

Chapter - 6

Language and the Human Conceptual Framework

Language and the human conceptual framework

Section I: Introductory

In the preceding Chapters we have taken into account the philosophers' conviction that language must be a mirror of reality. Of course, this has been a conviction with the ideal language philosophers who are inclined to discard ordinary language for the sole reason that it is not capable of laying bare the structure of reality. The entire critique of ordinary language, the allegation that certain expressions are systematically misleading has been worked out on the basis of this basic conviction. The argument in short has been that ordinary language is no good because it leads us into a false ontology.

The philosophical relevance of language has thus been viewed from the point of view that language, worth the name, must be somehow hooked on to reality. Language, it is believed, shows the world exterior to us. Of course all philosophers dealing with the analysis of language are not so convinced about this functional aspects of language that it should necessarily reveal the structure of reality. The philosophers examining ordinary language as a methodological instrument would not concede the monolithic conception of language. Nor would they say, that language should perform the allegedly all important task of revealing reality. It has many other jobs to do which depend on its multiple uses. Consequently, it would be wrong to stick to a unifunctional conception of language and speak of necessary connection between language and reality.

The critique of ideal language philosophy urged by the ordinary language philosophers may not be conclusive. Their discovery that,

functionally speaking, language is multi-faced does not of course seem to conflict with the thesis that language is a picture of reality. The ordinary language philosophers might have been successful in discovering many dimensions of language, but their discovery need not reject the function of mirroring, argued for and pointed out by the ideal language philosophers.

We shall have occasion to deliberate on this issue. Uptil now it is certain that it has been the claim put forward by a group of very important philosophers that language has a directedness towards the extralinguistic domain, analogous to the concept of intentionality of consciousness in Husserl's phenomenology or the intentionality of the apriori categories in Kant to the bounds of sense. Consciousness is necessarily consciousness of something. The world of consciousness is hardly windowless or a self-contained world. Such a world be meaningless if it is devoid of any self-transcending implication. Similar too is the nature of the human language. It may not be all a mistake if philosophers discover in it a signal for the structure of reality

Section II: A different outlook about the nature and function of language: A note on Strawson

With the publication of P. F. Strawson's book **Individuals** we come to have a completely different story about the nature and function of language. Strawson examines the phenomenon of language and discovers a world interior to us. The function of language has thus at least a dual dimension - one completely converse to the other. It is a pointer to the structure of the world outside and at the same time to the structure of the world inside - the conceptual scheme of human beings.

But this is not the reason why Strawson should be taken as an exception in the linguistic movement. The philosophers of the movement who preceded Strawson wanted to find out the translinguistic implication of language. They discovered that language ultimately pointed to a scheme of reality or an ontological structure. Language gets beyond itself and takes us to the real. Strawson has an altogether new story to tell. For him reality is independent of us and also independent of the language which we use. But the way we *know* it corresponds to a subjective apparatus. Knowledge is not passive reception of what is given out there; it is the apprehension of the objects in a certain arrangement, which is a contribution of the knowing subject.

One is reminded of Kant at this point. Kant initiated a revolution in epistemology when he said that understanding makes nature. The materials collected by the faculty of sensibility are arranged by the categories of the understanding - a rational though subjective apparatus and thus our world is made.

Strawson speaks of a similar arrangement. To explain, let us begin with Strawson's description of the world as one composed of particulars. This description is not epistemic. It is not the case that Strawson describes the world as one composed of particulars because he experiences the world that way. Philosophers' description of the world has surely an epistemic foundation. But the knowledge on which such a description is founded is taken to be displayed on the linguistic plane. Strawson notices that the proof of the fact that we know this world is that we can refer to the items of knowledge in language. This is not just a casual or contingent phenomenon. If we are not in a position to refer to what we claim to have known, then all our claims to acknowledge particulars in our ontology shall be frustrated

because of an unfounded claim. Strawson has elaborately analysed this phenomenon of linguistic communication which finally displays the universal human conceptual scheme.

