THEORIA

THEORIA, 2011
doi:10.1111/j.1755-2567.2011.01107.x

Making Sense of Doubt: Strawson's Anti-Scepticism

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Abstract: Strawson's philosophical attitude towards scepticism is frequently thought to have undergone a significant shift from the "strong" or "robust" employment of transcendental arguments in *Individuals* to a more "modest" understanding of the efficacy of such arguments in *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. I argue that this interpretation is based upon a misunderstanding of the function of transcendental arguments in Strawson's earlier works. Examining the continuity of Strawson's modest naturalistic approach to scepticism can offer some insight as to the continuing overestimation of the anti-sceptical efficacy of transcendental arguments.

Keywords: Strawson, scepticism, transcendental arguments, knowledge, conceptual scheme

1. Introduction

FOR A PHILOSOPHER WHO is so frequently cited as having produced arguments that are anti-sceptical in character, it is perhaps surprising that the nature of P. F. Strawson's anti-scepticism is not easily amenable to clear expression.[1] This might at first be thought to result from Strawson's apparent shift in attitude towards scepticism from the "strong" Kantian-influenced approach adopted in *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense*, which focused on the role of transcendental arguments, to the more "modest" Humean-influenced approach espoused in *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (Strawson, 1959, 1966, 1985). The shift in Strawson's thought is often supposed to be marked by a loss of confidence in the anti-sceptical potential of transcendental argumentation:

> [T]ranscendental arguments were full of promise: they seemed the key to epistemological advance. They appeared to offer a powerful method for defeating scepticism and establishing securely our knowledge of the world about us . . . Few people are now so optimistic; indeed their principal former exponent, Sir Peter Strawson, no longer sees them as a defence against the sceptic at all, but only as "investigating the connections among the major structural elements of our conceptual scheme" (Walker, 1989, pp. 55–76).[2]

1 By way of a very small representative sampling of writings which have concerned themselves with Strawson's anti-scepticism, see Stroud (1968); Walker (1989); Stern (2000).

2 Similar recent expressions can be found in Stern (2000) and in the papers collected in Stern (ed.) (2000).

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There is a sense in which this must be correct – Strawson himself seems to say as much in *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. Here he seems to acknowledge the limitations of a "Kantian" refutation of scepticism through argumentation and instead extols the virtues of a "Humean" (or "Wittgensteinian") approach, whereby the "correct way with the professional skeptical doubt is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is idle, unreal, a pretence . . ." (1989, p. 19). However, I would claim that, upon closer examination, it is not clear as to what Strawson's attitude towards scepticism actually is in these two works, nor is it clear as to what actually changed in Strawson's approach to scepticism over this period.[3]

Firstly, I'll very briefly outline Strawson's argument in chapter 1 of *Individuals* and sketch Stroud's well-known objection. The objective of this section is to isolate the methodological assumptions that provide Strawson's arguments with the dialectical force against the sceptic that he thinks they have. Secondly, Strawson's "massive reduplication" argument will be shown to conform to this interpretation. Thirdly, I'll address the question of what sense we can give to the familiar claim that Strawson's anti-sceptical thought undergoes a shift from a "bold" to a "modest" position from *Individuals* and *The Bounds of Sense* to *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. Fourthly, I'll try and distinguish two ways in which these arguments may be construed, which I'll refer to as the "Humean" and "Wittgensteinian" interpretations.[4] There are grounds to think that the self-avowed Humeanism of Strawson's naturalism is overstated. Not only that, but the Wittgensteinian influence that more accurately reflects Strawson's thinking here is broadly the *same* one that is also present in the methodological assumptions of the arguments presented in *Individuals*. Finally, if these claims are found plausible, then an account is required of just what shift did occur in Strawson's thinking in the three decades between *Individuals* and *Skepticism and Naturalism*, as he himself attested.

Specifically the conclusions I'll be arguing for are these: if we understand "transcendental arguments" as arguments that at least purport to deduce some item of knowledge of an objective world from premises concerning the necessary conditions of human thought, belief, experience, etc., then leaving aside the question of their success, there are grounds for denying that Strawson was ever putting forward any transcendental arguments so construed in *Individuals*. Furthermore, if we understand Strawson's "naturalistic turn"[5] (as Robert Stern has recently dubbed it)

3 For reasons of length, in this article I'll focus only on Strawson's descriptive metaphysics as presented in *Individuals* and shall ignore any complications that might be introduced by considering *The Bounds of Sense* as a development of the themes from *Individuals*. I would claim though that the considerations developed here apply equally to Strawson's position in *The Bounds of Sense*.

4 I'll make no attempt in this article to justify the historical accuracy of the application of these titles. As we'll see, there is sufficient evidence to think that Strawson held that there was some distinction worth drawing, despite their shared adherence to the naturalism extolled in *Skepticism and Naturalism*.

