enhance our “unrefined” understanding of the world, thus becoming part of the data for descriptive metaphysics (Haack, 1979, p. 370).<sup>377</sup> When seen in this light, the potential for conceptual change through philosophical inquiry is neither alarming nor surprising.

### *Ameliorative Conceptual Analysis in the Context of Descriptive Metaphysics*

Ameliorative conceptual analysis asks: *what is the purpose of this concept, and is there a better concept to achieve that purpose?* (Haslanger, 2012, p. 386). However, before suggesting a change, it is crucial to understand how the existing concept functions within our broader framework. Thus, any proposal should also rely on a descriptive analysis to clarify the role the term currently plays. This descriptive groundwork is essential for justifying how the proposed change could better

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<sup>376</sup> Thank you to Professor Glock for helping me notice this point about Strawson's view.

<sup>377</sup> See, for instance, Strawson's discussion about the concept of mind and the concept of a person in *Individuals* and later on in his response to Mackie in (1980, p. 270).

serve that role (Thomasson, 2017, p. 114). Ultimately, the primary criterion for accepting a revisionary proposal remains pragmatic: *will incorporating these features into our conceptual framework offer a practical and convincing way to address our needs and improve our understanding of reality?* (Callanan, 2011, p. 271).

My proposal is that to engage in ameliorative conceptual analysis in a fully Strawsonian spirit, we must establish clear boundaries—a conceptual map—that identifies which concepts we can modify and the ways in which we can effectively do so.

I start by distinguishing between the core and the periphery of our conceptual scheme, similar to the distinction Moltmann (2019, 2020) makes between the core and periphery of our natural language ontology.<sup>378</sup> The core of our conceptual scheme consists of fundamental concepts that are the main focus of descriptive metaphysics—those basic, irreducible, and necessary notions that underpin our experience and understanding of the world. In contrast, the periphery includes the expanding network of concepts that enrich and refine this core framework. These peripheral concepts are not foundational, but they help mediate our understanding and fine-tune our conceptual scheme to accommodate new insights and complexities. The concepts at the core would be largely immune to revision, in contrast to less essential aspects of our experience, which could theoretically be discarded “without imperilling the entire structure of the conception” (Stroud, 2003, p. 113).<sup>379</sup>

Peripheral concepts, on the other hand, would be more likely to be flexible or subject to modification (Eklund, 2015) in as much as it does not involve alterations that either

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<sup>378</sup> The core-periphery distinction recalls the core-periphery distinction in syntax introduced by Chomsky’s (1981, 1986). In broad terms, the core of a language’s syntactic system reflects its regularities and universal grammar, while the periphery encompasses exceptions and external influences that have been integrated into the language.

<sup>379</sup> There is a valid question regarding the natural or organic—in short, non-philosophically driven—displacement of a concept from the core to the periphery. As I will show below, this question would have to be addressed by descriptive metaphysics if it is to take into consideration the natural evolution of our conceptual scheme. However, my target here, as Strawson’s, is the metaphysically fuelled appeal to conceptual innovation and revision.

compromise the core structure or require major severing of its conceptual ramifications. For example, a revision of the concept of a woman in order to account for its less ordinary uses—say, applied to transwomen—would not require messing with the core-constitution of our framework, as the basic concepts linked to it, namely, that of a person, remains untouched. Neither would it require, *prima facie*, an important cutting off of its peripheral conceptual links. But to know exactly which ties to excise and which to set up is a question—possibly the most crucial question—for the conceptual engineer. And for that she better be versed in descriptive metaphysics.

In sum, I argue that as long as a revisionary proposal remains modest and is accompanied by the necessary groundwork of descriptive metaphysics, it can be endorsed by descriptive metaphysics. It is crucial to emphasize the significant role descriptive metaphysics plays in such cases—not only by preventing unproductive or absurd revisionary approaches but also by enhancing the effectiveness and applicability of ameliorative proposals. While some have explored the compatibility of descriptive metaphysics with ameliorative conceptual analysis,<sup>380</sup> such compatibility is not traditionally read into the essence of descriptive metaphysics or Strawsonian philosophy. My aim here is to demonstrate that these two approaches are essentially compatible and complementary by design. In doing so, I hope to present a version of descriptive metaphysics that discards the false image of absolute conservatism, making it more appealing even to those invested in revisionary ontology.

