CHAPTER I

AN EXAMINATION OF THE DESCRIPTIVE METAPHYSICAL APPROACH

In Individuals : An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics (1959) Peter Frederick Strawson has highlighted the main complexities of the problems related to the concept of person with the intention of solving them by the discovery of the general structure of human thought, i.e. by locating the concept of person in his scheme of descriptive metaphysics. He shows how the concept falls in line with our conceptual framework; and by this breakthrough approach which he develops by the application of the method of analysis, he offers a new theory of the concept of person. This theory seems to solve the age- old philosophical problems of the concept of human person, of reference, and of personal inentity. And if really these problems are solved by his scheme of descriptive metaphysics, there will be no theoretical hindrance to say that Strawson resolves the classical problems of the concept of person.

None perhaps prior to Strawson has said so clearly that the actual runway for philosophy is the general structure of our human thought. This implies that metaphysics must be primarily descriptive. He says : 'Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world.'[1]

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1. Individuals, Methuen & Co Ltd, London, 1969,   p.9.

Strawson, however, broadly distinguishes metaphysics into two types : descriptive and revisionary. According to him, Aristotle and Kant are descriptive metaphysicians because there is defensible tone of descriptive metaphysics in the works of these great predecessors. Even for this same reason Hume may appear under this class. It is clear enough from this view of Strawson that the traditional metaphysics is predominantly revisionary. He says that revisionary metaphysics has been concerned with generating a structure different from the one we actually have. The revisionary metaphysicians, for example, Plato, Descartes, and Leibniz on their way to revise the actual picture of our world, eventually have founded their metaphysical systems on apriori principles.

Although Strawson is the champion of descriptive metaphysics, yet his emergence into this realm of philosophy marks a new phase in virtue of his novel outlook. He says, 'The productions of revisionary metaphysics remain permanently interesting, and not only as key episodes in the history of thought. Because of their articulation, and the intensity of their partial vision, the best of them are both intrinsically admirable and of enduring philosophical utility.'[2] Strawson's intention has been very clearly reflected in these lines that unlike others he is not interested in assaulting the metaphysicians. He thinks that it is futile to quarrel with the revisionary metaphysicians because 'Revisionary metaphysics is at the service of descriptive metaphysics'.[3] It is his view that had there been no descriptive metaphysics, revisionary metaphysics would not have been possible. Revision presupposes description.

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2. Ibid., p. 9.

3. Ibid., p. 9.

It might be said that the traditional philosophers have failed to unearth the human conceptual scheme or its fundamental features. But revealing the most general feature of human conceptual structure Strawson says that as the central core of human thinking always remains basically the same, so our conceptual structure also remains unchanged. He writes : '... there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history or none recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialities of the most refined thinking. They are the commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and are yet the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. It is with these, their interconnexions, and the structure that they form, that a descriptive metaphysics will be primarily concerned.'[4]

We know from the history of philosophy that ever since the very launching of metaphysics, it has sharply been brought under fire. In the Post-Aristotelian age sceptics threw doubts to the possibility of epistemology and metaphysics. Even Plato had had the experience of being criticized by the Pythagoreans- e.g. Simmias - who said that the theory of the immortality of the self appeared to be unacceptable on his account. The modern assault on metaphysics by the philosophers belonging to different camps may be marked by their concern with systematic knowledge. But although behind the purpose of liquidating metaphysics various interests work at various times in accordance with the intellectual temperament of the age, still all these attempts are same at least in one respect of their anti-metaphysical tunning, viz. to doubt the possibility of metaphysics as the most abstract part of philosophy. Maintaining however a completely different line of argument, Strawson says that metaphysics being the point of take-

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4. Ibid., p. 10.

off, philosophy can not be assaulted upon in the ways it actually had been. Following his method to bifurcate descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, it could be said that the different approaches of the anti-metaphysicians have been ill-directed towards a discipline which has two aspects, one is descriptive, the other is revisionary. The objections which stand against the revisionary aspect are not at all worthy of standing against the descriptive metaphysics. The anti-metaphysicians failed to have marked that as a broad heading metaphysics also has a descriptive branch which is primarily concerned with the programme of revealing the structural and general features of our spatio - temporal conceptual framework. It is equally true that before Strawson no metaphysicians have identified the two aspects of metapysics. As the necessary consequence of this failure the concerned metaphysical systems have been self-defeating. This failure too got certainly the critics' attention to get gone inside the heart of the pyramid of metaphysics and declared that there is nothing but the finely designed mummy of the metaphysicians' transexperiential sophisticated dead thought. Some of the anti-metaphysicians were so encouraged and inspired by this result that they attempted to climb the peak of the said pyramid with the hammer of the verification principle in their hands to knock and throw away step by step all the elements out of which the structure was built up.

