

Two points to conclude. First, from my favored perspective, a creature's experiential states are her sensory states. However, the content of a sensory state will not count as a creature's conscious experience—it will be mere information-processing—unless the creature has the ability to make cognitive use of it. Second, as Strawson himself puts it (p. 159), according to naturalized Cartesianism, “mental reality is the *surface* ... None of the backstage activity that makes the play possible is actually part of the play”. Experiential phenomena are *necessarily* occurrent. From my perspective, this restriction unduly stigmatizes mental dispositions and capacities and is, I fear, too parochial.

References

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Galen Strawson and the Weather Watchers

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Neobehaviourists hold that a subject's desires are, *inter alia*, dispositions to behave in certain sorts of ways under suitable conditions. Galen Strawson provides a battery of arguments against this view in Chapter 9 of his wonderful book *Mental Reality*.

Before evaluating Strawson's arguments it is important to keep in mind what motivates neobehaviourists. They think, correctly, that though desires and beliefs both have contents, desires differ from beliefs with the same contents; and they also think, again correctly, that these twin facts about desires have to be fixed in some way metaphysically. Their distinctive claim is that they are fixed by the fact that what a subject desires, as opposed to believes, is determined by the ways in which she behaves in possible worlds in which her beliefs are true. If Strawson is to succeed in arguing against neobehaviourism he must therefore do two things. First, and most obviously, he must undermine the claim that subjects with desires have the requisite behavioural dispositions. But second, and just as importantly, he must provide an alternative account of the difference between belief and desire and the way in which the specific contents of a subject's desires get fixed.

Strawson undertakes the first task by attempting to produce a counterexample. He describes an imaginary group of individuals, the Weather Watchers, who are just like us in being able to perceive what is going on in their environment, but unlike us in having bodies that are constitutionally incapable of movement. As Strawson tells the story, though the Weather Watchers are unable even to conceive of the possibility of acting in any way, they are able passively to watch the weather, about which they have all sorts of desires. The Weather Watchers thus have desires but, by stipulation, they have no behavioural dispositions.

The initial problem with this argument, as Strawson himself admits, is that neobehaviourism is not refuted by the mundane fact that paralysed people can have desires. Neobehaviourism is the view that desires are dispositions to

behave in certain sorts of ways *under suitable conditions*, and what the case of paralysis shows is that one of the conditions that must be met is that the subject is capable of action. The question is therefore whether, even as described, the Weather Watchers are not disposed to behave in certain sorts of way under suitable conditions. Strawson has two lines of reply.

Early on he points out that it is simply wrong to suppose, quite generally, that a subject's desire that *p* is a disposition of hers to bring *p* about via her own agency. Someone who desires that Wimple beats Ivanov in the World Chess Championship might want Wimple to win fairly and squarely, and so be thoroughly averse to the prospect of influencing the outcome herself. The Weather Watchers' desires might all be like this. They might desire that the sun shines as a matter of good luck, not as the result of anything they do. Even if they were to become capable of action, then, Strawson claims that it is in the nature of the Weather Watchers' specific desires that they would still lack behavioural dispositions.

This line of reply is potentially devastating. Neobehaviourists claim that the only way in which the contents of our desires can get fixed is via their connection with behaviour. Strawson's reply is that no matter how we spell out the conditions in which a disposition to behave must manifest itself, we will succeed in supposing that all desires are such dispositions only if we misconstrue the contents of certain of our desires. Desires for states of affairs that *cannot* be achieved via the subject's own agency, desires like the desire that Wimple beats Ivanov fairly and squarely, or the Weather Watchers' desire that the sun shines as a matter of good luck, simply are not such dispositions.

Though this is a powerful line of argument, I am not convinced by it. Neobehaviourists should not be understood as suggesting that a subject's desire that *p* is a disposition to bring *p* about via her own agency. Their suggestion is rather that a subject's desire that *p* is a state that necessarily manifests itself in her behaviour, though perhaps only indirectly. Think of all the possible behavioural evidence that would bear upon whether someone desires that Wimple beats Ivanov fairly and squarely. Neobehaviourism is the view that someone has such a desire only if they would engage in enough such behaviour, of the right sort, under suitable conditions.

What kind of behaviour is of the right sort? The right sort of behaviour includes behaviour in which we can only imagine a subject engaging. A subject desires that Wimple beats Ivanov fairly and squarely only if, in the closest possible worlds in which she has a desire to gamble, and is offered a choice between a gamble in which the pay-off is that Wimple beats Ivanov fairly and squarely and a gamble in which the pay-off is something that she wants less but assigns only a somewhat higher probability, she chooses the gamble in which the pay-off is that Wimple beats Ivanov fairly and squarely. This is behaviour of the right sort because it does seem to be constitutive of

the desire in question. What could we make of a gambler who professes to desire that Wimple beats Ivanov fairly and squarely, but who then refuses such a gamble?

