
BOOK REVIEW

Galen Strawson: *Things That Bother Me. Death, Freedom, the Self, Etc.*
New York: New York Review Books, 2018, 240 pages

Jacek Jarocki*

Galen Strawson is certainly one of the most original contemporary philosophers. And he has—perhaps as every original philosopher has—given rise to many controversies. The theories he defends, such as panpsychism or the conception of *sesmets*—extremely short-lived selves—may indeed prompt an ‘incredulous stare’ (as Peter van Inwagen once observed) and are usually rejected by philosophical orthodoxy. But this, often too hasty, criticism causes Strawson to express his views even more boldly; it is not surprising, then, that his thinking might be seen as lifelong training in philosophical rebellion. It is for that very reason that *Things That Bother Me* is so important. It enables one to understand that his motives are in fact quite the opposite: Strawson turns out to be a humanist, concerned with the sempiternal questions that strike every clever man.

The book consists of nine popular papers, i.e. meant for non-philosophers. The first, ‘The Sense of the Self,’ is the oldest one—it was written in 1996. Its main subject, clearly stated in the title, is the phenomenology of the self: the way we feel our inner I. Strawson mentions seven features that ‘capture the core of the ordinary human sense of the self’ (p. 30). However, not all of them are parts of a genuine experience of ourselves; and in some cases, features such as personality, activity and long-term continuity are absent. This ‘thinned’ sense of the self involves being a thing, being something mental, being subject of experience, singleness and distinctiveness. The vast part of this chapter is devoted to familiarising readers with the idea that longevity of the self—a feature that seems essential to many of us—might not be (and, indeed, is not to some)

* John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

✍ Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Al. Raławickie 14, PL 20-950 Lublin, Poland

✉ jacekjarocki@kul.pl



a part of the sense of the self. Although it is difficult to say whether Strawson succeeds, he at least gives some notable examples to suggest that we should take his idea seriously.

The second chapter—‘A Fallacy of our Age’—is one of many of Strawson’s papers criticising narrativism, a conception that currently enjoys great popularity in almost every area of the humanities. Strawson distinguishes two versions of the view: according to the Psychological Narrativity Thesis, ‘human beings typically experience their lives as a narrative or a story of some kind’ (p. 45); by contrast, the Ethical Narrativity Thesis holds that a ‘richly narrative outlook on one’s life is a good thing, essential to living well’ (p. 46). Strawson is one of a few philosophers to reject both theses. The reason for this follows on from the previous paper: some people experience their selves as short-lived (transient) and ‘have no particular tendency to see their life in narrative form’ (p. 48). As before, Strawson does not propose any formal argument but simply stresses the diversity of human phenomenology.

The third paper, ‘I Have No Future,’ addresses the problem of death expressed in a question: Is my death bad for me? Strawson defends a non-deprivation view, according to which death does not deprive the one who died of any good, and therefore it cannot be bad. He calls his view ‘No Loss (of the Future)’ (p. 72), although—under different names—it has been widely accepted throughout the ages, most notably by Epicurus. What is truly original about the version defended by Strawson is the justification: he argues that one loses nothing when one’s death is—as it is often said—untimely. There is no such thing as a lost future of someone who is already dead. This point seems to be clear, despite its counter-intuitive consequences discussed by Strawson (at pp. 84–86). Still, it does not make death any less frightening: even if it does not deprive us anything, the thought of eternal non-existence is—at least to some—emotionally unbearable.

The next two papers are devoted to the problem of free will. Throughout his career, Strawson has argued against the possibility of freedom and (ultimate) moral responsibility. His argument rests on the assumption that being free and morally responsible require one to be *causa sui* (a cause of oneself). But being *causa sui* is incoherent, so freedom and moral responsibility are logically impossible. This is exactly the core argument that can be found in the paper ‘Luck Swallows Everything.’ However, despite its clarity, it is impossible for the reasoning to convince us that we are not free. We cannot help but believe that we are responsible agents, for we experience freedom in almost every moment of

our life. In effect, free will turns out to be both (metaphysically) impossible and (phenomenologically) necessary. One of the questions Strawson does not answer is why we are doomed to the experience of freedom. In his *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut describes an alien race called Tralfamadorians that abducts humans from time to time. ‘I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will’ explains one of the aliens. The question is: why is this so? Is there something special about our evolution? If yes, what role does this deceptive experience play? It is a shame that Strawson does not even try to tackle these questions at length.