Perhaps Adam would have seen an apple falling on the ground with his firm conviction that it's the will of God. Before Newton also people saw the same phenomenon. But it was only Newton who thought it deeply and ultimately discovered the law of gravitation as its cause, and also with that discovery he makes a way enter the mysteries of the nature to observe and explain them systematically. Strawson's discovery of the actual conceptual structure also seems to be an epoch-making event in the history of philosophy. This discovery may be compared to Newton's discovery of the gravitational force.

Kant through his discovery of the so-called human mechanism of theoretical knowledge attempted to reconcile between the two opposite groups of empiricists and rationalists. A.N. Whitehead told the traditional metaphysicians to come to a compromise with the actual picture of the world as recorded in our common sense. But Strawson's observation is quite different owing to his discovery of our conceptual system or framework. This conceptual system consists in 'the essential structure of ordinary language - that is, of language in its presently established uses. It is the dependably functioning medium of communication between people - their way of talking to each other about the objects in their world that can be publicly identified and reidentified'.[5] Strawson says that in terms of our conceptual scheme we think about particular things. Descriptive metaphysics accordingly is concerned with things of the world as they are which are revealed in our ordinary language through the way of communication. Revisionary metaphysics, on the other hand, always aims at offering a better structure which is other than the conceptual structure. Thus having noted the basic difference between the metaphysical description of what it is and the revisionary prescription of what it should be, I think, Strawson has thought that it is needless to make the two distinguished branches consistent with each other. It seems that by going this way he has done two important jobs. First he tries to settle the age-old philosophical quarrel between the metaphysicians and the anti-metaphysicians. Second, he did not condemn the revisionary metaphysics. He however says that we do not need to follow the revisionary metaphysicians who in the process of revising the actual structure of thought go into the world of fantasy. For Strawson, a revisionary metaphysician can fantasize situations beyond the bounds of our sense, but he can do that 'only because there is another kind

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5. E.A.Burtt, "Descriptive Metaphysics", Mind, Vol. LXXII, 1963, p.29.

of metaphysics which needs no justification at all beyond that of inquiry in general'.[6] A bird can leave its nest to fly in the sky but it can not help coming back to its nest which is really a shelter for it and its actual existence. It would be a fantasizing if one entertains the belief that though the bird is there in the nest, still there is no actual nest. A revisionary metaphysician can not but accept our actual structure of thought about the world, though depending upon his intellectual wings he can leave this spatio - temporal framework for his ideal world.

The novelty of Strawson's approach is the method of his analysis and description of the actual use of ordinary language. His descriptive metaphysics is, of course, different from philosophical, or logical, or conceptual analysis. He takes the guidance of analysis of language to reveal the very structure of our conceptual scheme. Sceptics here may say that there is no need of any descriptive metaphysics, since the job it intends to do has already been done by analytic philosophy. Certainly the task of analytic philosophy is to analyze and clarify the basic units of language. Descriptive metaphysics too lays emphasis upon this method of analysis; hence, it is just like the analytic philosophy in kind of intention. But in scope and generality descriptive metaphysics is fundamentally different from it. The aim of descriptive metaphysics is 'to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure'[7] which is not the function of analytic philosophy. Strawson says : 'Up to a point, the reliance upon a close examination of the actual use of words is the best, and indeed the only sure, way in philosophy. But the discriminations we can make, and the connexions we can establish, in this way, are not general enough and not far-reaching enough to meet the full

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6. Individuals, p.9.

7. Ibid., p.9.

metaphysical demand for understanding. For when we ask how we use this or that expression, our answers, however revealing at a certain level, are apt to assume and not to expose, those general elements of structure which the metaphysician wants revealed. The structure he seeks does not readily display itself on the surface of language, but lies submerged. He must abandon his only sure guide when the guide can not take him as far as he wishes to go.'[8]

Our conceptual scheme gets revealed in our ordinary language. This philosophical decision of Strawson justifies the reason for his reliance upon the method of analysis of the basic concepts or meanings of words and expressions of ordinary use. He says,'Among the kinds of expressions which we, as speakers, use to make references to particulars are some of which a standard function is, in the circumstances of their use, to enable a hearer to identify the particular which is being referred to. Expressions of these kinds include some proper names, some pronouns, some descriptive phrases beginning with the definite article, and expressions compounded of these.'[9] Strawson here also spells out that the nature of his scheme could be better understood if the key concept of identification is understood: An expression which is used to refer to some particular has been called by him an 'identifying reference'. According to him, it is not merely a fact of accident that we simply make an identifying reference to a certain particular to help our hearer only identify that; he rather says,'...it should be possible to identify particulars of a given type seems a necessary condition of the inclusion of that type in our outology.'[10] Opposing the principle of verification of the logical

8. Ibid., pp. 9-10.

9. Ibid., p.16.

10. Ibid., p.16.

positivists, Strawson employs the principle of identification to determine if something referred to by an expression is an actual particular thing of the world. His ontology therefore keeps no room for any type of non-existent particulars; it comprises only objective particulars which can be demonstratively or non-demonstratively identified and re-identified.

