Review: Galen Strawson, Selves. An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics

LUDWIG GIERSTL & LUDWIG J. JASKOLLA

In 1929, Alfred North Whitehead wrote that »philosophy never reverts to its old position after the shock of a great philosopher«. It might be the case that Galen Strawson’s Selves causes such a shock. Selves is a brilliant piece of philosophy synthesizing deep insights into nature of human experience with speculative force. Although, the book cannot be said to be easily accessible, studying it is rewarding and can be recommended to almost any philosopher interested in Metaphysics or Philosophy of Mind.

In the following paragraphs, we are going to give a systematic sketch of Strawson’s main line of thought and his central arguments. Basically, Selves can be divided into two main parts: The first part addresses the phenomenology of the self as understood in our everyday approach to the world, while the second part discusses the phenomenological findings of the first part in terms of metaphysics. Despite this two-fold structure, we emphasize that due to our understanding both parts are interrelated systematically and methodologically forming a coherent whole.

1 The Phenomenology of the Self

As everybody familiar with the debate concerning personal identity knows, there is abundant literature discussing the typical phenomenological features of the self – or in particular: the human self. This ordinary account of the varieties of experiences tied to the self is merely derivatively Strawson’s target. He is mainly interested in the discussion of one particular phenomenon which he calls »SELF-experience«. This phenomenon is best characterized in contrast to other experiences: While I may have a stinging pain in my left arm which is so strong that it effects my whole experiential pattern, the fact that my self is in some way part of this experience is not SELF-experience. Rather, SELF-experience denotes the experience of myself being an internal locus of consciousness. This means that SELF-experience is essentially directed at »the experience of oneself as experiencing, as having a palpitating inward life.« (36) In order to defeat certain misunderstandings, some remarks need to be
made: First of all, Strawson asserts that SELF-experience is not tied to reflexive self-consciousness. For example, a dog could experience himself as a center of subsequent experiences without being reflexively conscious about that fact (98 ff.). Further, he notes that SELF-experience does not entail that there are such things as immaterial substances, souls or bare substrata. In particular, he stresses the point that SELF-experience is (at this point) solely a phenomenological concept. There is no ontological entailment whatsoever (36-37). Last not least, SELF-experience is essentially a mental act. This means that it is only accessible to the respective subject of this experience. There is no way knowing purely on phenomenological grounds whether other humans or animals have SELF-experience (121).

In the following chapters of this first part, Strawson goes on discussing the concept of SELF-experience. He sets up a system of features that are typically said to be part of SELF-experience. This so called Building Argument (61) entails SUBJECT, THING, MENTAL, SINGLE – both synchronic singularity as well as diachronic –, AGENT, PERSONALITY and DISTINCT. Nevertheless, he argues that although this list applies to most forms of human SELF-experience, it is not fit to characterize SELF-experience in general adequately. Yet, this list is still not minimal, says Strawson. He applies the so called Whittling Argument (161) to carve out that minimal concept of SELF-experience. His subsequent definition reads as follows:

SELF-experience denotes experience that bears the following features: SINGLE, THING, SUBJECT and MENTAL. (163)

This means that according to the phenomenological analysis of SELF-experience, selves are minimally things that are subjects of experiences, that have mental features and that are unified in the sense that they can be called single things. These minimal selves are called SESMETS (204). Thus, with the Whittling Argument Strawson seems to leave the area of pure phenomenology. He talks about the relevant properties of the respective states of affairs that are addressed by SELF-experience.

But before proceeding deeper into questions of metaphysics, we would like to give a more detailed look at the Whittling Argument. The Whittling Argument assesses which characteristics of human SELF-experience are really necessary for general SELF-experience. This analysis relies on conceptual considerations as well as on experiential data. Here is a short example of how it works. Strawson argues that in order to be an AGENT a state of affairs needs to be able to exert intentional actions. Nevertheless, it seems that »pure observers« (187) are metaphysically possible –
there seems to be no apparent inconsistency involved in the concept of them. It also seems not self-contradictory to think that pure observers bear SELF-experience. But if this is the case, then intentional action cannot be an essential characteristic of general SELF-experience. This will have to do as an example of the Whittling Argument.

2 The Metaphysics of the Self

The second part of *Selves* is dedicated to the metaphysical questions, whether sesmets can be said to exist and what their essential characteristics are. Chapter 5.10 might serve as a key to Strawson’s metaphysical concept of sesmet. Strong substantial analogies between sesmets and »living moments of experience« (256 ff.) can be drawn: Surely, living moments of experience are mentally propertied and have a subjective center. In addition, they can be said to be single things, because they expose a genuine kind of strong unity during the shortest portion of time possible. Whereas the ontological question about the existence of selves remains to be answered, we can suppose the existence of living moments of experience with cartesian certainty.