5 As it has been dubbed in Stern (2003).

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as an account of how we are somehow entitled to disregard the radical sceptic's challenges on the basis of our "inevitably" or "unavoidably" assumed beliefs and practices, then there are grounds for claiming that Strawson offered a naturalistic response to scepticism in *Individuals*. The argumentative strategy pursued in both works is that the sceptic's doubts are incapable of being maintained and are thus *performatively* self-contradictory.[6] Finally, it is suggested that this ambiguity in Strawson's own attitude towards his anti-scepticism can be seen to go some way towards diagnosing the causes of the short-lived optimism for transcendental arguments.

2. Strawson's Argument and Stroud's Objection

In chapter 1 of *Individuals*, Strawson argues for the claim that particulars must be thought of as material things that continue to exist while unperceived (1959, pp. 31–58). The argument is explicitly set out in the context of Strawson's project of descriptive metaphysics, which, as Strawson claimed, "is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, [while] revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure" (1959, p. 9).

The argument that he employs to substantiate his claim regarding unperceived particulars is often characterized as "transcendental" in character, so I'll use it as my model for considering Strawson's anti-scepticism in this work. However, since this argument has been coloured so significantly by the critical analysis put forward later by Barry Stroud, it will be helpful to look first at the argument as perceived through his eyes, and as to where the fault with that perceived argument lies.

In his well-known 1968 article "Transcendental Arguments", Barry Stroud states that "Strawson would have to show that . . . a statement about how things are, follows from . . . a statement about how we think of the world, or what makes sense to us. How could such an inference ever be justified?" (1968, p. 246). This indeed is the question that forms the major part of the legacy of transcendental argument generally.[7]

It's worth asking straight away whether this challenge correctly characterizes the project of descriptive metaphysics. Stroud is surely correct that Strawson's

6 A perhaps similar claim is perhaps presented in Quassim Cassam's (2008) introduction to Strawson's *Skepticism and Naturalism*. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this similarity to my attention.

7 This is not to suggest there isn't a host of other problems associated with such arguments. For a synopsis of these, see Moore (1999). My concern here is not with transcendental arguments *per se*, but rather with transcendental arguments as they figure within Strawson's evolving thought about scepticism. For a discussion of the relations between Kant's transcendental arguments and the contemporary employment of them see Stern (2000) and Callanan (2006).

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arguments here are at least in part directed at some kind of radical sceptic who doubts our ability to attain knowledge of the existence of things outside us. Also, it seems undeniable that Strawson attempts to do this by way of transcendental arguments, construed as some kind of reflection on the necessary conditions of thought, belief, experience or whatever. Stroud combines these two premises and deduces that Strawson attempts to defeat the external world sceptic by using transcendental arguments to deduce a fact about the world from facts about how we think about the world.

However, this conclusion doesn't follow. It would only follow if defeat of the external world sceptic were only possible *directly*, i.e., demonstrating the falsity of the sceptic's doubt by actually securing some knowledge of the external world. But this isn't the only strategy that might be employed against the radical sceptic. The sceptic may also be refuted *indirectly*, by demonstrating that there is something incoherent or inconsistent about the nature of the challenge in the first place.[8] Thus, the simplistic charge of self-refutation against the sceptic who claims that nothing is known is the traditional exemplar of the indirect refutation; epistemological externalism provides the exemplar of the direct refutation.[9]

Given Strawson's explicit claim about his project in *Individuals* (1959, p. 9), to the effect that it involves describing the necessary structure of our *thought* about the world, one might be wary of accepting Stroud's claim that Strawson's arguments here are directed at securing some fact about the world rather than some fact about how we must think about the world. In fact I think it's quite clear that Strawson's transcendental arguments constitute attempts at indirect refutations of sceptical challenges and make no claims to deduce facts about the world from facts about the structure of our conceptual schemes.

3. The Massive Reduplication Argument

When one examines the actual arguments put forward in *Individuals*, they do not appear to be the right kind of design for arguments that are directed against external world scepticism. Consider Strawson's reply to his own "massive reduplication" argument (1959, pp. 20–23). This argument effectively raises a sceptical scenario:

8 I'm using this distinction as drawn by Luper (2003). Strawson himself appeals to this distinction in *Skepticism and Naturalism* (1985, pp. 9–10).

9 A weakness of the indirect strategy generally, and which will be seen to have a particular relevance to Strawson's arguments, is that it only functions by ascribing a claim or set of claims to the sceptic, claims which can be denied to be held by the sceptic. It's worth noting though that on the indirect strategy the central complaint of Stroud's analysis, that any transcendental argument must implicitly avail of either a supressed verificationist or idealist premise, is bypassed. Strawson's purported appeal to verificationism would only be a stumbling block if the aim of the argument was a direct refutation of the sceptic.

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given that for any non-demonstrative description φ of a specific particular P, of which we suppose that φ describes uniquely, what precludes the possibility that φ obtains also of another particular Q, or R, or Q and R, etc., in another sector of the universe? As part of his response, Strawson initially states that guaranteed uniquely identifying descriptions are not required for identification at all *per se* – all that is required is the possibility of communication and agreement of the speaker's meaning and the hearer's meaning (1959, p. 18).