In the case of demonstrative identification both the speaker and the hearer can directly identify a particular thing sensibly discriminating that from other particular things. In the case of non-demonstrative identification a particular thing can not be directly identified by using demonstrative 'this', or 'that', because the particular to be identified can not be directly located in a range of the particulars which are sensibly present. But for Strawson it is not a serious concern at all. He says : 'For even though the particular in question can not itself be demonstratively identified, it may be identified by a description which relates it uniquely to another particular which can be demonstratively identified. The question, what sector of the universe it occupies, may be answered by relating that sector uniquely to the sector which speaker and hearer themselves currently occupy.'[11] This sense of non-demonstrative identification is very vital for Strawson's descriptive metaphysics.

The possibility of successful non-demonstrative identification of particulars indicates that even demonstrative elements are involved in all types of identifying descriptions; and that there is 'the system of spatial and temporal relations, in which every particular is uniquely related to every other'.[12] In fact the principle of identification shows that the system of spatial and temporal relations is our

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11. Ibid., p.21.

12. Ibid., p.22.

conceptual system. Strawson's world of particular things therefore is a unified spatio-temporal world of identifiable particular things. Kant has made a distinction between what there is and what is given. His world of things-in-themselves were more real than the world of appearance. But, according to Strawson, we identify a particular thing as exactly as it is in our single spatio-temporal world. A reality is that which has empirical ground, i.e. which is identifiable in a spatio-temporal framework. In this sense Strawson's descriptive metaphysics is a study of the fundamental or reality that exists. And also in this sense he is justified in opposing Locke's ideas and Kant's pure form of sensibility. If objects are given to us by means of Locke's ideas or Kant's pure form of sensibility, we must fail to know the actual nature of objects.

Another fundamental aspect of Strawson's approach of descriptive metaphysics which he develops by the application of the method of analysis of language, marks a new direction of thinking that grammar and logic really beget ontology. When we use a subject - predicate form of sentence, the subject term of such sentence is made to use to refer to a particular entity which exists. Strawson states, 'Nothing could be more fundamental in speech or thought than the operation of picking out some individual item - referring to it by name or description perhaps - and saying, or thinking, something about it - predicating something of it.'[13] He says that spatio-temporal particular things, for example, material bodies and persons are subjects of predication and whatever is thought or said about the subjects is its general property or universal. Universals may also fill the role of a subject but particulars, the objects of reference can never

13. P.F.Strawson, "My Philosophy" in P.K.Sen and R.R.Verma (eds.), The Philosophy of P.F.Strawson, ICPR, New Delhi, 1995, p.3.

perform the role of a predicate. Strawson remarks, 'universals - general or abstract things - may and do figure as objects of reference, subjects of predication, as well as particulars or spatio - temporal things; though particulars can never fill the predicate - role.'[14] In our ordinary use of words and expressions of everyday language we make the connection between an expression or word and an object of reference, an entity that exists. We make the ontological and grammatical or logical connection between subjects and particulars and between predicates and universals. Thus the grammatical and logical distinction between subject and predicate presupposes the ontological distinction between particular and universal.

It might be said that the story of the distinction between subject and predicate, of particular and universal is nothing new. Of course the story is not new, but certainly Strawson's argument to explain the concept of universal is something which is relatively new. Plato regarded universal to stand for the essence, the real thing which exists apart from the particulars. Aristotle explained it as an abstract entity though, according to him, it is inseparable from the particulars. Locke said that a universal is 'abstract general idea'. Hegel thought that same thing can be both universal and particular or concrete, and this way he virtually opposed the logical distinction between particular and universal. According to Hegel's absolute idealism the only real thing is the absolute idea; and it is Mind of which the finite minds are parts. Then in one sense the finite minds are particulars or concretes, and in other sense the real thing, the Mind is universal. Thus we can say that in the Hegelian sense there is no conflict between the two ideas of particular and universal.