Another key to Strawson’s metaphysics of the self is clearly his concept of »Real Materialism« (288 ff.). We are going to line out the central conceptual hallmarks of this theory in the following paragraphs. One of the pillars of Strawsonian real materialism is the idea that objects are special kinds of processes. Strawson argues that the world is essentially made out of processes of energy-stuff (299 ff.). Under certain circumstances – when the respective processes constitute strong synchronic unities – energy-stuff forms objects that bear the characteristics of being single and thing.

Further, Strawson refrains from the idea to call his position some form of panpsychism (although he surely expresses his tendency towards such a theory of the mind). He nevertheless argues that mental and physical features of the world are at least equi-primordial. This conviction is based upon a central philosophical intuition: There is no phenomenon as intimately known to us as our experiential states. This phenomenological intuition translates into a metaphysical thesis: Considering fundamentality of philosophical concepts, there can be nothing more fundamental than these experiential states (282). This important belief is employed various times throughout the book.

With these considerations in mind, Strawson tackles the question of the ontological status of objects *per se* (304 ff.). He dismisses both bare sub-
strata approaches to the nature of concrete particulars as well as bundle theories. If put in the terminology of recent analytic metaphysics, his approach can be described as some version of nuclear trope-theory\(^5\).

Where do these ontological preliminaries leave us? If sesmets or selves can be said to exist, then they need to satisfy the criteria sketched in the preceding paragraphs. This means that selves are to be understood as essentially individual unities of energy-stuff bearing mental as well as physical features. According to this conviction, Strawson formulates a definition of thin subjects:

»The fundamental property of a thin subject of experience is simply that it can’t exist without experiencing, ...« (324)

Now, the following chapter – and especially 7.4, 8.8 and 8.10 – discuss this assumption of thin subjects as well as their internal ontological structure. This is what Strawson calls the »experience-subject-content-identity thesis«. Probably this is one of the most stunning metaphysical deductions defended in the book. Plainly, Strawson argues that for thin subjects – or here also sesmets – experiencing, being a subject and having some content are identical. He defends his thesis by putting forth certain conditional claims. For example, whenever there is some kind of experience, this fact entails that there is also a subject having this experience. We demonstrate the general method of his argument here. Actually, this line of thought is based on the cartesian notion of real and merely conceptual distinctions:

(1) There are entailment claims, like the one given above.

(2) It is shown that these entailment claims are reflexive in a way that they ground equivalence claims.

(3) The equivalences are interpreted as strong modal relations; such that for every possible world, where the one concept holds, the other concept needs to hold, too.

(4) Strawson assumes that the best and simplest explanation for modal equivalences is to assume that in fact the respective concepts are identical.

(5) If applied to »experience«, »subject« and »content«, the preceding method brings about the experience-subject-content-identity thesis.

Surely, this is an at first hand astonishing result. But Strawson makes a beautiful point for his idea.
3 Some Further Ideas

We already argued that Strawson’s book is not easily accessible, and we think that this summary illustrates this assumption. We tried to give a glimpse at the overall argumentative structure of *Selves*. Nevertheless, we had to exclude many ideas that are important to the fine-tuning of the argument. Before closing this review, we would like to formulate some questions, we came across when working on the text. We think that these questions ground further work that has to be done in order to widen scope of *Selves* beyond its already wide range of topics:

First of all, we would be interested in how Strawson models and describes the synchronic relation of sesmets. How do they interact? And what are effects these interactions bring about? Secondly, the question of diachronic persistence seems to be important. When ordinary selves are considered one of the most interesting question is how philosophical theories model and ground our immediate perception of some kind of persistence. Although Strawson refrains from an explicit theory of persistence, it would be interesting to see which forms of persistence (for Derek Parfit’s relation R[^6]) are consistent with his theory of sesmet. Thirdly, we are interested in the relation of Strawson’s atomism concerning sesmets and SELF-experience and his considerations concerning the holism grounded in the all-pervasive energy-stuff.

We are under the impression that it is not for nothing that these question remain unanswered. Strawson expresses a distinctive scepticism when it comes to answering certain questions. The problems concerning the existence of the self could be solved according to our own SELF-experience. For many other problems the following holds true:

»I think, though, that we must take Locke’s advice and ‘sit down in quiet ignorance of those things which upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities’ (Essay, 1.1.4).« (381)

This is an impressive piece of philosophical literature – especially for those, who share Strawson’s philosophical intuitions. For all others out there, the book offers a wild, speculative ride to shores unknown.
Notes

1 [5, p.11]
2 [4]; Selves is now available also in paperback, including a revised and extended foreword. Subsequent citations are located in brackets in the main text;
3 For another review emphasizing this point, please refer to [2].
4 Strawson uses capital letters whenever he is using the respective terms in a phenomenological sense.
5 [3, p. 567]
6 [1, pp. 216–217]
References