This, Strawson claims, might at first be thought to secure all that we require – namely, to demonstrate "the practical baselessness of doubts about the possibility of non-demonstrative identification" (1959, p. 21). Strawson's argument proceeds not on the basis that we can secure knowledge that our referring descriptions are *genuinely* referring, i.e., that they actually pick out the external object that they purport to pick out, but rather that they suffice for conventional agreement on what there is relative to agents with similar conceptual schemes occupying the same certain sector of the universe (Strawson, 1959, p. 21).

Strawson continues to claim that this argument is unsatisfactory, though, and that a further argument is required, one that would "explain the possibility of our having the conclusive reasons we may have" (1959, p. 21). He argues (briefly) that the problem of massive reduplication fails to bite once we consider that the agreed-upon non-demonstrative description is conceptually linked to agents' demonstrative referencing of particulars to specific spatio-temporal co-ordinates. If it is a necessary condition of agreement of a non-demonstrative description that there be demonstrative referencing, and demonstrative referencing requires spatio-temporal indexing, then this rules out the possibility that the non-demonstrative description might be satisfied at that same time in some entirely different sector of space.

The upshot of this further argument is that when one speaker and one hearer are in agreement over what they take to be the reference of a non-demonstrative description of a particular, then they can be confident that *if* that description genuinely refers *then* it cannot be the case that there is more than one particular to which it genuinely refers. But of course it does not establish the antecedent of the conditional – there is no guarantee that the non-demonstrative description does genuinely refer. The requirement of this further argument is to give a principled explanation, and not merely a practical response, to the question of how uniquely referring non-demonstrative descriptions might be possible.

When Strawson claims that such an argument explains the "conclusive reasons" we have then, it is clear that these are reasons which are conclusive against the specific massive reduplication threat. Strawson's argument here does not require establishing that the agreed-upon description is an instance of genuine referring. His aim is to undermine the possibility that, where agreement between speaker and hearer occurs, there could be doubt over the validity of their agreement regarding

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the *uniquely referring* quality of their description, not regarding the *genuinely referring* quality of that description.

Strawson's argument then merely attempts to establish one kind of refutation of one type of sceptical threat. If the threat, however, is construed as whether or not in the situation of speaker–hearer agreement, there is a genuine possibility of radical error (i.e., there being no such particular as that which the agreement purports to be about), then the argument fails by *design* to offer conclusive reasons against *this* kind of doubt. However we construe the sceptic confronted here, it cannot be in terms of doubt regarding the existence of objects in an objective external world.

4. Anti-Scepticism in Chapter 1 of *Individuals*

So how does the argument for the existence of unperceived objects actually proceed in *Individuals*? Strawson doesn't argue directly for the following thesis:

(M) There is an existing objective world of material particulars inhabiting a single spatio-temporal framework.

Rather, he argues for the far less grand-sounding conclusion:

(I) There is successful particular re-identification in at least some cases of non-continuous observation.

However, it might seem that accepting (I) does involve also accepting something like (M) here. Strawson's claim is that we are capable of re-identifying a particular after an interruption in our observation of it. Understanding that the particular re-identified is the *same* particular observed previously seems to commit us to the claim of its continued existence in the interim of non-observation – and *this* is surely close enough to a claim for the existence of unperceived objects to have justifiably raised Stroud's concerns.

Strawson starts from the claim that:

(1) "We have the idea of a single spatio-temporal system of material things" (Strawson, 1959, p. 35).

This is not in question surely even for the sceptic – he accepts the starting point of our experiences occurring within a framework that appears spatio-temporal in character, and that one of the key features of this framework (at least apparently so) is that it is a single and unified framework. The sceptic merely doubts whether, within this single spatio-temporal system of material things, we ever have grounds to assert a claim to a successful re-identification of any particular.

Strawson points out that this sceptical doubt can only be coherently construed as an hypothesis to the effect that, for any occasion where one has two successive

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observations at t_1 and t_2, every second occasion of observation at t_2 could feasibly be an occasion of observation of an entirely new and different particular to the one previously observed. As he puts it, the sceptic supposes "that we were *never* willing to ascribe particular-identity in such cases" (Strawson, 1959, p. 35). In effect, this demand would be that:

(2) For any occurrence of a particular being observed at t_1, followed by a second observation of a particular occurring at t_2, this can always be construed as the observation of two numerically distinct observations of two numerically distinct particulars (rather than as two numerically distinct observations of a single numerically identical particular).

From here the sceptic generalizes from any single possible case to every possible case and claims that:

(3) There are never grounds to assume that for any pair of observations at t_1 and t_2, these represent two observations of the same numerically identical particular.

Strawson's transcendental argument responds by taking this general sceptical conclusion and questioning its coherence. It's uncontroversial to claim that there exists the phenomenon of mistaking two observations of two different things for two observations of the same thing. Yet could there be a possible world where this phenomenon represented the unvarying *status quo*, where *all* identity-statements consisted in such a mistake? The sceptic, Strawson claims, is asking us to accept such a possibility.

