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Mental Reality by Galen Strawson

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What Is the Phenomenology of Thought?

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Galen Strawson's book, *Mental Reality*, is an impressive and ambitious piece of work. Strawson defends two main theses. First, against what he calls "neobehaviorism", he argues that neither behavior nor behavioral dispositions are in any way constitutive of a creature's mental life. Reference to behavior is not part of the nature of the mental. Secondly, what is constitutive of the mental is conscious experience. In these few pages, I want to concentrate on the second thesis.

One can, I think, agree with Strawson that analytic philosophers of mind of the last thirty years have spent less energy exploring features of conscious experience than other mental phenomena, e.g., propositional attitudes. And I have little doubt that Strawson's book will contribute to redirecting philosophers' attention onto conscious experience. The second strand of Strawson's work, however, is not merely a brief in favor of conscious experience. His goal is not just to convince other philosophers that conscious experience too is a respectable topic. The view which he advocates and which he labels "naturalized Cartesianism" is that the core of the mental *is* experience (and nothing else).

If so, then Brentano was wrong to claim that the mark of the mental is intentionality (or aboutness). And if Strawson is right, then there is just *one* deep problem in the philosophy of mind: the problem of experience. There is then a sense in which it is wrong to assume—as many philosophers do (e.g., Field 1978)—that there are *two* deep problems in the philosophy of mind, not one: there is the problem of intentionality (Brentano's problem) and there is the problem raised by experiential properties. At least, they are wrong to assume either that the two problems can be put on the same footing or that a solution to the problem of intentionality can open the way to a solution to the problem of experiential properties. So if Strawson is right, then a lot is wrong in current philosophy of mind. Is Strawson right? Before I face this question, I would like to sketch Strawson's overall position.

It is one of the most striking features of Strawson's book that he takes idealism far more seriously than most physicalist writers (as his remarkable chapter 5 testifies). Given his naturalized Cartesian position, this is both interesting and understandable. In fact, Strawson remains firmly in the camp of monist physicalists or materialists: he does not opt either for ontological dualism or for idealism. In a sense, Strawson's project in *Mental Reality* is to give his physicalist readers a flavor for the size of the "explanatory gap" between our existing notion of the physical and our notion of the mental, i.e., the experiential. Even though physics and the natural sciences have notably evolved since Brentano, still the gap remains enormous and the mind-body problem is even harder than Brentano took it to be and than most physicalists nowadays take it to be when they assume that intentionality is the mark of the mental. Naturalized Cartesianism goes hand in hand with what Strawson calls (chapter 4) "agnostic materialism" which calls for a reform (a revision or a revolution) in our conception of the physical. On this view, "our current conception of the physical is fundamentally incomplete" (p. 101); "it is the descriptive scheme of physics that will have to change dramatically if there is to be an acceptable theoretical unification with the mental scheme" (p. 104). Here, one is reminded of Chomsky's repeated remark that our concept of the physical is constantly evolving and of his (1995) recent claim as well that a naturalistic approach to the mind should expect a "unification" with "the 'core' natural sciences, not necessarily [a] reduction".

In fact, once one has appreciated the size of the explanatory gap, one faces a basic choice: either one sticks to the assumption that "our current conception of the physical is basically on the right lines and liable to undergo only essentially conservative extensions" (p. 103) or one doesn't. Like Chomsky, Strawson opts for the latter option. This is why he remains a physicalist. But if one takes the former option, then there are two basic directions one can go.

One can endorse physicalism and deny various features of the mental. This is what many current physicalist writers do to varying degrees: from the eliminative materialist claim that no mental property has ever been instantiated to instrumentalist and interpretationist doctrines which put into question the reality of various mental phenomena and properties.