Strawson has explained the classical concept of universal in the background

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14. Ibid., p.4.

of his descriptive metaphysics. According to him, universals are neither the real things nor the abstract entities. He says that 'universal' is a general word we use to classify particular things according to their similarities. Therefore, the philosophers who think that universal is not the principle of classification of particular things but is merely general or abstract idea standing for something real or abstract entity, they mistakenly think the principle itself as a real thing or abstract entity.

Certainly Strawson's concern with reference and predication has been the central concern in his scheme of descriptive metaphysics. He says, 'And this pre-occupation of mine, with reference and predication and their objects, has indeed run through much of my writing, from the early (1950) article 'On Referring' through many subsequent articles (including some of the latest).'[15] In the article 'On Referring' Strawson employed the method of linguistic analysis to show the general structural aspect of our ordinary language, and this helped him proceed from the grammatical analysis of a sentence into subject - and predicate - expression to the category analysis of subject and predicate. According to him, 'what at bottom sustains or underlies the formal distinction of terms in the fundamental combination is the ontological or metaphysical distinction between *spatio - temporal particulars* on the one hand and *general concepts or universals* on the other'.[16] We know that Russell develops a method of analysis to explain the meaningful falsity of sentences containing descriptive phrases, and champions the view that only logically proper names denote objects. But Strawson says that this view ignores the way our ordinary language is made to use. He writes :'We

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15. Ibid., pp. 1-2.

16. Ibid., p.9.

very commonly use expressions of certain kinds to mention or refer to some individual person or single object or particular event or place or process, in the course of doing what we should normally describe as making a statement about that person, object, place, event, or process. I shall call this way of using expressions the "uniquely referring use". The classes of expressions which are most commonly used in this way are : singular demonstrative pronouns ("this" and "that"); proper names (e.g."Venice", "Napoleon", "John"); singular personal and impersonal pronouns ("he", "she", "I", "you","it"); and phrases beginning with the definite article followed by a noun, qualified or unqualified, in the singular (e.g."the table", "the old man", "the king of France")."[17] Strawson, therefore, holds that any of these expressions we can use as subject in our ordinary subject - predicate sentence to refer or mention to some particular object or thing.

Russell's analysis shows that a sentence may be false but meaningful. But Strawson points out that a sentence can not be true or false. On occasions when a sentence is used by some person to make an assertion, then that assertion becomes true or false. In other words, the use of a sentence or proposition may be true or false. Strawson says that Russell fails to have distinguished between (1) a sentence, (2) a use of a sentence, and (3) an utterance of a sentence. This distinction is important in the sense that we should not think that a sentence is about its particular subject, say, a particular person, or thing or event, for the same sentence we use on different occasions for the purpose of talking about

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17. P.F.Strawson, "On Referring", in R.R.Ammerman (ed.), <u>Classics of Analytic Philosophy</u>, Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Ltd., Bombay-New Delhi, 1965, p. 315

different persons, or things, or events.

Russell holds that the meaning of a logical subject or proper name is the particular designated object, i.e. he thought that the meaning is mentioning or referring. Strawson states that the source of Russell's mistake is his failure to distinguish between an expression, a use of an expression, and an utterance of an expression. It is Russell's mistake because he confused meaning of an expression with the object which this expression is used to refer to. Strawson, therefore, rightly says : 'People use expressions to refer to particular things. But the meaning of an expression is not the set of things or the single thing it may correctly be used to refer to : the meaning is the set of rules, habits, conventions for its use in referring.'[18] For Strawson the function of an expression or sentence is the meaning of that expression or sentence; the function of the use of an expression or sentence is truth or falsity, referring or mentioning. Thus the meaning of an expression is not the object it refers to, but the rules, habits, and conventions which govern the general direction for its use. And if meaning is not mentioning, then an expression may be meaningful even if it has no referent. The meaning of an expression is determined by the general direction for its use.

Russell states that logical subject must designate object. But in the Strawsonian sense it can not be stated that an expression refers to or mentions something. To say that an expression refers to an object is to support the view that a sentence is true or false. In fact an expression, according to Strawson, by itself can not mention or refer to something, only in a particular context someone can use an expression to mention or to refer to something. Here Strawson's method of ordinary language analysis is sufficient enough to state that the question

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18. Ibid., p.322.

of the meaning of expressions or sentences is independent of the question of mentioning or referring. And, so, the concerned problems of philosophers are pseudo - philosophical problems; these problems are caused by mishandling of ordinary language. Even, some real philosophical problems are due to misuse of ordinary language. Strawson remarks : 'I can quite well say that there are real philosophical problems, and still add that they result, usually if not always, from a misunderstanding, from a mishandling of ordinary language. And I can say that they are not dissolved, but rather are correctly solved, by appealing to a more rigorous analysis of usage. Thus I can manifest a decent respect for ordinary language, while also trying to resolve philosophical problems (treated as quite genuine problems) through analytic methods.'[19]

Strawson's analysis of the basic structure of ordinary language shows the following features of it.