However, Strawson argues that we have good grounds for resisting the possibility: if all identity-statements had always consisted of such mistakes we would never have grounds *in the first place* to think that the observations at t_1 and t_2 could possibly be of a numerically identical particular. In the sceptic's possible world, we would have no grounds to suppose that the continuous observation at t_1 ought to be related in any way to the observation at t_2. The very notion of a second observation after an interruption representing a continuation of a first observation would not even arise.

What would such a possible world be like? Strawson claims that this scenario, where the observations at t_1 and t_2 lack any grounds at all to be considered in relation to each other, is tantamount to claiming that the observation at t_1 is conceived of as residing in an independent and self-contained spatial region to the spatial region in which the observation at t_2 resides: "Then we should, as it were, have the idea of a new, a different, spatial system for each new continuous stretch of observation . . . Each new system would be wholly independent of each other" (1959, p. 35).

However, if this were possible, we simply wouldn't have the *worry* of whether it could be the case that the particular identified at t_1 is the same particular identified

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at t_2. As Strawson puts it, "there would be no question of *doubt* about the identity of an item in one system with an item in another. For such a doubt makes sense only if the two systems are not independent, if they are parts, in some way related, of a single system which includes them both" (1959, p. 35).

Yet since the sceptic's entire case is nothing more than the raising of just such doubts, Strawson concludes that in raising the sceptical alternative the sceptic raises the possibility of a scenario where doubt itself could never arise. On the contrary, doubt can only arise because our conceptual scheme is the way it appears to be. In this way the sceptic's doubts are refuted by the very possibility of their being raised, or, as Strawson pithily puts it, "it is only because the solution is possible that the problem exists. So with all transcendental arguments" (1959, p. 40). The argument could be summarized as follows:

(1) "We have the idea of a single spatio-temporal system of material things."
(2) There are never grounds to assume that two observations at t_1 and t_2 represent two observations of the same numerically identical particular.
(3) If there were never grounds to assume that two observations at t_1 and t_2 represent two observations of the same numerically identical particular, then there would never be grounds to form the very notion of material things persisting in a single spatio-temporal system of material things.
(4) But we *do* have the notion of such persisting things. (1)

Therefore,

(5) There are sometimes grounds to assume that two observations at t_1 and t_2 represent two observations of the same numerically identical particular.

It is on these grounds that Strawson makes the following accusation:

> This gives us a more profound characterization of the sceptic's position. He 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 they are logically irresoluble doubts, but because they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense (1959, p. 35).

Whatever the merits or flaws of this argument, it surely does not constitute a straightforward attempt to deduce some fact about the world from some reflection on the necessary conditions of thought, belief and experience, as Stroud would have it. On Stroud's interpretation, the transcendental argument proceeds from a claim regarding thought of a single unified spatio-temporal world to its necessary condition, the possibility of the re-identification of particulars, and from there to *its* necessary condition, which is that criteria for the re-identification of particulars which are satisfiable are available to us (1968, p. 246).

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If this were the argument Stroud would be entirely correct to point how that it is not entailed by these claims that these re-identification criteria are ever genuinely satisfied, which is what would be required to establish the claim that unperceived objects exist independently of us. But this is not the argument. The argument is not an attempt to refute the sceptic directly by demonstrating that an item of knowledge is in fact known; rather, the argument is an attempt at an indirect refutation which states that there is something incoherent or inconsistent about the sceptic's challenge in the first place. Strawson can stop at the conclusion that sometimes criteria for the re-identification of particulars which are satisfiable are available to us because his claim is that the sceptical alternative proposed is one where there are no coherent criteria of re-identification at all, and this would render null the concept of re-identification itself, which would in turn render null the possibility of raising a doubt about re-identification.

Strawson's argument here is far from compelling, since it seems to attribute to the opponent an absurdly and unnecessarily strong premise at (2): Strawson infers from the fact that the sceptic can raise a doubt regarding any occasion of re-identification that the sceptic thereby makes a knowledge claim to the effect that there are never grounds to assume a successful re-identification. The sceptic need not be construed as making the positive claim that we *never* have grounds to make a successful re-identification claim (rather than the claim that we can never know whether the grounds we take ourselves to have are in fact good ones). Any sceptic could resist such attribution, and without it, the rest of the argument doesn't go through.[10]

It would seem then that, given the structure of the argument regarding existing unperceived material particulars, Strawson's approach here could not by virtue of its design have had the conclusion that Stroud takes it to have. Rather, Strawson's argument is directed not at securing knowledge of things in the external world but rather at establishing the meaninglessness of raising and maintaining doubt regarding the possibility of knowledge of things in the external world.[11]

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10 I'm not going to discuss any other objections to Strawson's argument, though there are several *prima facie* potential weaknesses, e.g., one might also ask why the "independent spatial world" claim must be inferred in such a scenario. Also, it is not clear why, even if it is shown to be a necessary condition of our making sense of the sceptical doubt that we have in the past disregarded it, this entails that we were then correct in doing so. That the pre-dated disregard of a sceptical possibility is a necessary condition of making sense of a current sceptical possibility does not in any way negate the viability of the sceptical doubt currently under consideration. Even if we grant that the sceptic must begin from within the conceptual scheme that he sets out to raise doubts about, what is it about this fact that invalidates his subsequent attempts to kick away the ladder of that very conceptual scheme?