The next chapter, titled ‘You Cannot Make Yourself the Way You Are,’ is a conversation between Strawson and Tamler Sommers. Here the former repeats—but in an even less formal manner—his pivotal views on free will. However, Sommers asks him a couple of troubling questions that lead Strawson to draw some inconvenient consequences. He is forced to admit, for example, that neither Adolf Hitler nor Joseph Stalin can be held responsible for their deeds. Even if we are able to accept this fact cognitively, for we have *a priori* proof, we still feel emotional resistance to treating genocide in the same way as we treat an earthquake: as something that just happened through nobody’s fault. Strawson may be right, then, that ‘the impossibility of radical free will, ultimate moral responsibility, can be proved with complete certainty’ (p. 111); however, the consequences of adopting this view could be catastrophic for our everyday lives.

The next two papers consider the problem of consciousness. The first, titled—quite significantly—‘The Silliest Claim,’ discusses the views of the Deniers: the philosophers who deny the existence of conscious experience, also known as ‘what’s-it-like’ (or qualia, although Strawson finds the last term ‘uncomfortable’ [p. 131]). Few of them do so explicitly. Their more common strategy is to redefine ‘consciousness’ in terms of behaviour, function or brain process. Strawson, who firmly believes that this view is mad, tries to find the roots of this claim. He believes that the first of them is metaphysical behaviourism—a mutation of a much weaker, methodological thesis about the object of psychology. The second, however, is far more important: it is the belief that we know exactly what the fundamental nature of the physical world is. This is—Strawson concedes—plainly false. But contemporary philosophers have made this fatal mistake even worse: they have assumed that this fundamental nature is also utterly non-experiential. Contrary to common opinion, nor is physics is much of a help,

for it is just a bunch of equations and pointers readings and so remains silent on the nature of the physical. Why, then, do some people endorse the Denial—‘the silliest view ever held in the history of human thought’ (p. 151)? Strawson offers a psychological explanation: we are tempted to believe in literally anything that is universally acclaimed.

So, what might be the fundamental nature of the world? Strawson tries to answer the question in the next paper, ‘Real Naturalism,’ in which he argues for panpsychism. Most philosophers assume that the stuff the physical world is made of is utterly different from our experience. This assumption leads straightforwardly to so called ‘mind–body problem,’ i.e. the question of how to combine experiential occurrences with the non-experiential nature of the physical world. Strawson reverses the initial assumption. We know, he argues, that experience exists and what it is, but we know nothing about the physical. What follows is, first, that the mind–body problem is a pseudo-problem, for its main question is similar to questions such as ‘Have you already stopped bullying your wife?’; and second, that it is at least plausible that what we call the physical is indeed experiential. For, Strawson asks, what non-experiential nature could the physical have? This is a tricky question, because by definition we know nothing about anything non-experiential. In that light, panpsychism—physicalist panpsychism—is indeed the best explanation.

The next paper, ‘The Unstoried Life,’ goes back to the critical examination of narrativism. Once again, Strawson expresses his conviction that ‘some of us are naturally—deeply, positively—nonnarrative’ (p. 179). He scrutinizes the view of Marya Schechtman, who holds that we constitute our selves by weaving stories, that our life is indeed a process of life-writing. In contrast, Strawson cites those whose experience is totally different. He puts special emphasis on the fact that ‘there are deep human differences’ (p. 195) that we cannot ignore.

In light of the previous chapter, it may be a bit surprising that the last paper, titled ‘Two Years’ Time,’ is autobiographical. However, Strawson clarifies, there is no contradiction between being a non-narrativist and writing one’s own memoir. (Probably the more serious obstacle to Strawson writing a full biography would be the fact that—as he concedes at p. 34—he has ‘a little interest in [his] own past’.) In this short paper, Strawson recalls the late 1960s—the final years of his time at Winchester College, a hitchhiking trip across the Middle East and his early years at Cambridge University. It is a very personal, sometimes painfully sincere yet beautiful story of growing up during the short

but revolutionary era of 'flower power,' full of rebellion, drugs, music and love. All in all, it is a story of—or a manifesto for—the whole generation.

As one can easily see, what binds these papers together is certainly not their consistency. Why, then, has Strawson decided to publish them in one volume? The answer appears obvious: he represents a small minority of living philosophers whose aim is to construct a sort of wider metaphysical frame: a kind of metaphysical system. And within that system there is a place for all the problems he tackles in the book. However, what is particularly remarkable about the project is its mainly aporetic character. Of course, Strawson's positive ideas, such as panpsychism, are certainly worth our attention; but the arguments he proposes against universally held philosophical views such as libertarianism (and compatibilism), narrativism or (non-experiential) naturalism are in many cases lethal. This becomes even more obvious in these popular papers, for they get things as straight as possible and do not split hairs.

