

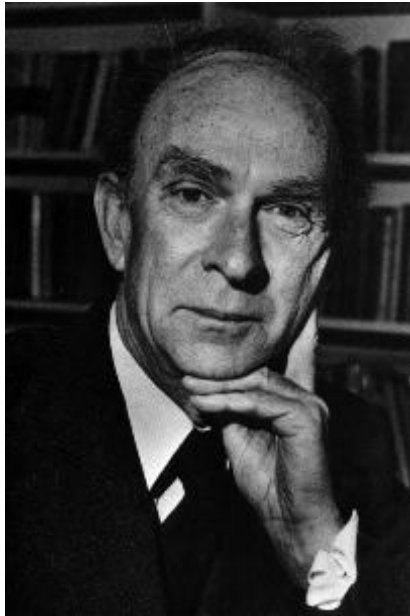
著名英国哲学家斯特劳森去世, 享年86岁

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Sir Peter Strawson

November 23, 1919 - February 13, 2006

Oxford philosopher of matchless range who made incisive, influential contributions to problems of language and metaphysics



FEW scholars achieve lasting fame as dramatically as did the philosopher Sir Peter Strawson. By 1950 Strawson, then a Fellow of University College, Oxford, was already a respected tutor and a promising member of the group of younger Oxford dons whose careful attention to the workings of natural languages marked them out as “linguistic” philosophers.

In July of that year, however, a mensis mirabilis, he published two extraordinary papers, which are still read and discussed more than 50 years later and which are prescribed to tyros as models of philosophical criticism.

The first of these concerned the topic of truth. During the late 1940s J. L. Austin, the leader of the linguistic philosophers, had been trying to construct what he envisaged as a “purified” version of the correspondence theory of truth — the theory that a statement’s truth consists in its correspondence to the extra-linguistic facts. At the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association held in July 1950, he unveiled his version of the theory.

Its formulation is complicated, not to say delphic, and it was Strawson’s achievement, in his immediate reply at the joint session, to show that insofar as Austin’s formula succeeded in saying anything that was not obviously false, it failed to constitute a rehabilitation of the correspondence theory.

This reply made a deep impression on those who heard it or read it. It subjected one of Austin’s own formulations to the kind of appraisal — penetrating, exact and merciless — which he liked to mete out to others but

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which few were acute enough to return.

The other paper that Strawson published in July 1950 resonated even more widely. Russell's Theory of Descriptions had been praised by Ramsey as a "paradigm of philosophy", and in the years since its appearance in 1905 it had come to be an accepted part of the philosophical logician's tool-kit. The theory concerns the meaning of statements containing definite descriptions in the grammatical singular. According to it, a speaker who affirms "The King of France is bald" asserts that there is one and only one King of France, and that he is bald.

In *On Referring* Strawson attacked this account at its root. A speaker who affirms "The King of France is bald", he maintained, does not assert that there is a unique King of France. Rather, he presupposes that there is; in choosing this form of words, he takes for granted that there is one and only one such person, and expects his audience to take this for granted too. Of course, he makes an assertion, but the content of that assertion can be understood only against the background of what is thus taken for granted. His assertion concerns the person presupposed to exist, and is to the effect that he is bald.

Accordingly, Strawson held, Russell was wrong to hold that the speaker's statement is false in a context where there is no unique King of France. A statement is false only if things are not as it says them to be. But in the absence of a unique King of France, the statement lacks content, so that there is no such thing as the way it says things to be. In such a circumstance, the statement must be counted neither true nor false.

Philosophers continue to discuss whether this objection to Russell's theory is the devastating blow that Strawson continued to believe it to be. The article's enduring importance, however, does not depend upon the answer.

In the course of explaining his objection to Russell, Strawson was led to distinguish carefully between, for example, the declarative sentences of a language and the statements that people make by uttering those sentences.

Any satisfactory account of truth and of meaning must respect these distinctions, and his way of drawing them has survived the test of time to become canonical. His use of the notion of a presupposition, moreover, encouraged empirical linguists to investigate more generally the way in which different sorts of utterance carry presuppositions. Even where their theories supersede his work, they remain rooted in it.