Strawson's second line of reply is independent of his first. Even if we are able to specify a connection between desire and behaviour under suitable conditions, he claims that it would be wrong to conclude that creatures with desires therefore have behavioural dispositions.

Any desire has the following property: it is necessarily true that there are beliefs with which the desire can combine in such a way as to give rise to, or constitute, a disposition to act or behave in some way. This is a conceptual truth, true even of desires to change the past and desires for logically impossible things. But if I am rightly sure that I could never do anything about satisfying any of my desires about the weather, or lack any conception of the possibility of doing anything to satisfy my desires, then I am not *now* disposed to act or behave in any way simply on account of the fact that I have certain desires. (p. 277)

This line of reply seems to me not to get to the heart of the matter. It shows, at best, that neobehaviourists should concede that desires are not behavioural dispositions, but say instead that they are dispositions to be disposed to behave in certain sorts of ways under suitable conditions. This terminological concession leaves neobehaviourism intact because, as I said at the outset, the essence of the view is that facts about the difference between beliefs and desires and facts about the specific contents of desires are fixed by the (possibly indirect) connection between desires and behaviour, and this remains true even if desires are merely dispositions to have behavioural dispositions, not behavioural dispositions themselves.

Elsewhere Strawson makes it plain that his objection is substantive, not terminological.

Oxygen is apt, in certain circumstances and when combined with certain other things, for quenching thirst in human beings who ingest it. Similarly it is apt, when combined with certain other things, to kill human beings who ingest it.... Beliefs and desires are like this in their relation to action and behaviour. *Given their already existing and independently graspable nature*, they can enter into combinations in which they may be said to constitute dispositions to action or behaviour. (p. 277)

Neobehaviourists can agree with what Strawson says at the beginning of this passage. The desire to spend eternity with someone may cause you to save their life, and your own, when combined with the belief that you will both die from snake-bite if you don't administer the antidote you have in your possession immediately. But, equally, it may cause you to kill them, and yourself, when combined with the belief that your families will force you to live apart and never see each other again if your lives continue. There is no surprise here, just a reminder that if desire is a behavioural disposition at all then, like oxygen if oxygen is a disposition, it is a multi-track disposition.

What neobehaviourists need to disagree with is the point Strawson puts in italics. Let's agree that whenever oxygen combines with certain other things and, as a result, has certain effects, there is a property with a certain intrinsic nature which combines with those things and has certain effects. Moreover, let's agree further that that property has these effects because it has the particular intrinsic nature it has, and because the causal laws are, as a matter of contingent fact, what they are. Now consider two quite different views about the meaning of 'oxygen'. According to one 'oxygen' picks out stuff with that intrinsic nature without reference to any of its effects. 'Oxygen' picks out stuff with that intrinsic nature not just in the actual world, but also in other possible worlds. According to the alternative, 'oxygen' picks out the stuff, whatever it is, which has the appropriate effects. On this second view, though in the actual world 'oxygen' picks out stuff with the particular intrinsic nature associated with oxygen in the actual world—for this is the stuff that has the requisite effects in the actual world—in other possible worlds it picks out stuff with a different intrinsic nature, whichever stuff in those worlds has the requisite effects.

On the first view there is a straightforward sense in which oxygen has an independently graspable nature, and it is oxygen's having this nature, in conjunction with the actual causal laws, that explains why it has the effects that it has. But on this view it turns out that oxygen exists even in possible worlds in which it does not have the effects it has in the actual world. Indeed, in possible worlds in which the causal laws are different, oxygen has systematically different effects. On the second view, by contrast, though the stuff that is oxygen in the actual world has an independently graspable nature, the nature of oxygen itself is fully conveyed by the description 'the stuff, whatever it is, that has such-and-such effects'. This is because we do not track oxygen across possible worlds by tracking stuff with the intrinsic nature of the stuff that is oxygen in the actual world, but rather by identifying whatever stuff it is that has the requisite effects.

The idea that desires have an independently graspable nature like oxygen on the first view, a nature which, together with the actual causal laws, explains why desires have the particular behavioural effects they have, seems quite incredible to me. It commits us to the view that there are possible worlds in which people have desires with the very same contents as desires they have in the actual world, but in which, because the causal laws are different from the actual causal laws, the systematic connections those desires enjoy with behaviour under suitable conditions are quite other than the connections those same desires enjoy in the actual world. This is the view of desire from which neobehaviourists quite rightly recoil. Their objection is metaphysical, not epistemological. They just don't see how a state's having that intrinsic nature could make it the case that it is a desire with the specific content it has.