1. The semantic aspect of language is determined by the set of rules, habits and conventions.

2. As a medium of communication the ordinary language is used in the speaker - hearer context.

3. Some expressions of the ordinary language, e.g. proper names, pronouns, descriptive phrases, etc., we as speakers use to make identifying references to particular things, persons, and events to enable our hearers to identify the

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19. "Discussion of Strawson's "Analysis, Science, and Metaphysics" " in R.Rorty (ed.), The Linguistic Turn, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1968, pp-328-329.

particulars which are thus referred to.

4. We not only make identifying references to particular things, but we think or say something about those particular things. Strawson says, 'One of the main purposes for which we use language is the purpose of stating facts about things and persons and events. If we want to fulfil this purpose, we must have some way of forestalling the question, "What (who, which one) are you talking about ?" as well as the question, "what are you saying about it (him, her) ?" The task of forestalling the first question is the referring (or identifying) task. The task of forestalling the second is the attributive (or descriptive or classificatory or ascriptive) task.'[20]

5. What we say of one particular thing of a certain class, could also be said of other things of that class, and thus what we say of each and every particular member of a class is the general feature of that class; this general feature then is the principle in terms of which we say that this particular thing is the member of this class. This general feature or the principle is what Strawson calls universal or general concept or term. He says that 'we certainly find it indispensable to use general terms to classify natural things according to their similarities'.[21] So a general term or universal if we use in the place of subject term of a sentence it would not refer to any real thing; only it will be used as a 'convenience of speech'. For example, 'courage is a necessary part of true virtue'. But Strawson mentions that although we can use the general or universal, the concept or idea in the subject - position of a sentence, yet it can be 'confined to its basic predicative role'. He says : '... indeed we can often paraphrase away such apparent reference, putting

20. "On Referring", Op.cit., p.327-328.

21. "My philosophy", Op.cit., p.11.

our general principle of classification into its proper place as a predicate and no longer as a subject. Thus instead of saying 'Courage is a necessary part of true virtue', we can say 'No man is truly virtuous unless he is courageous'. Here the apparent reference to the thing courage has disappeared.'[22] And thus the apparent reference to universals as subjects of predication, or objects of reference disappears.

6. Any expression, for example, 'this' is not identical with its pragmatic and communicative use in a particular context.

From the foregoing considerations it appears that Strawson employs the method of analysis to closely examine the actual use of words or expressions of ordinary language and to expose the actual structure of our thought about the world. He opines that 'the philosopher's principal task is the understanding of how our thought about things works, and that we can not find out about these workings except by looking at how we use words'.[23] He also believes that it is feasible 'to stick to the scrupulous examination of the actual behavior of words, and to claim that this is the only sure path in descriptive philosophy'.[24]

The importance or significance of Strawson's descriptive metaphysical approach may also be shown by way of contrasting his view with Wittgenstein's world-view. Strawson says, 'We think of the world as containing particular things some of which are independent of ourselves; we think of the world's history as made up of particular episodes in which we may or may not have a part; and we think of these particular things and events as included in the topics of our common

22. Ibid., p.11.

23. "Discussion of Strawson's "Analysis, Science, and Metaphysics" " , op.cit., p.324.

24. Ibid., p.319.

discourse, as things about which we can talk to each other.'[25] The world then from Strawson's descriptive metaphysical point of view may be described as the totality of spatio-temporal particular things. The framework of Strawson's world is thus the spatio-temporal framework. He writes: 'If we ask what constitutes the framework, we must look to those objects themselves, or some among them. But not every category of particular objects which we recognize is competent to constitute such a framework. The only objects which can constitute it are those which can confer upon it its own fundamental characteristics ... Material bodies constitute the framework.'[26] In this concept of the world there is no Wittgensteinian holistic sense that the world as a whole is greater than the totality of its parts. According to Strawson objects themselves make up the spatio-temporal framework of the world because these objects possess material bodies; and these objects we can identify by way of sensibly discriminating them from one another within the framework.