Although the results of a Strawsonian ameliorative analysis would certainly be less ambitious and broad than envisioned by more radical-minded revisionists, it can still lead to meaningful, albeit incremental, change. After all, slow and steady wins the race. As Haack reminds us, “[we] are not on a branch, as in Geach’s metaphor, rather, on a raft, as in Neurath’s.

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<sup>380</sup> See Fine (2017), Haslanger (2020) and Thomasson (2009, 2017).

And if you object that this means we are all at sea, I reply that this is no worse, at any rate, than being up in the air” (1979, pp. 370–371).

### **Prolegomena to Any Future Descriptive Metaphysics**

Before I conclude this chapter, and thereby this dissertation, there are two final proposals I would like to offer regarding the direction of future metaphysics. First, while descriptive metaphysics has traditionally been conceived as a static endeavour, I propose extending it to include a diachronic dimension, enabling us to account for the changes that our conceptual scheme undergoes over time. Second, although Strawson argued that revisionary metaphysics should be at the service of descriptive metaphysics, I contend that the reverse is also true. Thus, the relationship between them is more complementary than typically acknowledged: descriptive metaphysics serves revisionary metaphysics by providing the basis and setting the constraints within which revisionary proposals can operate effectively.

These two proposals, it must be noted, are strictly speaking foreign to Strawson’s original conception of descriptive metaphysics. In a sense, they go against the letter of Strawsonian philosophy, but not, as I hope to demonstrate, against its spirit. I believe they are necessary additions to the original programme, not only enhancing its effectiveness but also bridging gaps that still exist between its methodology and more mainstream contemporary approaches in ontology. By drawing these lines together, we can reveal that the distance between them is not as significant as previously thought and, in doing so, breathe new life into descriptive metaphysics in a renewed and exciting form.

#### *The Prospect of Dynamic Descriptive Semantics*

This prospect concerns a missing emphasis on the historical character of our framework of thought and the evolving nature of our concepts. Strawson’s focus on the core, stable, and change-resistant aspects of our conceptual scheme can be seen as a deliberate and justified response to the challenging absurdities advanced by traditional metaphysics. At the same time,

it addresses the growing pressure, particularly over the last century, from the achievements of science and the subsequent attempts to assimilate philosophy into it, in hopes of thereby achieving some of its success. However, the Strawsonian focus on immutability has, regrettably, come at the expense of overlooking the historicity of our conceptual scheme.<sup>381</sup>

To be sure, as I have argued over the past two chapters, the primary aim of descriptive metaphysics is to explore those core aspects of our conceptual framework that, as Strawson puts it, “have no history”.<sup>382</sup> Nevertheless, it remains undeniable that our conceptual scheme—like us—is shaped by history and evolves with it, even if its core remains relatively stable. As remarked by Snowdon, if our concepts are constantly and deeply changing, the descriptive metaphysician will just have to describe those changes (2006, p. 60, fn. 2).

I propose that we begin by considering a dynamic view not only of conceptual schemes but also of individual concepts themselves. Concepts evolve over time, and it is crucial for both the descriptivist and the revisionist metaphysician to understand when and how these changes occur. In my view, a concept resembles a fractal image within the broader conceptual scheme: just as in a Strawsonian framework where all concepts are interrelated in various ways, each concept itself possesses a core or nucleus and is internally structured in an interlocked manner. This means concepts are non-atomic but interconnected within. By employing methods perhaps external to Strawsonian philosophy, such as genealogy or conceptual archaeology, we can trace how a concept has evolved over time, identifying which elements of its content have remained stable and which have changed.

