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Review of Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P.F. Strawson, edited by Z. van Straaten, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), ISBN 0-19-824603-X

Twenty-five years ago the existence of a Wayn_flete Professor of Metaphysics at Oxford appeared a piece of quaintness, on a par with calling atomic physicists 'experimental philosophers'. Even the admirers of Hegel in this country - J.N. Findlay is the most distinguished - defended him not as a metaphysician but against the charge of being metaphysical.

No one has been more responsible for the remarkable revival of the idea of metaphysics since that time than the present holder of the Wayn_flete chair, P.F. Strawson. That revival has not been a simple restoration of the ancien régime, however. As Strawson's work shows, the relationship between metaphysics and analysis is more complex than the image of the two as mutually exclusive competitors would allow.

In fact, even in its most hostile period, the analytical attitude to metaphysics held the promise of a more subtle approach. According to Strawson's predecessor, for example, the metaphysicians were - despite themselves - engaged in analysis:

> It is not a new discovery that at least a part and an important part of philosophy consists in the analytical investigation of types of mental function-

> ing... And while parts of the treatment given by historical philosophers to these subjects have been not analytical, but speculative or hypothetical or dogmatic, other parts have always been strictly analytical and critical.
>
> (G.Ryle, 'Phenomenology')

It seems questionable whether metaphysics is really just the illusory veil opposed to analysis. Might one not conclude, rather, with Strawson, that analysis is itself the most promising method for metaphysics? The question that will interest the student of Hegel is whether the conception of metaphysics thereby revived is sufficiently rich to take its place (and compete) with Hegel's own.

From this perspective the collection under review is disappointing. It epitomizes the (admittedly great) strengths, but also the weaknesses of contemporary analytical philosophy. As to its strengths: No one who reads this work could seriously repeat the canard that the subject matter of contemporary analytical philsosophy is trivial when compared to the great philosophies of the past. Quite the contrary; the essays take up a remarkable number of momentous philosophical problems - the basis of moral responsibility (Ayer, Bennett); the identity of the self (Mackie); the objectivity of experience (Evans); the nature of language (McDowell); the cognitive status of moral discourse (Wiggins); to name only some.

One unfortunate consequence is a compression of argument which makes several of the essays dense to the point of opacity. But more significant is the highly advanced degree

of division of intellectual labour thereby presupposed. For here, perhaps, is the source of the weakness. The discussions are presented as if they were solely problem-oriented, taking place with no broader philosophical commitments than to precision of inference and acuteness of semantic perception. Yet this appearance is deceptive. The form in which philosophical problems present themselves always depends - if not always in obvious ways - on commitments made at a more general level. To deal with problems alone might be permissible were analytical philosophy agreed on a common account of such general questions.

But Strawson has shown that this is by no means the case; his attempts to rehabilitate metaphysics have led him to raise methodological problems of heroic scope.

A comparison with Hegel may perhaps illustrate their nature. Hegel expressed the programme of his metaphysics in his famous call to 'grasp the true not just as substance but equally as subject'. To carry the programme out involved him in bringing into relation three separate senses of 'subject'. In the first instance it is a call to modify the traditional ontological view of the subject as a hypokeimenon - a possible bearer of accidents - in the light of the modern conception of subjectivity as an active principle, permeating whatever it is in relation to. But - and this is crucial - Hegel can only set the two in connection by examining them in a third context: the role that both conceptions play in the domain of language. It is speculative philosophy's task to explicate the tension between the superficial grammatical view of language (which incorporates the traditional

view of subjects as mere hooks on which predicates are hung) and its true structure, whereby the subject is revealed as an active principle.

Now, as Raymond Plant has pointed out, this approach to metaphysics incorporates something remarkably like the view expressed in Wittgenstein's Zettel: 'Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language'. Yet this is also the problem. For, if we are to use language as the fulcrum for metaphysics, we need to be sure that what we are dealing with is the structure. As Strawson puts it:

> [There] is a profound and surely important difference between any explanation... which... applies pretty directly to the surface structure of our sentences, and any explanation which... appeals to an underlying structure differing more or less radically from the superficial grammatical form... An explanation of the latter kind, it seems, has to face a certain kind of challenge, as to what exactly it is claiming and how these claims are verified.
>
> ('On Understanding the Structure of One's Language')

That is, we cannot simply 'read off' structure. For Hegel, Strawson's 'challenge' is met by the nature of speculative philosophy: true structure incorporates the Gang der Sache selbst, the self-constructing path taken by the Begriff and revealed philosophically in the Science of Logic. For Strawson himself, needless to say, no such solution is open.

In a discussion of Chomsky Strawson advocates what he calls 'essential grammar'; a grammar, that is, which will not start from traditional, purely syntactic, ways of dividing language, but will discriminate the elements of language semantically. To put it crudely, we should study the use of words in terms of the structure of concepts, not vice versa. The metaphysician's search for general features of linguistic structure depends on the search for general features of conceptual structure.

Structures of concepts, however, are obviously not amenable to the sorts of description we give of empirical phenomena, and - even if they can be described - such a description does not demonstrate their generality or necessity. For Hegel this is again a matter of the Begriff: our concepts are revealed as modalities of the unique, necessary concept - the logos underlying reality. But Strawson does not believe in metaphysics's power to develop necessary conceptual structures (by which to validate the particular ones we do have) a priori.

Yet any other approach to metaphysics seems threatened with triviality. How else to make good the claim that structures are necessary? To say only, for example, that alternative concepts are unimaginable is too weak: what can or cannot be imagined is a psychological matter subject to cultural variation and development - consider only Kant's view that a non-Euclidean geometry, though not self-contradictory, is unimaginable.

Strawson's attempt to give sense to the idea of concepts' necessity - neither to etiolate it into a mere general fact about the behaviour of a speech community, nor to make it

dependent on conceptual structures generated a priori - takes him on a course between two cliffs. One, as is well known, is called Quine; the other - no doubt to the navigator's surprise - might be called Hegel.

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