The other way to go is to embrace idealism. And on Strawson's view (p. 101), "idealism is far less implausible than outright eliminativism" because "there is a sense in which we cannot be wrong about experience that has no parallel in the case of the nonexperiential" (p. 103). Strawson thinks that one cannot deny this asymmetry on pain of self-contradiction: "for there to seem to be ... phenomenology or experience *just is* for there to be such phenomenology or experience" (p. 52). Assuming that the point is not that one's judgments about the qualitative content or character of one's experience are always infallible, I have no disagreement with Strawson here. But I would merely like to add that the same goes for beliefs: one cannot meaningfully, I

think, believe that one has no beliefs or that there is no belief. Of course, if belief is experiential, if believing is experiencing or if there is some kind of phenomenology involved in believing, then this is merely a particular case of Strawson's general point that "if it really seems to one that one is having an experience then one must indeed be having some experience or other" (p. 104). But if not, then perhaps it is not true after all that "there is a sense in which we cannot be wrong about experience that has no parallel in the case of the nonexperiential". With the question of whether belief in particular and conceptual thought in general is experiential, we reach, I think, a question which is hard but crucial for Strawson's overall position.

As I said, at the core of naturalized Cartesianism is the claim that experience is constitutive of the mental: the only genuinely mental phenomena are *occurrent* conscious experiential phenomena; only *occurrent* conscious experiential phenomena are intrinsically mentally contentful (where "occurrent" means "non-dispositional"). By contrast, non-mental subexperiential phenomena are not intrinsically contentful and are, therefore, not mental. What then of non-occurrent mental dispositions such as an individual's beliefs and desires (or propositional attitudes)?

Consider Louis who is in a dreamless sleep at time *t*. Although it is literally (or simply) true of him at *t* that he believes various things and although each of his beliefs may be one of Louis' brain states, still according to Strawson (pp. 165–68), no state of Louis' brain as Louis lies in a dreamless sleep is intrinsically contentful. Hence, no state of Louis' brain as Louis lies in a dreamless sleep is really mental. Neither a computer program should be said to be intrinsically about what it can be used to model, nor should a CD on which Beethoven's fifteenth string quartet is stored be said to be intrinsically musically contentful. I agree. I would also agree that the meaning of the English word "cat" is not one of its intrinsic properties. It is part and parcel of naturalized Cartesianism, as Strawson understands this view, I think, to assume that, unlike merely dispositional states, *occurrent* experiential conscious mental states—the only genuinely mental states—are intrinsically contentful. So the fact that a state is a conscious *occurrent* state can confer intrinsic content onto it.

From an externalist perspective—which is my perspective—I find this claim somewhat puzzling. I doubt very much that anything is ever intrinsically contentful or that a semantic property is ever an intrinsic property of the thing which instantiates it. Consider again the meaning property (or the semantic property) of the English word "cat". If one agrees that no property of the word "cat" can be one of its intrinsic properties unless it is one of its basic physical properties or it *supervenes* upon one of its basic physical properties, then clearly the semantic property of the word "cat" is not one of its intrinsic properties.

Although it is a controversial distinction, I would agree with Strawson that there is a distinction to be made between primitive (“original” or underived) intentionality and derived intentionality. I would agree that the word “cat” has derived intentionality and lacks primitive intentionality. And I would agree that a CD has derived musical content but lacks original musical content. But having original (or primitive) content (or intentionality) does not turn content into an intrinsic, i.e., a non-relational property. So if an individual’s occurrent conscious belief that the glass in front of him contains water has underived intentionality and if the belief itself is a brain state token of the individual, this does not make the content of the individual’s belief that the glass in front of him contains water an intrinsic property of the individual’s brain state token. I do not see how the fact that the belief is occurrent or consciously entertained by the individual could turn its content into an intrinsic property of the individual’s brain.