But this attempt to explain why Strawson is so vividly interested in all these topics is not enough. The final answer to that question is hidden in the title of the book: all the problems Strawson takes on have bewildered him one way or another. In this way he reminds us of an old yet rarely expressed truth: that the basic stimulus to do philosophy is astonishment. Strawson's astonishment stems from two sources. The first are certain philosophical views he finds hard or even impossible to believe. In one of his papers, 'The Depth(s) of the Twentieth Century'—not included in this collection—he enumerates nine philosophical views that were commonly accepted when he was an undergraduate (e.g. on meaning and understanding, feeling and emotion or consciousness) and confesses that they 'seemed to me [...] the wrong way round.' Then he adds: 'This led me to feel very insecure about my ability to do philosophy.' It is simply inexplicable—Strawson says—that some people believe that 'the self is an illusion generated by an improper use of language' (p. 23) or that conscious experience does not exist. So, one of the basic sources of Strawson's puzzlement are philosophical views.

Yet the second—and much more important—cause of Strawson's astonishment are not the answers to certain central philosophical problems but the problems themselves. It is obvious that many of them engage Strawson emotionally, which is sufficient to explain the title of the book. One might ask whether detached reflection—a view from nowhere—would not have been better than personal involvement? Strawson, though, proves this question to be ill-posed: his personal preferences give him at most the initial impulse to take on

certain issues, but justification of his views is independent of emotional commitments.

Still, the fact that one has to defend against the charge of personal involvement says a lot about the intellectual climate today and—at the same time—reveals the truth: that Strawson does not belong to the party of fully-fledged analytic philosophers. The latter often ignore the fact that, historically speaking, philosophy is mostly a discipline that does involve personal commitment. Pierre Hadot in his classical book *La Philosophie comme manière de vivre* [*Philosophy as a Way of Life*] shows that philosophical reflection has been a kind of a spiritual exercise, usually complementary to—but sometimes also substitutive for—religion. One of the hallmarks of the analytic tradition is that it has abandoned that meaning, as Thomas Nagel convincingly argues in his essay ‘Secular Philosophy and Religious Temperament.’ By contrast, Strawson tries to reintroduces philosophy understood as an outlook one is personally committed to; *Weltanschauung* as German idealists called a world view, a notion wider than philosophy yet still respecting the rules of reason. As a person who ‘had a non-religious upbringing’ (p. 13), Strawson seeks an alternative way of coping with deeply bothering “‘cosmic” things’ (p. 15) without reference to a transcendental being. Perhaps that is why he seldom introduces definition and argues for his views—rather, he ‘want[s] to record [...] reflections’ (p. 73)—and even more rarely tries to convince his opponents. This might initially disappoint or even upset some analytically oriented readers. There are also *prima facie* contradictions, e.g. between Strawson’s ‘episodism’—his experience of being a short-living self—and besetting him from early childhood, his fear of death—‘the first of the things that deeply bothered’ him (p. 15). It is worth noting, however, that in a previous version of the essay ‘I Have No Future’ (published in a volume *The Subject of Experience*), Strawson replies to that charge: ‘All that I can say is that this is a truthful report of how I feel—even if it involves a sort of inconsistency.’ In this way Strawson gives expression to a general notion that people may be internally incoherent, especially when it comes to what they know and what they feel. Sometimes philosophy can help us to sort things out, but in some cases—as in the case of free will or fear of death—any systematic reflection is helpless. Consistency at all costs, although often very desirable, may move us away from the truth.

We must bear in mind, then, that *Things That Bother Me* is not in any case a philosophical treatise. On the other hand, it is something more than just a popular book for non-philosophers (although casual readers may benefit

considerably from it). It is, rather, the testimony of a humanist: someone interested in human nature. And the first object of inquiry for Strawson is Strawson himself. For that reason, the book tells a very personal story. Strawson writes about his bewilderments, about his severe depression and difficult youth but also about his favourite reads and bands. The book reminds us that a true philosopher has never been—and should never be—an office worker who leaves his desk at 4.30pm. Rather, it is someone who, constantly bothered by certain problems, tries to answer them or at least pose them clearly in a rational manner.

It is no accident that *Things That Bother Me* was published by New York Review Books. It is a sort of intellectual autobiography, full of confessions and memories; quite similar to Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, so frequently quoted by Strawson. Besides, it is an excellently written book; witty, engaging and sometimes provoking. In short, it is a brilliant piece of literature that easily lives up to any expectations one might have upon seeing Ian McEwan's words printed on the back cover: 'Galen Strawson is one of the cleverest men alive.'