But why did Wittgenstein fail to have presented a systematic world-view? He thought that the world is not a totality of things for, according to him, it is not possible to give a description of the world by making a list of descriptions of each and every individual object. For him the world as a whole is greater than the totality of things. He, therefore, thought it essential that to give a description of the world we are to give a description of facts, i.e. how things are there in the states of being related to one another. But Strawson's account is here important; he says that a relation in which two objects stand is unique, but not basic from the point of view of identification; this relation rather could be explained in terms of basic material bodies. Hence, the world could be explained in terms of the

25. Individuals, p.15.

26. Ibid., p.39.

totality of material things without counting relations or order of arrangements between them. Wittgenstein thought that the world divides not into objects, but into facts because he has not noticed the difference between basic particulars and non-basic relations. So it seems that it would not be wrong if it is said that his approach is revisionary. His approach is revisionary because he wants to offer a picture of the world in logical space which is the totality of unidentifiable logical objects and their all possible relations. And this revisionary account of the world is the consequence of his approach which was aimed at formulating a logically perfect language the conditions of which were ideal. We know that Wittgenstein translated this logically perfect language into elementary propositions; and then the elementary propositions finally into primitive signs or names which stand for simples. That is, according to early Wittgenstein the semantic argument is the proof that the meaning of a name is the simple object. Following Strawson's scheme here I would like to say that Wittgenstein's semantic argument is the root cause of this revisionary world-view. The Tractatus method of analysis as a means to clarify language resembles Russell's method.

Opposing his Tractatus concept of meaning, Wittgenstein admits in Philosophical Investigations the rough ground of everyday language. He says, 'The philosophy of logic speaks of sentences and words in exactly the sense in which we speak of them in ordinary life' (Part-1, Section -108). What, then, is the sense or meaning of the words and expressions of our ordinary language ? He says, 'Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life ?- In use it is alive' (Part-1, Section-432). It is therefore the view of the later Wittgenstein that every word or expression, of our ordinary language, by itself is meaningless, but in the context of use it becomes alive, i.e. meaningful. In a sense it seems right that words of the language have no uniform meaning apart from its use, and perhaps this is the

reason why Wittgenstein says that words are dead symbols; they get life in the process of being used.

As far as Strawson's descriptive metaphysical approach is concerned, Wittgenstein's idea that the meaning of a word is its use does not point to our actual linguistic use. Indeed, from the point of view of the rough ground of ordinary language, it can not be said that the words or expressions of such language are dead symbols. We learn sometimes the meaning of words by ostensive definition where the meaning of those words could not be expressed by means of corresponding words; and sometimes definitely by means of corresponding words. Following Strawson's concept of meaning it can be said that we learn the meaning of words or expressions with the help of rules, conventions and customs. We do inherit the system of using language from our ancestors, and when as descendants we accept our ancestors' language to communicate meaningful ideas to ourselves, we do it in the sense of a set of rules; conventions, and customs. Accordingly meaning and use of words and sentences are completely two different things; these two should not be confused. The meaning of an expression or word is the set of rules, conventions, and customs; while we use words and sentences to mean something, i.e.to express our ideas about some particular things to someone or others. In other words we use them to fulfil our ordinary needs, we use them to describe our thought about particular things, persons, and events.

The merit of Strawson's celebrated metaphysical approach is that while it attempts to exhibit the general structure of our thought in making clear the actual behaviour of words and of our concepts, it has not changed them at all. Maintaining this line of approach I shall try to discuss in the following two chapters why the Cartesian, and the no-ownership theory of person are incoherent.

But before I go to the second chapter I propose to critically discuss some criticisms raised against the various aspects of Strawson's descriptive metaphysical approach. This is needed because my purpose is to explicate and evaluate the Strawsonian theory of person giving special emphasis on the methodological context within which this theory is developed. The methodological context is the context of descriptive metaphysics. It seems that Strawson's concept of person is a paradigm case of deriving philosophical conclusions to solve many problems traditionally centered round the concept. If it is so, it is because of his descriptive philosophy. That is to say, if his approach is plausible, his theory of person also will be plausible; otherwise it will not be.

Dereck A. McDougall criticises the possibility of Strawson's descriptive metaphysics. For him if descriptive metaphysics be a study to describe the basic structure of our thought by studying the working of ordinary language, then the task is rather critical; and so it can not be descriptive. He says, '... the idea that there should be a structure of human thinking is something which only arises at a certain level of thought, the level of thought which finds its expression in philosophy itself. And at this level of thought, the unveiling of structure must be essentially a critical procedure, it can not just be descriptive.'[27] McDougall's view appears to be correct in the sense that in the case of any ordinary description the concerned describer as a passive spectator only describes the object or mental state of his present experience; but in the case of descriptive metaphysical programme the describer is not passive spectator, rather his description is connected with a reflective thought. And if such metaphysical description gets

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27. D.A.McDougall, "Descriptive and Revisionary Metaphysics", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. XXXIV, 1973, p.214.

started with a reflective thought, then it is not descriptive at all.