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<sup>381</sup> It could also be that Strawson’s emphasis on the perennial aspects of our conceptual scheme stems from a need to distinguish his approach from that of Collingwood. Collingwood similarly aims to uncover the underlying presuppositions of our conceptual scheme but does so in relation to science and its varying epochs, making his investigation explicitly historical. See, for instance Vanheeswijck (2014) and Stroud (2003).

<sup>382</sup> Although Strawson does recognise the dynamic nature of Wittgensteinian hinge-propositions (“the framework is, up to a point, at least, dynamically conceived: what was at one time part of the framework may change its status, may assume the character of a hypothesis to be questioned and perhaps falsified” (Strawson, 1985c, p. 18)) it is not clear how flexible and dynamic are his own Strawsonian hinges.

For example, consider our concept of space. It has undeniably been central to our conceptual scheme for as long as we could call it “our” scheme, yet it has evolved significantly over time, especially in response to scientific discoveries. We have moved from an Euclidean understanding to a Newtonian one, and then to a non-Euclidean perspective, with possible variations in between—all iterations of the same core concept of *space*.<sup>383</sup>

This approach highlights that certain concepts can undergo significant transformation without being entirely revised or replaced. This distinction is crucial because the Strawsonian critique *against revision* is largely based on the notion of revision as *elimination or replacement*. Yet not all transformation constitutes revision; and revision does not imply evolution.

*No Revision Without Description: Descriptive Metaphysics as the Framework for Revisionary Metaphysics*

There is one last proposal I must introduce to my understanding of Strawsonian descriptive metaphysics—or perhaps I should call it “Neo-Strawsonian” metaphysics. To Strawson, the productions of revisionary metaphysics are, at its best, “both intrinsically admirable and of enduring philosophical utility”, but they are so only in so far as revisionary metaphysics is “at the service of descriptive metaphysics” (Strawson, 1959, p. 9). Appealing to Strawson's own compatibilist spirit, I now argue that the relationship between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, though still hierarchical in the sense of application priority, is ultimately mutually interdependent.

When we acknowledge the diachronic dimension of conceptual analysis, it becomes clear that successful revisions introduced by revisionary metaphysics integrate into our conceptual scheme through a necessary descriptive groundwork. These successful revisions then become new data for descriptive metaphysics. What emerges is a virtuous cycle, or more

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<sup>383</sup> Cf: “[I]t is [...] important [...] to recognise not merely that words may preserve their identity while their meanings alter, but that concepts, too, may preserve *their* identity through change of their local or temporary states” (Strawson, 1962c, p. 693). See, for example, Putnam (1975)

precisely, a recursive procedure: first, descriptive analysis identifies how our concepts function and highlights those with certain deficiencies. Revisionary or constructive metaphysics then addresses these suboptimal concepts, either by introducing new concepts to meet emerging needs or refining existing ones that fall short.

Crucially, any ameliorative strategy relies on the groundwork laid by descriptive analysis, which informs whether a concept should be discarded or merely modified. Descriptive analysis guides the best path for proceeding and the most effective way to integrate a new concept, ensuring a smooth transition that aligns with the roles previously fulfilled by its predecessor. Through this process, descriptive and revisionary metaphysics work together to continually refine and improve our conceptual scheme in a dynamic and adaptive way. Descriptive metaphysics thus becomes the framework for any revisionary proposal, not only assessing its viability but actively contributing to it.

## **Conclusion**

Although the concept of descriptive metaphysics and its contrast to revisionary metaphysics has been firmly established within the mainstream framework of analytic metaphysics since the publication of *Individuals* in 1959, Strawson's original programme for ontology has largely remained a marginal pursuit, upheld by a few in a somewhat ad hoc manner that often diverges from the original goals and methods of conceptual description that Strawson devised. In this chapter, I have proposed certain approaches—minimal adjustments and extensions—that aim not only to continue but also to reinforce the core principles of Strawsonian descriptive metaphysics: its primary commitment to conceptual self-understanding, its critical stance against implausible revisionary proposals, and its modest yet significant claims of validation; in essence, its realistic and human engagement with metaphysics.