11 The conclusion of Strawson's argument, the negation of premise (2), is not that there are grounds to assume that sometimes successful re-identification occurs; rather it claims that there are sometimes grounds to assume that successful re-identification occurs. The difference of scope reflects two different ways of reading Strawson's descriptive metaphysics – the former claim reflects how the world must be, the latter how we must think about the world.

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The second feature that warrants attention here is this – on the reconstruction offered here, Strawson's transcendental argument seems to rebut the sceptic by way of elucidating beliefs and practical attitudes that must pre-date sceptical doubt if the raising of those doubts is to be possible. Sceptical doubt regarding the possibility of the re-identification of objective particulars is undermined because of the pre-existing commitment that we just have by virtue of the possession of the actual notion and practice of re-identifying particulars in a single spatio-temporal framework. In this case, the fact that we just do engage in the practice of re-identifying particulars forms the unavoidable starting point for the consideration of scepticism which ultimately proves pivotal in undermining the sceptical threat. More generally, the strategy engaged upon here involves a claim to the effect that since certain beliefs and practical attitudes pre-date the sceptical doubts, our ineliminable reliance upon those beliefs and practical attitudes is the crucial dialectical factor in determining the adoption of our theoretical commitments.

5. The Sceptic as Revisionary Metaphysician

In offering this reconstruction of how I take transcendental arguments to work in *Individuals*, it's important to note that the employment of transcendental arguments only properly offers half of Strawson's strategy for disarming scepticism. Equally important perhaps is the point that this other half of the strategy hinges crucially on Strawson's own distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics.

According to Strawson, if the sceptic is to count as being sceptical at all, he must be understood as offering a logically possible alternative account of what it appears our conceptual scheme reveals, but in fact does not reveal. So, whereas our conceptual scheme purports to reveal a world of material particulars persisting in a single and unified spatio-temporal framework, it in fact (say) refers to a series of electrical impulses stimulating reactions in envatted brains. This, Strawson claims, is perfectly *acceptable* as a metaphysical account of how the universe we experience is ultimately constituted. It deserves as much consideration as any piece of proposed revisionary metaphysics one might entertain – as much as one that offers an account whereby only processes, or the present, or a single uniform gunk, etc., ultimately constitute the presented world.

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. This of course is not to deny their validity as possible challenges to the appropriateness of our current conceptual scheme; what it does mean though is that the possibility should only be evaluated on the same grounds as those on which any proposal of revisionary metaphysics is evaluated – i.e., by a consideration of its explanatory utility and

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pragmatic appropriateness to our requirement for the navigation through and explanation of the world presented to us. If a global sceptical alternative could offer an attractive conceptual scheme on these terms (*per impossibile*, as it turns out), then, on Strawson's lights, we *should* adopt it as our own. However, if it lacks any such recommendation, then we are perfectly entitled to ignore the proposal: "Finally, we may, if we choose, see the sceptic as offering for contemplation the sketch of an alternative scheme; and this is to see him as a revisionary metaphysician with whom we do not need to quarrel, but whom we do not need to follow" (Strawson, 1959, pp. 35–6).

The ultimate criterion for accepting the inclusion of revisionary proposals is pragmatic – could the incorporation of such features into our conceptual scheme, or could the wholesale replacement of our current conceptual scheme, offer us an attractive and plausible account for satisfying the practical necessities of our navigation through the presented world? Would the account accord more harmoniously with these inevitable practical concerns? If the sceptic *qua* revisionary metaphysician could answer in the affirmative, it's not that we would simply choose his alternative – we would have no choice *but* to accept his alternative. In this scenario though, where the proposed change of conceptual scheme speaks for itself of its own advantages, one wonders what would be left of the proposal that could be considered *sceptical* in character.

This then is Strawson's response to radical scepticism in *Individuals* – it either transpires that the sceptical threat runs contrary to our pre-dated beliefs and practical concerns, in which case it is appropriately ignored because it runs contrary to our inevitable beliefs and practices; or, the sceptical threat *is* deemed relevant to our practices and practical concerns, but in which case it now no longer holds the status of a negative sceptical threat but rather that of a positive alternative metaphysical recommendation. In either case, the sceptical hypothesis, whether through transcendental argumentation or through being recast as a revisionary metaphysical hypothesis, is shown to run contrary to our inevitable beliefs and practical concerns.[12]

12 In his 1961 review of *Individuals*, J. O. Urmson, sceptical himself of the very dichotomy between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, wrote that "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). This is a helpful characterization, since it alludes to the key dialectical role the dichotomy is meant to play for Strawson; namely, that there is a valid distinction to be made 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. In the context of the rejection of radical scepticism in *Individuals*, it is the recognition of how we do inevitably think that warrants the categorization of the radical sceptic as a revisionary metaphysician, and it is the corollary inevitability of our engaging in practices that reflect those inevitable ways of thinking that warrant the sceptic *qua* revisionary metaphysician being disregarded.