The philosophy of Strawson has been built in the background of his significant distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics. The concept of 'descriptive metaphysics' emerges in Strawson's **Individuals** in contrast to what he calls *revisionary* metaphysics. The distinction between the two types of metaphysics is explained by Strawson in the following sentence : "Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure."¹ Thus Strawson takes metaphysics to be an elaboration on the structure of human thought. Traditionally speculative philosophy presents a philosophically blown-up scheme of things, an ontology which if spelt out would virtually amount to a revision of our conceptual scheme. Kant criticised Plato by comparing him to a dove which soars up and up forgetting its nest on earth. A philosopher needs to stand firmly on earth so that his claim be credible.

The basic thesis upheld by Strawson in **Individuals** is that the universal conceptual apparatus of man can be exposed through a "close examination of the actual use of words".² He is fully aware that the structure he seeks, does surface itself in language, but lies underneath. He, therefore, recommends that the descriptive metaphysician who intends to lay bare the conceptual scheme must analyse the actual behaviour of words, because the actual use of linguistic expressions remains Strawson's sole and basic point

¹Strawson, P. F. :**Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics**, Methuen: London, 1959,p. 9

²Ibid., p. 9.

of contrast with the reality he wishes to understand, conceptual reality. Strawson appears to suggest that the actual use of words maps the conceptual reality. Is a picture theory with a difference? A non-rigorous picture theory?

The words in ordinary usage do not only unveil our conceptual scheme, they also determine our ontology. This thesis is argued by Strawson in terms of his theory of reference and communication, and also by his concept of identification. If we follow Strawson's argument in the first Chapter of **Individuals** we shall notice that he believes in a very close connection between language and ontology, of course, not in the sense in which an ideal language philosophers would conceive it. Strawson does not accede to the idea that there is a resemblance between language and reality. His idea is rather that the inclusion of a basic particular within our ontology is determined by a linguistic phenomenon, viz., whether the particular in question is such that it cannot be known by us which in its turn, is to be testified by the fact if it can be referred to by us and that again successfully. Success, in this context, is determined by fruitful communication. Communication, in Strawson's opinion, is fruitful only when the hearer can identify the particular which is referred to by the speaker.

It seems that Strawson would not speak of the structure of reality being mirrored by the structure of language. But he would definitely relate language to reality by suggesting that the richness of our ontology, its content, is determined by a very important linguistic phenomenon- whether that is capable of being referred to and identified by us.

But as we have already mentioned, what distinguishes Strawson from his other peers. His examination of language draws our attention to a subjective apparatus which we human beings universally operate with in our knowledge of particulars. This is brought out by Strawson with the help of

his theory of identification which in his opinion is an essential factor in successful communication.

Section III: Different steps of Strawson's argument

Let us follow Strawson through the different stages of his argument. This world, as he says, is taken to contain particular things and these particulars are incorporated in our common discourse, as things about which we can talk to each other. Such particulars are identified by us in speech. Strawson rightly puts: "That it should be possible to identify particulars of a given type seems a necessary condition of the inclusion of that type in our ontology."³ Now such identification, for Strawson, is not merely the task of the individual knower of a particular who can use identifying expressions which include "some proper names, some pronouns, some descriptive phrases beginning with the definite article, and expressions compounded with these."⁴ For Strawson the proper situation for identification is described by a speaker and a hearer. The hearer inevitably creeps in because of one of the most pervasive features of language, viz., communication. The speaker is said to have identified what he refers to by an identifying expression if that identifying reference enables the hearer to identify the thing thus referred to.