I have presented the idea of radical conceptual revision as a way of illustrating the effectiveness of descriptive metaphysics: by showing how descriptive metaphysics can stop

nonsensical revisionary proposals in their tracks, we are compelled to acknowledge its power and utility as a viable framework for contemporary analytic ontology: the radical revisionist position is absurd because, to support his doubts, he dismisses even the most reasonable assumptions. However, this also indicates that it is far more reasonable to trust in our fallible but functional conceptual scheme than to accept extreme revisionist conclusions (Bird, 2003, p. 40).

Moreover, my additions correspond, on the one hand, to an expansion into a dynamic conception of descriptive metaphysics that addresses the historical transformation of our conceptual scheme, focusing on how even some of its most fundamental elements—those concepts that are a necessary part of our framework of thought—have themselves been reinterpreted and recontextualized over time. On the other hand, they reflect an acknowledgment that revisionary and descriptive metaphysics are not opposing approaches, but are instead necessary stages within a comprehensive procedure—one that ultimately relies on descriptive metaphysics as its foundation.

“We cannot come to make radically new philosophical sense of things save through a progressive piecemeal process” (Moore, 2017, p. 49). This insight captures the realistic and detailed approach Strawsonian metaphysics promotes, countering the radical revisionist’s absurd yet fascinating ambitions.

## Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to offer an in-depth exploration of Peter Frederick Strawson's contributions to philosophical methodology by focusing on his approach to analysis, language, and metaphysics. By revisiting Strawson's work on semantics and the philosophy of language, I have aimed to reveal the underlying systematicity in Strawson's conception of philosophy, evident not only in his reflections on the appropriate methods of philosophical analysis but also in the structure of his own arguments and approaches. His work, I hope to have shown, is unified by a realist and compatibilist spirit that connects the diverse strands of his thought into a coherent and powerful philosophical vision. In this, I aim to reconfirm "the view that Strawson is one of the twentieth century's best systematic philosophers" (Bezuidenhout, 2001, p. 465).

In achieving this, the dissertation clarified a number of key aspects of Strawson's methodology while challenging prevailing misconceptions, particularly those that suggest Strawson adhered to conventional descriptivism about names or that he denied the potential of a systematic theory of meaning. Instead, the study revealed Strawson as a nuanced proto-contextualist, whose careful attention to the interaction of semantics and pragmatics has been largely dismissed by contemporary philosophy of language.

Beyond clarification and exegesis, the dissertation argues for the relevance of descriptive metaphysics as a productive framework for contemporary ontology. By setting boundaries on conceptual engineering and arguing against radical conceptual revision, it presents descriptive metaphysics as a foundational structure within which any responsible revisionary proposals must operate, showing that Strawsonian metaphysics, far from being purely conservative, has the flexibility to accommodate certain forms of conceptual innovation, provided they are grounded in a well-defined descriptive analysis. Thereby reaffirming how, in Strawson's philosophy, "the most general concepts and categories of human thought do form,

in their connections and interdependencies, an articulated structure which it is possible to describe without falsification” illuminating the “mutual involvement of ontology, epistemology, and the philosophy of language, logic, and mind” (Strawson, 2000, p. 193).

Overall, the dissertation underscored that an understanding of Strawson’s philosophy requires attention to the deep coherence of his work across semantics, pragmatics, and metaphysics. Neglecting these connections risks an incomplete reading that fails to capture the full extent of Strawson’s ambitions. By restoring these connections, this study presented Strawson’s project in its true complexity and relevance, reaffirming his philosophy’s sharpness, originality, and enduring significance for current debates in analytic ontology. And even if there remain gaps and challenges in his work, “in philosophy, who hasn’t failed or doesn’t fail eventually? It is enough, more than enough, to have done as well as Strawson did. In *magnis voluisse sat est*” (Bergmann, 1960, p. 622).

Ultimately, I would consider the core goal of this project achieved if it has managed to invite—or even challenge—the reader to revisit Strawson’s work, to engage anew or perhaps for the first time with his writings. In that case, my dissertation would indeed have been successful.

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