His naturalized Cartesian standpoint then leads Strawson to what he calls the “No Problem Thesis”, i.e., the thesis that intentionality raises no deep problem for either physicalism or a naturalistic perspective; only experience does. Whatever is left of intentionality or aboutness without what it is like to undergo an occurrent conscious experience can, on Strawson’s view, be handled by a combination of informational and evolutionary approaches (as currently developed by e.g., Dretske, Fodor, Millikan and Papineau). Intentionality without conscious experience, however, is not the real thing. On the one hand, machines with no capacity for conscious experience can’t enter states with real intentionality. On the other hand, “instant people” who have no history and no causal connexions to the world but who can enjoy occurrent conscious experiences can still have large chunks of intentionality (what Strawson calls E/A and N/C* intentionality). Obviously, the No Problem Thesis presupposes that having theoretical beliefs, entertaining abstract thoughts or exercising a concept is a form of experience or that there is something it is like to have theoretical beliefs, to entertain abstract thoughts or to exercise a concept. This assumption seems to me at the heart of naturalized Cartesianism. Although I am not going to provide an argument (let alone a knock down one) against this assumption, I would like nonetheless to suggest that this assumption might be more costly than beneficial.

Strawson himself concedes that his extended use of experience to include conceptual thought sounds puzzling since, as he puts it (pp. 182–63), conceptual thought is *abstract*, *intangible* and *diaphanous*. Unlike sensory experience, what he calls thought experience occurs in no modality at all (p. 196). And this is a point on which I would like to press him.

There is a fairly natural picture of the mind according to which there is a fundamental difference between thoughts and experiences. On this picture, sensory representations, unlike conceptual representations, are phenomenal states, i.e., states with phenomenal properties. Experiential states are states

with sensory or emotive qualities. There is something it is like to enjoy a phenomenal experience because to enjoy a phenomenal experience is to be in a state with a phenomenal, i.e., a sensory or emotive, property. There is something it is like to see a red rose, to hear the sound of a violin or to taste a strawberry. But it is not much like anything to think that 2 is an even number or that the sum of the angles of a triangle equals 180° . Understanding something (whether a proposition expressed by an utterance or the proof of a theorem) might be accompanied by emotions or feelings of elation or mental images. And there is something it is like to have such emotions or images. But if understanding is coming to believe a proposition, then (pace section 1.4 of *Mental Reality*) there is nothing much it is like to understand something.

On this picture, there are two connected reasons for this difference. First, phenomenal states serve as inputs for higher level cognitive processing: it is the function of a creature's phenomenal states with sensory properties to supply information to the creature's higher cognitive centers. There is more information available in the sensory input than in the conceptual output: forming a belief or a conceptual representation on the basis of a sensory representation involves the selective elimination of information. Our capacity for sensory experience outranges our capacity for conceptualizing or categorizing. Second, experiential states are typically subjective and perspectival. Conceptual thoughts and beliefs are abstract and objective. Any visual experience of a dog must be of a particular poodle or a particular German shepherd under a particular point of view. Exercising the concept of a dog is not perspectival in this sense.

As Strawson says (p. 194), "the tendency of the last fifty years of analytic philosophy has been to separate the notion of conceptual content sharply from the notion of experience". So I guess, my standpoint will look reactionary to him. Consider, however, Block's (1995: 233) discussion of the hypothetical phenomenon he calls *superblindsight*: this is an imaginary blindsight patient who would have been trained to come to guess things which are presented in his blind field. So he might come to know that there is e.g., an X in his blind field without seeing it. Information from his blind field seems to "pop into his thoughts in the way solutions we've been worrying about pop into our thoughts". As Block's own rumination of the case shows, we are, I think, forced to accept a contrast between "what it is like to know visually about an X in [the patient's] blind field and an X in his sighted field. There is something it is like to experience the latter, but not the former.... It is the difference between just knowing and knowing via a visual experience". The patient knows and, therefore, believes that there is an X in his blind field. But there is nothing it is like for him to have this belief. What is missing from his belief state (or state of knowledge) is visual experience, hence experience.

Two points to conclude. First, from my favored perspective, a creature's experiential states are her sensory states. However, the content of a sensory state will not count as a creature's conscious experience—it will be mere information-processing—unless the creature has the ability to make cognitive use of it. Second, as Strawson himself puts it (p. 159), according to naturalized Cartesianism, “mental reality is the *surface* ... None of the backstage activity that makes the play possible is actually part of the play”. Experiential phenomena are *necessarily* occurrent. From my perspective, this restriction unduly stigmatizes mental dispositions and capacities and is, I fear, too parochial.

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