Transcendental response: Strawson

THE TASK. The world, as *we* perceive it and think about it, contains particulars. Strawson's overall task is 15
'descriptive metaphysics'. We want to describe our conceptual scheme and the ontology that comes with it. A
central element in it is the ability to identify particulars.

IDENTIFICATION. What is 'to identify', in the first place? We start from unproblematic observations, without 16
attempting to give a reductive definition. Let's imagine a conversation where the speaker uses some expressions
to 'refer' to a particular. When the hearer knows what the speaker is talking 'about', he is able to 'identify' it.
Sometimes, of course, he doesn't. Still, we say this: to be able to identify a particular is to be able to make an
identifying reference to it.

Is it a fluke that we have this ability? No. If we pretend to know/believe/assume the existence of particulars 16
(of a certain kind, for example), we thereby maintain our ability to identify such particulars. Furthermore, we
get a handy way of regimenting our ontology. We say that one sort of particulars (α-particulars) is more basic 17
than another one (β-particulars) just in case our ability to identify β-particulars depends on the ability to identify
α-particulars.

When do we actually have the ability to identify a certain particular? What does this ability consist in?
Sometimes we only are able to identify x *relative* to some y. For example, how can I identify Mahler? Perhaps I 18
only know that he is an Austrian composer. Then I can identify him in the company of Brahms, who, as I know,
is a German composer. If, however, you ask me to identify him in the company of other Austrian composers, I
am confounded: I don't know who there is who. 'Well,' you say, 'but Mahler is also called "Mahler"!' Yet,
first of all, generally not every particular has a name. Secondly, the name is not a reliable guide to identification:
two individuals may be namesakes, or their names are corrupted, or swapped altogether.

So, although we may have access to relative identification, we need to get some way to identify particulars
absolutely. Strawson suggests that this way is provided by demonstrative identification. We can point at x and 19
say, 'That one there!' In that we may or may not be assisted by descriptions. In any event, demonstration
allows us to 'directly locate' a particular in the multitude of other particulars. This is because demonstrative
identification has the following advantage: the 'entire' scene within which identification is taking place is 19f
determined unambiguously.

Moreover, suppose that a certain particular a is outside the scene. How can we then talk about it (=refer to 20
it)? Ultimately by means of a certain unique description Fa, since, as Strawson insists, a bare name 'a' will
not help. Yet this will not ensure that we refer to that very a: we cannot rule out a massive reduplication with
the effect that some $b \neq a$ is also F. That is, even though I may be convinced that a is a unique F, my reasons
are defeasible.

Example 1 (Reduplication). Strawson's discussion is not altogether easy to follow. Let's elaborate by looking at several
cases. First, I pretend talking 'about' Mahler whom I identify descriptively: 'The author of Sixth Symphony, the husband
of Alma Mahler, the Austrian composer who died in 1911, ...' We suppose that these descriptions are unique, either
individually or jointly. But if this is *all* I have, and if I can't point at Mahler, then: there may be another area of the
universe, in Tibet or on Jupiter perhaps, where a certain individual answers exactly the same descriptions. This can't
be ruled out. That is, then, the case where the individual is 'outside the scene' of my demonstrative identification. So
descriptions alone cannot identify an individual uniquely.

In the second case, perhaps in addition to certain descriptions of Mahler or in their absence, I can point at Mahler. He
(or it) is within the scene. I am able to identify him uniquely.

In the third case, I'm listening to a piece of music that I identify demonstratively (I'm totally ignorant of music, so
can't form any musical descriptions). Then I say:

(17-1)   Mahler is *the* author of *that* music now playing.

Here I pin Mahler to some element in my scene that is not threatened by reduplication. Even if there is a qualitatively
identical music authored by 'Brahms' (another individual), I'm still referring to Mahler.

In the fourth case, complications arise. I'm listening to the Sixth Symphony which I identify descriptively: 'The
piece of music having such and such properties.' Then I say:

(17-2)   Mahler is *the* author of the Sixth Symphony which is *that* music now playing.

This, admittedly, is the more likely scenario than the third case. Now, suppose that the music now playing is a very garbled
version of the Sixth Symphony. That is, while the Sixth Symphony is F, the version I currently hear is G. Suppose that
a music with the property G was in fact authored by 'Brahms'. Well, am I referring to Mahler or Brahms? This case
illustrates two problems at once. Sometimes descriptions can play an identifying role with the effect that, intuitively, it
doesn't seem to matter that there is another individual fitting better the given description. Also, it is not always, perhaps
never, clear, in my bare act of demonstration, what I in fact refer to. Demonstrations must come equipped with descriptions,

or so it seems. For in (17-2), despite my demonstration, I presumably was referring to the Sixth Symphony, rather than to Brahms' trash. The reason is exactly in the role that the description *Fx* played in my thinking about the Sixth Symphony.

PRACTICAL SOLUTION. On many concrete occasions, Strawson suggests, complications just considered don't matter. It is enough to know, by the knowledge of context, that there is at least *an* individual answering a description. In other words, for practical purposes, we may be satisfied even with *in*definite descriptions. **THEORETICAL SOLUTION.** But the practical solution fails to explain why we *are* often satisfied even by indefinite descriptions—why, that is, such imperfect knowledge often provides conclusive reasons for identification. The proposed theoretical solution is that every descriptive identification, if it is unique and successful, must involve a possibility of demonstrative identification. That is the element that explains their success. 21f But then, why are we so certain that demonstrative identification *will* be any more successful than a descriptive one? So, the final answer is that we have to 'admit' that all individuals form a spatiotemporal framework where each individiual is assigned a unique location. This, let us note, is not a deductive *proof* of any sort. Rather, when Strawson says that 'it is necessary to admit', 'we must add', 'it cannot be denied', these locutions are understood as part of the 'transcendental' manoeuvre. To enable our experience and knowledge of the world we must make all these assumptions. YSB