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6. Anti-Scepticism in *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*

Some thirty years after the first publication of *Individuals*, during which time the appeal of transcendental arguments as a means of disputing scepticism had somewhat waned, Strawson returned to the topic in *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. More precisely, Strawson made explicit his "naturalistic turn" three years earlier in a 1982 review of a collection entitled *Transcendental Arguments and Science*. Here Strawson does appears to acknowledge Stroud's critique and immediately suggest a naturalistic response to such scepticism *à la* Hume, saying that "[i]f . . . we accept *this* naturalism of [Hume] . . . then we shall dismiss sceptical doubts – not as answerable by argument, nor as meaningless, but as *idle*" (1982, p. 50).

The next year Strawson gave the Woodbridge lectures which were to be published as *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*. Here again the phrasing is repeated:

> [Hume and Wittgenstein] have in common the view that our "beliefs" in the existence of body and, to speak roughly, in the general reliability of induction are not grounded beliefs and at the same time are not open to serious doubt. 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. To attempt to confront the professional skeptical doubt with arguments in support of these beliefs is to show a total misunderstanding of the role they actually play in our belief-systems. The correct way with the professional skeptic is not to attempt to rebut it with argument, but to point out that it is idle, unreal, a pretence . . . (1985, pp. 19–20]).

There are two things to note here: firstly, that Strawson is focusing on the notion of the *idleness* of sceptical doubt, i.e., that scepticism, even if accepted, is still entirely inefficacious regarding our beliefs and practices; secondly, that Strawson appears to contrast attempts to elucidate the idleness of sceptical doubt with attempts to elucidate the *meaninglessness* of sceptical doubt.[13] Strawson argues that the naturalist must now give up the "unreal project of wholesale validation" of one's conceptual scheme.[14]

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13 Strawson also appears to draw this distinction elsewhere, e.g., in *Analysis and Metaphysics*, where he claims that "(a) radical and all-pervasive (i.e. a philosophical) scepticism is at worst senseless, at best idle . . ." (1992, p. 96). Insofar as Strawson in *Skepticism and Naturalism* considers his project as continuous with that of the project of descriptive metaphysics (e.g., see p. 25), I would argue that he would still continue to characterize the sceptic as one who ought to be revealed as the revisionary metaphysician, as he had claimed in *Individuals*.

14 It's interesting to note that in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, before addressing the remaining prospects for transcendental arguments after Stroud's attack, Strawson distinguishes two forms of interpreting such arguments which cut along the same direct/indirect lines as I have been drawing:

> . . . Stroud acknowledges the appeal of a kind of argument which he calls 'transcendental'. Such arguments typically take one of two forms. A philosopher who advances such an argument may

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It's not my purpose here to attempt a critical re-evaluation of this argument.[15] My aim here is to draw attention to the basis for the recommendation of those beliefs and practices that are immune to sceptical doubt. The reason why sceptical doubts may be ignored or disregarded in some special cases is just because the raising and maintaining of such doubts is contrary to the beliefs and practices that form part of the "bedrock" or "scaffolding" or "framework" of our conceptual schemes. Furthermore, Strawson holds that these beliefs and practices to which we are antecedently committed may be made explicit by way of transcendental argumentation.

As I've argued in the previous sections, if this is the core anti-sceptical strategy, then there is far less to distinguish the approach employed by Strawson in *Individuals* from that employed in *Skepticism and Naturalism*. In both works, Strawson finds a role for transcendental argumentation; similarly in both works, the role of those actual beliefs and practical concerns of agents is pivotal in motivating the attack on the sceptic.

7. The Continuity of Strawson's Anti-Scepticism

It would be incorrect to claim that Strawson's earlier work represents an attempt to directly refute the sceptic, and in fact Strawson's transcendental arguments in *Individuals* and *Skepticism and Naturalism* both represent indirect arguments formed within a naturalistic perspective. Strawson himself contrasts the naturalistic response to scepticism with the strategy of indirect refutation; however, Strawson's own attempts at indirect refutation are predicated on an acceptance of the primacy of certain assumed beliefs or practical attitudes.

My suggestion then is that Strawson may himself have overstated the nature of his departure from his earlier anti-sceptical strategy. As already mentioned though, it is often thought that Strawson acknowledged the strength of Stroud's analysis and that this resulted in his "naturalistic turn". There is evidence though to suggest that

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> begin with a premise which the skeptic does not challenge, viz. the occurrence of self-conscious thought and experience, and then proceed to argue that a necessary condition of the possibility of such experience is, say, knowledge of external objects or of states of mind of other beings. Or he may argue that the skeptic could not even raise his doubt unless he already knew it to be unfounded, i.e. he could have no use for the concepts in terms of which he expresses his doubt unless he were able to know to be true at least some of the proposition belonging to the class of all members which fall within the scope of the skeptical doubt (Strawson, 1985, pp. 8–9).