No comparable problem arises if we suppose that a desire with a certain content is simply a state that meets a certain descriptive condition, however. If desires with certain contents, like 'oxygen' on the second view, are those states, whatever they happen to be, that would have certain sorts of behavioural and other effects under suitable conditions, then there are no possible worlds in which desires enjoy systematic connections with behaviour under such conditions other than those enjoyed by those same desires in the actual world. States enjoying the same systematic connections just are desires with the same contents. Neobehaviourism's attraction is precisely that it manages to secure this result.

Strawson thinks that desires do have such an independently graspable nature, however, and he tells us what it is:

...the primary linkage of the notion of desire to a notion other than itself is not to the notion of action or behaviour but rather to the notion of being pleased or happy or contented should something come about (or at least to the notion of ceasing to be unhappy or discontented should it come about). (p. 280)

Note that Strawson here undertakes the second of the two tasks I identified initially. He provides us with an alternative account of the difference between belief and desire—desires are states that make us pleased when their content is realised, whereas beliefs are not—and an alternative account of the way in which the specific contents of desires get fixed—a subject desires that *p*, as opposed to *q*, just in case it is *p*, rather than *q*, that pleases her. Moreover, given this account of the nature of desire it is plain why Strawson might think that desire is more like oxygen on the first view: in possible worlds in which people would be pleased if *p* comes about they surely desire that *p* *whatever* the systematic connections between this state and their behaviour.

Of course, neobehaviourists will insist that, since the state of being pleased is itself just a mental state that the subject desires to be in, it follows this state too is, *inter alia*, a behavioural disposition. They will say that Strawson's claim to have given an alternative account of the nature of desire that doesn't require a systematic connection with behaviour is thus an illusion. But whether or not this neobehaviourist response to Strawson's alternative account is convincing, there is, I think, a more decisive objection to his account.

The idea that it is in the nature of desires that a subject is pleased when the contents of her desires are realised sounds to me like the notorious doctrine of psychological hedonism. To be sure, it is true and *a priori* that desires aim at their own satisfaction, but this notion of satisfaction is completely formal: a subject's desire that *p* is satisfied just in case *p*. This means that *p*'s obtaining involves the subject's *feeling satisfied* or *being pleased* only if *p* is, *inter alia*, a proposition to that effect, and the fact is that, though some *ps* are like this, others simply aren't. Accordingly, my main objection to Straw-

son's alternative account of desire is that it commits him, a priori, to just this notorious doctrine. This is not just to take an unacceptably a priori route to what should be, at best, an a posteriori conclusion, it is also to embrace a doctrine that seems to me to be plainly false.

Strawson's Agnostic Materialism

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1. Agnostic Materialism.

In *Mental Reality* Galen Strawson tries to determine what the fundamental and difficult questions about the mind are, and to answer them. His answers are iconoclastic and brilliant, especially his sustained criticism of behaviourism, functionalism and of certain ideas associated with Wittgenstein. I wish, however, to consider one aspect of Strawson's answer to his first fundamental question, (namely, how do nonmental and mental phenomena relate?) to which his answer is in some respects similarly unorthodox.

Strawson defends a position which he calls agnostic materialism. His argument, if I understand it, runs as follows. Mental properties, in particular experiential properties, are physical. We should agree to this because materialism is the best supported monistic theory, and monism is the best supported general approach.¹ If experiential properties are physical properties then either they are reducible to physical properties or at least some of them are fundamental physical properties.² Strawson puts what he thinks are the same alternatives in these words; 'So either these experiential physical properties are reducible to other, nonexperiential physical properties, and do not feature as fundamental in an optimal physics; or they are not reducible to nonexperiential physical properties, and at least some of them feature as fundamental in an optimal physics.'³ Strawson argues that experiential properties are not reducible to nonexperiential physical properties, and so, at least some of them are fundamental in an optimal physics.⁴ Since this is not currently recognised, Strawson claims to have shown that our conception of the physical must be revised.

It might be felt that Strawson moves somewhat rapidly in equating the idea that experiential properties are real, physical and not reducible to physical nonexperiential properties with the idea that they must figure (like 'electric

¹ See Strawson 1994, ch 3, section 1, for the pro-monistic claim, and, amongst others, ch 4, section 7, for the pro-materialist claim.

² See Strawson 1994, ch 3, section 5, for assertions of this claim.

³ See Strawson 1994, p. 61.

⁴ See Strawson 1994, p. 68, for one expression of this claim.