It is interesting to note that McDougall does not deny the possibility of philosophical description, but of the possibility of the kind of metaphysical description Strawson has been concerned with. Now let us see if Strawson's metaphysical description can fulfil the criteria of philosophical description in general. While both philosophical and ordinary descriptions are concerned with a description of something given, the object of ordinary description is given demonstratively, but the object of philosophical description is not given so patently. From this point of view of similarity and dissimilarity of philosophical description with ordinary description it might be stated that Strawson's metaphysical description can fulfil the conditions of general philosophical description. In fact, McDougall has missed the difference between metaphysical and ordinary description by giving emphasis on the fact that a descriptive metaphysician should be a passive spectator and he should not make use of any reflection. But one might be an active spectator and can give a good description of something. To give a description is to get involved with an activity. Again a philosophical description might have some sort of reflection.

In "Philosophical Description", J.N.Mohanty remarks : 'There are in fact two kinds of reflection. One kind of reflection, the more familiar sort, questions, analyses, interprets, explains, enquires into the conditions of the possibility of the given, and guided by any one or more of these motives, constructs theoretical models (as in the sciences) or speculative systems. Let us call it 'reflection$_1$'. There is however another sort of reflection (which again is not quite the same as introspection or anuvyavasāya) which aims at catching hold of the unreflective experience prior to its distortion by preconceptions ... Let us call 'reflection $_2$'.

A genuine philosophical description has to make use of reflection $_2$.'[28]

It also seems that McDougall's opinion is quite unjustifiable. He says that the structure of our thinking 'arises at a certain level of thought', but the said structure is such that it arises at any lavel of thought, and Strawson's descriptive metaphysics primarily concerns the most basic, or the commonplace level of thinking, or the pre-reflective thinking as such.

It might be said that Strawson's programme of descriptive metaphysics is not presuppositionless, since he said that there is a conceptual framework, and the task of his programme is to lay bare it. That is, without any examination he accepted the existence of the actual structure of our thought. But this objection does not seem to be tenable. It is not necessary that a programme should start from absolute zero. For if this view is entertained, no philosophical or scientific systems would be made. It never happens that one starts thinking without any aim and succeeds in making a discovery. A successful discovery is the finding of something anticipated before that discovery is actually made. Strawson has anticipated what he wanted to lay bare by the programme and procedure of his descriptive metaphysics. The difference between presupposition and anticipation is that in the case of the former no question is further thrown to challenge the possibility of what has been granted, but in the case of the latter what is thought of as a possibility has the risk of being questioned and rejected. It is, therefore, not fare to suggest that Strawson's descriptive metaphysical approach has started with presuppositions.

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28. J.N.Mohanty "Philosophical Description", in K. Bhattacharyya (ed.), Philosophical Papers, First Series, Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 1969, pp. 7-8.

C.W.K. Mundle says that in his <u>Individuals</u>, Strawson speaks of an examination of the ordinary use of words. 'One would expect from this that Strawson will appeal to and rely upon 'a close examination of the actual use of words' as often and as far as possible. In fact, he rarely does this at all.'[29] The remark of Mundle that 'he rarely does this at all' seems to be far from satisfactory. Certainly Strawson has relied upon a close examination of words and expressions of ordinary use as and when that was required. One such patent example is the use of the word "I". He claims that from the ordinary use of the word "I" we can have the concept of a person. He believes that all philosophers who have concerned with the views of the mind-body problem, have not explained the concept which we ordinarily have of a person; and for this general mistake they failed to have offered us any coherent theories of the concept of person. In fact Strawson himself has attempted to explain the concept of person on the very basis of the ordinary use of the expression "I". This we shall see in the following chapters in its appropriate context.

Tsu-Lin Mei in his article "Subject and Predicate, A Grammatical Preliminary" raises a serious objection particularly against Strawson's general thesis of descriptive metaphysics. Strawson said that our conceptual structure in terms of which we think about the world are expressed in everyday speech, and so to understand how we operate our conceptual scheme we must understand how words and expressions of such everyday speech are used. With a view to make clear the actual hehaviours of such words and expressions Strawson made a grammatical analysis of a sentence into its subject and predicate expressions. A number of philosophers right from Aristotle have made such grammatical

29. C.W.K. Mundle, <u>A Critique of Linguistic Philosophy</u>, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, p.138.

distinction between subject and predicate terms, but Strawson emphatically says that this distinction begets ontological distinction between particular and universal. But, according to Tsu-Lin Mei, such grammatical distinction is not made in Chinese. Therefore, Strawson 'must either have thought that they (Chinese, etc.) conform to his (grammatical) criterion or that they are irrelevant ... And to say that they are irrelevant is to claim English as the paradigm of all languages'.[30] Obviously English is not the paradigm of all languages, since Chinese as ordinary language is not irrelevant. And for this reason Strawson is mistaken in adopting descriptive analysis to come to the conclusion that our conceptual structure is revealed in ordinary speech. Mei, thus, '... happily takes a single case, a Strawson article on subjects and predicates, and so invites a specific refutation of his (Strawson's) general thesis'.[31]