Now granted that a communicating situation comprising of the speaker and the hearer forms the stage for identification, what is the test for hearer's identification? To enable the hearer to identify the particular referred to by the speaker, the speaker is required to use demonstratives of the sort 'this' or 'that' - precisely in case when such a particular has a contemporaneous existence with the speaker and the hearer. In such cases

³Ibid., p.16

⁴Ibid., p. 16

it is possible on the part of the hearer to "pick out by sight or hearing or touch " or to "sensibly discriminate the particular being referred to, knowing it is that particular ."⁵

Apart from such cases of demonstrative identification *par excellence*, there may be cases where "the particulars to be identified is not within the range of those sensibly present". In cases like these the use of a name or a description is futile because the particular is not sensibly present. When a specific description fails we are forced to take recourse to a general description. But the general description also may prove useless if a host of particulars answers to the same description. When a particular is not sensibly present there remains always at least a theoretical possibility that the description would not individuate. However much one enlarges the description of the individual or of the specific sector of the universe - "its internal detail and external relations - this possibility of massive reduplication remains open."⁶This theoretical possibility poses a hazard to the speaker's making an identifying reference. The hearer also is unable to know if the speaker's description is an individuating one , i . e . , if it applies uniquely.

Strawson's solution to the above problem is this : In cases of non-demonstrative identification it is not fruitful to give a description in general terms. The particular which is not sensibly present and hence cannot be demonstratively identified, "may be identified by a description which relates it uniquely to another particular which can be demonstratively identified ."⁷

⁵Ibid., P. 18.

⁶Ibid., p.20.

⁷Ibid., p.21

The sector occupied by that particular should be uniquely related to the sector which speaker and hearer themselves currently occupy.

The problem of massive reduplication is thus taken care of. A particular may not be demonstratively identified. But whatever particular can be demonstratively identified serves as a reference point to which every other non- demonstratively identifiable particular can be referred. Should one suspect that there is a single system of relations in which every thing and event has a place, Strawson speaks of "a system of spatial and temporal relations, in which every particular is uniquely related to every other". Every particular which is not demonstratively identifiable may thus be spatially and temporally related in a unique way to whatever is demonstratively identifiable. This relation will be unique and thus the question of reduplication will not threaten the possibility of identification when it is non -demonstrative.

Our knowledge of particulars, then, presupposes a system in which every particular, including the speaker and the hearer, has a place. Strawson says, "...it cannot be denied that each of us, is, at any moment, in possession of such a framework - a unified framework of knowledge of particulars, in which we ourselves and, usually, our immediate surroundings have their place, and of which each element is uniquely related to every other and hence to ourselves and our surroundings."⁸ The framework has been presumed to be a spatio-temporal one and the individuating relation is also spatio-temporal, in as much as space- time "has a peculiar comprehensiveness and pervasiveness".

So we operate with a single, unified spatio- temporal system. It is not a system, Strawson says, which we operate individually nor is it a private

⁸Ibid., p. 24

system. Each one of us has a single spatio-temporal network ; nevertheless this is a public system because all of us are in the system itself.

The human conceptual scheme does not simply operate with a spatio-temporal framework . It is not only the case that the experience of a particular must be arranged in space and time , as Kant also endorsed. Nevertheless, in the Kantian system there is a question of arrangement of the data received through the faculty of sensibility. The disorganised , discrete or isolated data collected through sensibility would not produce knowledge unless they are categorised or arranged by the rather active faculty of understanding. The conceptual apparatus in the Kantian system is partially passive and partially active. In Strawson's system one may notice a similar idea when the spatio-temporal framework is discovered as a passive scheme through which we receive our experience of particulars. But this collection has to be arranged in a certain manner. This arrangement does not express itself in the form of judgements as in Kant's case. Strawson's point is rather that knowledge in the true sense requires identification . From this basic point of view , he discovers that there is a relation of dependence between the identification of one class of particulars and another. It may be that we do not identify a class of particulars without a prior identification of another class of particulars. This would mean that from the point of view of identification, a class of particulars may be more basic or more fundamental than another class of particulars . This amounts to an epistemic arrangement done by our cognitive apparatus. The active imposition of the category of understanding which we find in Kant is here conceived as a process of arrangement according to identifiability dependence in Strawson's philosophy. This method of arrangement may now be considered in a greater detail.