Strawson makes clear that he regards the naturalistic approach to scepticism as an alternative to either of these ways of employing transcendental arguments against the sceptic. However, I have tried to suggest that, despite his own protestations to the contrary, Strawson's indirect attacks on the sceptic have themselves been predicated on a broadly naturalistic methodology.

15 Having said that, this interpretation may well have a bearing on at least some of these critical approaches – see Putnam (1998), Williams (1996) and Sosa (1998).

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Strawson himself thought that the naturalistic turn *doesn't* represent a shift from the initial scope of the project outlined in *Individuals*, even if Strawson himself might have occasionally given a different impression.

In 1998, Hilary Putnam raised the issue of the relation between the Kantian method of *Individuals* and the Humean method of *Skepticism and Naturalism*, arguing that the approaches offer methodologically incompatible analyses of how to handle the sceptic.[16] Putnam views the situation much as I have been presenting it, with Kant as having raised a challenge to the meaningfulness of raising and maintaining certain sceptical doubts within our conceptual scheme, and Hume as instead arguing for the irrelevance of those meaningful doubts within our scheme. Putnam raises the question of how these two seemingly different approaches to responding to scepticism might be thought to be a part of the same project of descriptive metaphysics *qua* connective analysis.

In his reply to Putnam, Strawson fails to address this aspect of Putnam's challenge. While avoiding the issue of the differences between the Kantian and Humean approaches to scepticism, Strawson instead discusses the significant similarities he perceives between the Wittgensteinian and Humean responses to scepticism. However, in doing so, Strawson identifies *Wittgenstein's* anti-scepticism as that which is concerned with the claim that "skeptical doubt . . . is meaningless or incoherent or unintelligible" (1998a, p. 288). Strawson here links that type of argument put forward in *Individuals* (i.e., one which exposes the *meaninglessness* of radical sceptical doubt) with the Wittgensteinian approach that claims that "there can be no significant questioning of that which 'underlies all questions' " (1998a, p. 289). Strawson replies to Putnam that the type of argument is one whereby a particular belief is recognized as "part of the framework or background of all argument, all thought, all asserting or questioning". He continues, "It is 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" (1998a, p. 291).

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16 Putnam (1998, p. 284) argues explicitly as follows:

> I have expressed surprise at the fact that Strawson does not see his Humean tendencies and his Kantian tendencies as in any way in conflict. In *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* he reconciles them in the following way: Kantian arguments show us how our concepts hang together, but do not speak as to the skeptic's challenge to justify our conceptual scheme as a whole; Strawson's Humean contention that the question of justification cannot even be raised, because reasons are not and cannot be in question here, appears to speak to that challenge. But, the contention employs the wrong "cannot". Strawson's contention speaks to the issue of pointlessness given the way we are "hard-wired", not to the issue of intelligibility. Surely, the skeptic's challenge to justify "the uniformity of nature" and "the existence of the external world" presupposes that they can be coherently doubted. And that is just what the Kantian arguments call into question. How our concepts hang together has everything to do with whether there is an intelligible skeptical challenge.

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Here Strawson links his approach in *Individuals* with that of Wittgenstein's methodology – Kant is not mentioned at all.[17] As for the relevance of Hume, Strawson's claims are far more muted here. In regard to Wittgenstein's anti-scepticism, Strawson claims, "it is not quite certain that Humean naturalism is altogether excluded" and that it is "not clearly incompatible with Humean naturalism" (1998a, p. 289).

Strawson goes further when responding to Ernest Sosa's objections to the naturalistic account made in the same collection. Sosa argues that the fact regarding the inevitability of certain beliefs amounts to a fact regarding human psychology, one which has no bearing on the epistemological challenge that the sceptic raises (1998, p. 363). In responding, Strawson now denies that it is the feature of the *inevitability* of belief itself that indicates the idleness of doubt – that response, he says, would be "weak indeed" (1998b, p. 370). Instead, the idleness of doubt is a result of the fact that certain beliefs form the "bedrock" or "scaffolding" or "framework" of all our thinking and reasoning.

This would suggest that Strawson takes the Wittgensteinian strand of naturalism to be *convincing* against the sceptic if the latter is to be considered as a sincere radical opponent. Strawson's Humean naturalism in the end then is not the source of one's confidence in ignoring sceptical threats – rather it is the Wittgensteinian account of the bedrock of beliefs that pre-date and make possible the raising of doubt that give grounds for the ignoring of those threats. The fact that we will inevitably ignore the threat of scepticism and inevitably make judgements, form beliefs, perform actions, etc., is a reflection of that nature, *in just the same way* that our taking certain beliefs and practices for granted is a reflection of our nature. It is the *meaninglessness* of sceptical doubt in relation to our conceptual schemes that for Strawson makes sceptical threats idle. The meaninglessness of scepticism is cited, as it was in *Individuals*, as the grounds for the idleness of scepticism.