It is a matter of fact that in Chinese sentences are not of the S-P form and proper names are not separately used. But does it mean that the expressions of this language whenever are used do not refer to spatio-temporal things ? Or, is it to be stated that as there are no subject expressions, so there are no identifiable particular things ? It seems that it is the peculiar aspect of the Chinese language that in it subjects and predicates are not separately used, but if it is translated in other languages, then it will get translated in subject- predicate form of sentences. Therefore, it seems that Mei's objection is not at all a serious one to the viability of the approach of descriptive metaphysics.

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30. Tsu-Lin Mei, "Subject and Predicate, A Grammatical Preliminary", The Philosophical Review, Vol-LXX, 1961, p.157.

31. Robert Price, "Descriptive Metaphysics, Chinese, and the Oxford Common Room", Mind, Vol. LXXIII, 1964, p.106.

E.A.Burtt in his article "Descriptive Metaphysics" says that Strawson can not justify his approach as descriptive. To prove that his approach is descriptive, he must have to prove that descriptive metaphysics is different from revisionary metaphysics. And Strawson in spite of his sincerest attempt simply can not do this. For he has admitted that 'metaphysics was essentially an instrument of conceptual change, a means of furthering or registering new directions or styles of thought. Certainly concepts do change, and not only, though mainly, on the specialist periphery; and even specialist changes react on ordinary thingking. Certainly, too, metaphysics has been largely concerned with such changes, in both the suggested ways'.[32] And 'if metaphysics is concerned with furthering conceptual changes which occur not merely on the specialist periphery but near the central core of our communicative system, there is obviously a constructive role for the revisionary metaphysician.'[33] A descriptive metaphysician who will be concerned with such task of furthering and registering changes of concepts thus would be turned to be a revisionary metaphysician. To change a concept is to revise it. According to Strawson's arguments a revisionary metaphysician does the work of revision. And if a descriptive metaphysician performs the same job of a revisionary metaphysician, and a revisionary metaphysician plays the constructive role of a descriptive metaphysician in showing the occurrences of conceptual changes near the central core of human thinking, then no difference could be there between them.

Again, if some concepts change, it would be hardly plausible to maintain that there is a changeless core of concepts with which a purely descriptive

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32. Individuals, p.10.

33. E.A.Burtt,"Descriptive Metaphysics", Mind, Vol. LXXII, 1963, p.31.

metaphysician is concerned. Indeed the history of the conceptual changes indicates the impossibility of a single conceptual scheme for all sorts of ordinary speeches in our world. Burtt, therefore, concludes that 'no line can be drawn between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics; the former is inevitably also the latter... If our whole system of categories and concepts is not static but in process of continual evolution through new interpretations, any accurate description of them will naturally describe them as undergoing this process, and one can not avoid attempting a description which will guide the further stages of the process in a hopeful direction as compared with descriptions that are less wisely prophetic.One will become a revisionary metaphysician in spite of himself, for he can not avoid recognizing that the changes going on can be for the better and can be for the worse'.[34]

Now if the above remarks of Burtt are justifiable, Strawson's approach would deserve to be rejected, and so also his theory of person. It, however, would be a greal blunder if we think in the line mentioned by Burtt. For primarily it is the task of the descriptive metaphysician to expose and explain the structure formed by categories and concepts which do not change at all 'in their most fundamental character'. Strawson says, '... the central subject matter of descriptive metaphysics does not change, the critical and analytical idiom of philosophy changes constantly.'[35] Burtt himself has admitted this. He writes,'All that would seem necessary is that at each important shift of meaning in the course of history there be something significant in common between the old and the new meanings;

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34. Ibid., p.32.

35. Individuals, p.10.

otherwise the same word could hardly be employed.'[36] Between the old and the new meanings of a word something that remains unchanged is the fundamental character of the concept formed from the ordinary use of the concerned word. We may here take the example of 'causality' In the course of historical metaphysical progress the concept of causality has been defined and explained in several ways, but the concept itself has not been abolished, or replaced or changed by any other new concept. Now, if the categories and concepts do not change in their fundamental character, then it would be reasonable to maintain that there is an unchanged massive central core of human thinking with which a descriptive metaphysician will be primarily concerned.

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36. "Descriptive Metaphysics", op.cit., p. 32.