Strawson is very keen in observing that in identifying particulars we find that there is one way dependence of one referring expression on another referring expression. His formula is that if it be found that a particular belonging to a specified class cannot be referred to in a manner of identification without prior identification of a particular of another class, while the particular of latter class can be identified without prior identification of the particular of the former class, then the particular belonging to the latter class will be considered more basic than the particular belonging to the former class. Strawson says:

It should turn out that there is a type of particulars, β , such that particulars of type β cannot be identified without reference to particulars of another type, α , whereas particulars of type α can be identified without reference to particulars of type β . Then it would be a general characteristic of our scheme, that the ability to talk about β particulars at all was dependent on the ability to talk about α particulars, but not vice - versa. This fact could reasonably be expressed by saying that in our scheme α particulars were ontologically prior to β particulars, or were more fundamental or more basic than they."⁹

If the expression 'ontological priority', is taken in the Platonic sense, then Strawson's thesis would rather be absurd. Since an event or a process does not become what it is by virtue of its relation to a material body, even as in Platonism the particulars become what they are by virtue of their participation in the specific form. Strictly speaking, in Strawson's philosophy, existent entities come to constitute the ontology for us only after such

⁹Ibid., p. 15.

entities satisfy the requirements of their acknowledgement. The requirement is our being able to successfully identify such entities. In the process of identification we discover referential dependence of one class of particulars on another class of particulars. The priority thus proved must then be referential priority. Strawson does not intend to prove 'ontological hierarchy' in the Platonic sense.

Thus the use of language or more precisely, the use of referring expressions indicates that our ontology includes particulars. A referring expression is nothing if it does not result in the identification of the particular being referred to by the speaker. Identification in its turn is possible only when the hearer can identify the particulars in space and time as those referred to by the speaker. Since referring is an act which involves identification of the referent in the way described by Strawson, one can scarcely go without translinguistic presupposition which is the empirical guarantee for a process of communication.

We are thus led to construct our ontology on the basis of the actual way in which we use words as referring expressions. Besides, for Strawson, language also reveals the world within our conceptual structure. Identification, in terms of a referring expression, would not be possible unless we believe that we are in possession of a single unified spatio-temporal framework housing all particulars. We may further ask in this context: Does language by itself provide only ground for transcending it? Strawson holds that an expression by itself does not refer to an existent entity. It is made to refer by the referee. And it is for this reason the question of existence becomes pertinent.

However, we should remember that Strawson holds that referring would be vacuous if it is dissociated from the belief, on the part of the user

using an expression to refer, under the appropriate condition, that the referent exists. It would hardly be relevant to say, in Strawson's theory of reference, that language or its use does not contain within itself the guarantee for what is or is not. Strawson would not of course claim that his use of referring expression has an intention which terminates in the extra-linguistic world. He is concerned only to work out the ontology 'for us' and not ontology or its structure quite independent of ourselves.

Strawson requires us to determine that a certain set of particulars are basic *independent of* our identification of them. Moreover he offers certain other criterion of *basicness*. Material bodies and persons, according to Strawson, are considered basic not only because they can be independently identified but also because they answer perfectly to the character of the unified spatio-temporal framework. When Strawson speaks of the spatio-temporal framework, he does not take it to be a system where all the particulars find a place. The framework, in his opinion is not something other than. The object in reality we speak of, there is at least one class of particulars which answers to the description of the framework. As a matter of fact such particulars, by virtue of their fundamental characteristics, may be said to confer their characteristics upon the framework. The framework is admittedly spatio-temporal, and material objects are three dimensional and endure through time. Thus material bodies which meet the key conditions of three dimensionality constitute the framework. Hence Strawson concludes that given a certain general feature of the conceptual scheme we possess, and given the character of the available major categories, things that are or possess material bodies must be the basic particulars.

Section VI: Remarks

Strawson's examination of the actual use of words, his emphasis on the phenomenon of referring expressions and the significance of identification bring home some truths about the constitution of our cognitive mechanism. The discovery of the conceptual framework really hangs upon the necessity of communication through referring expressions. This has been questioned by some philosophers. B. A. Brody, for example, when admitting the importance of reference, has expressed his doubts concerning the need for communication and consequently for identification. If this is really questionable, then Strawson's method of unfolding our conceptual scheme will be totally frustrated.