If these Wittgensteinian influences are at the heart of Strawson's anti-scepticism, what then is the value of the Humean strain of naturalism for him? One noticeable difference is Strawson's focus on the *inevitability* of action. This is present already in a Wittgensteinian form in both *Individuals* and *Skepticism and Naturalism*;

17 Immediately following this, Strawson suggests that rehearsing this argument against the sceptic is perhaps unnecessary, since it proceeds on the basis of an assumption of a genuine sceptical opponent who is sincerely challenging our right to the confidence in certain basic beliefs and practices. In contrast, Strawson 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 . . ." (1998a, p. 291).

He goes on in the rest of the passage to suggest that the "logical possibility" that the sceptic is pointing out to us here is that, in the sceptical scenario, the threat is predicated upon the fact that the subject's conscious experiences are qualitatively indiscriminable from a subject genuinely ensconced in a physical environment – the upshot being that the reality of inner or subjective experience is a commonly shared starting point of the sceptic and his opponent alike.

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however, Hume's account of the distinction between the value of scepticism in the study and in the street brings with it an additional dimension.

Often consideration of radical scepticism begins from the consideration of a certain question – what are we to make of the apparently non-contingent fact of our inability to eliminate the theoretical possibility of a radical scepticism? In *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson asks us to consider a different question – imagine that the logical possibility of the sceptic's doubts were theoretically *confirmed* – what then would change regarding one's everyday beliefs and practical commitments? Absolutely nothing, as Hume has pointed out: no matter how convincing the theoretical objections appeared in the study, none of them could impinge on our practical beliefs and attitudes in the street. 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.

The difference then is effectively one of presentation rather than of philosophical substance. For Strawson, the sceptic's doubts are ignored because they are meaningless but Humean naturalism allows for a different form of expression of those grounds, by way of a thought experiment whereby we imagine the sceptical doubts theoretically confirmed. This though is hardly a radical departure even in terms of Strawson's philosophical methodology. As we've seen, the argument regarding the re-identification of particulars in chapter 1 of *Individuals* proceeds from the premise whereby we assume that the sceptic's threat actually obtains. More famously perhaps Strawson argued in exactly the same way in "Freedom and Resentment", written in 1960. Strawson's well-known argument here is for the irrelevance of the problem of determinism to the issue of moral responsibility, on the grounds that no conclusive theoretical argument in favour of determinism could possibly affect our "reactive attitudes" towards others (1960, pp. 11–13).

Strawson again echoes this point thirty years later in *Skepticism and Naturalism*. When he talks of scepticism regarding other minds, he argues that no matter how strong or weak our arguments for or against scepticism with regard to other minds, the unavoidable fact is that we "simply react to others as to other people. They may puzzle us sometimes; but that is part of so reacting. Here again we something which we have no option but to take for granted in all our reasoning" (Strawson, 1985, p. 21).

Strawson's employment of this last phrase, culled from Hume's *Treatise*,[18] seems particularly apt. It is the fact that some beliefs and practical attitudes simply are taken for granted in all our reasonings that is the common assumption of all Strawson's arguments against scepticism. In some cases these beliefs and practical attitudes can be elucidated by transcendental argumentation; in others, they simply

18 It is employed several times in Hume (1990, e.g., book I, part 3, section iii).

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manifest themselves through their imperviousness to sustained doubting. In all of these cases though, Strawson maintains that we ought to recognize when doubt runs against those notions and practices that we inevitably take for granted in philosophical inquiry. Whatever critical evaluation we make of this approach, it seems we cannot view it merely as a late addition to Strawson's thought.

It is also arguable that the surge in optimism for transcendental arguments in the latter half of the twentieth century was based on an understanding of their function along the lines presented in Stroud's critique. The appeal of transcendental arguments was that they appeared to offer all the benefits of an indirect refutation of the sceptic (by employing premises that the sceptic would accept) while also providing a robust direct refutation in the securing of some non-trivial fact. Yet Strawson's own arguments, which provided the source of the revival of transcendental arguments, are clearly indirect transcendental arguments, ones that ascribe a set of claims to the sceptic and subsequently argue for the incoherence of the coterminous maintaining of each of that set's claims. Such strategies inevitably offer the potential for the response that the sceptic can refuse to accept the ascription of some of those claims – as I've suggested, Strawson's transcendental argument regarding the existence of material particulars fails just because it ascribes a claim to the sceptic that no self-respecting sceptic would maintain. While there are many proposed challenges regarding the status of transcendental arguments' anti-sceptical efficacy, it's worthwhile to diagnose at least one source of that lack of efficacy.

Acknowledgements

For comments on an earlier version of this article, thanks to members of the philosophy department at King's College London.

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