But we think Brody's remark is not apt. It is really a contingent matter whether somebody will decide to talk to others about a particular which he knows. But such knowledge must be necessarily communicable. We cannot acknowledge the existence of particulars unless we believe that such acknowledgement is communicable to others. It would be highly absurd if we say that a man acknowledges the existence of a particular and denies at the same time the possibility of its communication. It also explains partly why such a particular shall have to be identified. This is also the reason why Strawson says: "That it should be possible to identify particulars of a given type seems a necessary condition of the inclusion of that type in our ontology

"¹⁰

The success of descriptive analysis of ordinary language would depend to a large extent on the claim which Strawson makes in favour of the

¹⁰Brody, B. A. : "On the Ontological Priority of Physical Objects", *Nous*, Vol. 5, 1971, p. 16.

conceptual scheme. He tells us : "There is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history."¹¹ What he means is that the analysis of language would reveal a universal and invariant conceptual apparatus. But it may be doubted that the conceptual scheme which ordinary man operates with is relative to his cognitive content and the cultural climate of his age. This question gets a very sharp edge in the contention of Iseminger . He asks: "Was there a time in history or is there a culture in which men employed or employ a conceptual scheme in which there is no provision for the identification of basic particulars ?"¹² One can also refer to the misgivings of E.A.Burt who comments in his article *Descriptive Metaphysics* :

it seems to me quite clear that his (Strawson) belief in a changeless categorial core of human thinking rests on an illusion—a very natural illusion, arising from the fact that at any given point in history some concepts appear to us as central and basic that we cannot imagine how anyone could dispense with them. To engage in any responsible inquiry seems to require their use. But when we adopt the broadest historical perspective that it is possible to adopt, do we not find that any candidate for a place in this massive core—causality, substance, space, time, individual, universal -has in fact undergone changes that are more drastic than those of linguistic idiom and personal style, and do we not naturally expect that such changes will continue, however slowly and therefore imperceptibly to most of these who employ these

¹¹Ibid., p.10.

¹²Iseminger, Gary. : "Our Conceptual Scheme", *Mind*, Vol. 75, 1966, p.132.

concepts?"¹³ Burt further continues that "the implication of such a survey is that Strawson is mistaken in believing that there is a changeless core of metaphysical categories, and also in believing that a metaphysical system can be purely descriptive, avoiding any revisionary taint."¹⁴

It is one of the fundamental claims of Strawson that the conceptual scheme discovered by him is constant or changeless. There may be different methods of unfolding the scheme which may vary according to the intellectual and perhaps cultural climate of age in which the investigation is carried on. But basically there will always be a constant and invariant conceptual scheme.

Now, Strawson is aware of the above possibilities, of doubts and misgivings, and observed that "certainly concepts do change, and not only, though mainly, on the specialist periphery; and even specialist changes react on ordinary thinking."¹⁵ Nevertheless, he believes that "there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all"¹⁶

Strawson's contention then is that the categories and concepts which constitute the massive central core of human thinking do not change at all in their most fundamental character. It is true that the concept of causality, as Burt has suggested, has undergone change in the course of the progress of metaphysical investigation. But the concept itself, we must not forget, has

¹³Burt, E. A. : "Descriptive Metaphysics", *Mind*, Vol. 72, 1963, p.32.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵Strawson, P. F., *op. cit.*, p.10.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 10.

always been there. The change is not fundamental in the sense that it is affected on the endorsement of the concept in human cognitive structure. It shows also that any change that does not affect the existing framework of concepts does not do away with the ordinary and commonplace view of the world. Such a change does not call for an alternative use of linguistic expressions fitted to describe an alternative ontology.

What we intend to suggest is that the ordinary man's ontology is a constant process of linguistic analysis, and that it does reveal a conceptual scheme with an invariant and changeless central core. Despite our cultural advancement in history the central core remains constant. What is important is that there is a universal ontology for ordinary people which comprises particulars as the objects of reference. It is this phenomenon that reveals the invariant conceptual scheme of man. And it is this that Strawson discovers with his method of descriptive analysis.