Peter Frederick Strawson was born in London in 1919, the second of four children of a schoolmaster. He was educated at Christ's College, Finchley, and in 1937 he went up to St John's College, Oxford, with an open scholarship in English. Until the end of his life he had by heart large tracts of English verse and prose. Immediately on arriving at Oxford, however, he changed to read for the Honour School of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, in which he graduated with second-class honours three years later.

Even at the time this classification was widely recognised to have been a

mistake. By the summer of 1940 many of the younger dons at Oxford had been, or were about to be, called up into the Armed Forces, so the task of examining was borne disproportionately by older figures less receptive to the glimmerings of a fresh approach to philosophical questions.

Strawson was called up on graduation and served with the Royal Artillery and then with the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers from which he was demobilised in 1946 with the rank of captain.

He started his academic career as an assistant lecturer in philosophy at the University College of North Wales but remained at Bangor for only a year. In 1946 he sat for the John Locke Scholarship at Oxford, and his papers won him not only the prize but also the patronage of Gilbert Ryle, who recommended him for a vacant post at University College. He became a lecturer there in 1947, and was elected a Fellow of the college a year later.

Strawson was a highly successful undergraduate tutor. Unfailingly courteous and equable (his oldest friends can scarcely recall him raising his voice), he was also extraordinarily patient. These qualities, alongside his emerging distinction, helped to attract many bright young men to read Greats and PPE at University College.

In tutorials with him they would have the enviable experience of seeing a first-rate mind grapple effectively with apparently intractable philosophical problems. Many were thus inspired to become professional philosophers themselves, but even those who made their mark in other fields retained memories of his teaching which, if not quite fond (his tutorials were too exacting for that choice of word to be happy), could still inspire awe decades later.

One former pupil, indeed, made a generous benefaction to the college to provide a room in which Strawson could work after his retirement, and some of his travels in later life were smoothed by others conveniently en poste as ambassador here or high commissioner there.

Strawson believed that his 20-odd years as a tutorial Fellow had been of great value to his philosophical development. Certainly, they gave him command of a range of philosophical issues unmatched by any philosopher now living. That range in turn enabled him to transcend the fine distinctions and precisely directed criticisms that had first made his name, and to compose series of lectures, in due course published as books, which placed particular concepts and problems in a perspective which made visible their relations and connections.

In the first of these, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (1952), the concepts in question were the basic logical notions, and the work is marred by an incomplete mastery of the techniques of modern logic.

However, his next book, *Individuals* (1959), a study of substance concepts, is one of the masterpieces of analytic philosophy. Building on insights from

Aristotle, Strawson was able to discern, behind the surface variegation of natural languages, certain comparatively (and explicably) firm and permanent features of our natural “conceptual scheme” . He was then able to describe what he had discerned in prose whose rhythms respond perfectly to the camber of his argument, and whose balanced periods attain a Mozartian grace.

This investigation, an exercise in what he called “descriptive metaphysics” , led naturally to *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), an illuminating study of what he took to be Kant’ s similar enterprise. Its occasional errors of scholarship (Strawson’ s German was never better than rudimentary) are far outweighed by an imaginative insight into what his great Prussian predecessor might have been attempting in the darker passages of the *Critique of Pure Reason* .

With an oeuvre of this quality Strawson was the obvious successor to Ryle when the latter retired from the Waynflete Chair of Metaphysical Philosophy in 1968; on election he became a Fellow of Magdalen College.

As a supervisor of graduate students, he was just as effective as he had been as a tutor of undergraduates. He had no interest, though, in gathering disciples; although aspiring young philosophers came from all over the world to sit at his feet, he always wished to attach them not to himself, but to the highest standards of philosophical argument.

As an academic administrator, he was punctilious, though his silent yet manifest amusement at the many committee meetings he was required to attend as a professor perhaps betrayed a sense that such gatherings provided better opportunities for the observation of human folly than for the dispensation of philosophic wisdom.

Some who prized his judgment regretted, indeed, his reluctance to exert his influence more widely by cutting more of a public figure in the university. Those who knew him, though, will not regret, for they will be unable to imagine otherwise, the quiet and undictatorial way in which he helped to lead the sub-faculty of philosophy.

While he was a professor, and later, Strawson continued to publish. *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974) explores how natural languages manifest the conceptual scheme he had described in *Individuals*. After years of unjust neglect, it is gaining attention from empirical linguists. *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (1985), the text of the Woodbridge Lectures he delivered at Columbia University in 1983, presents what is perhaps too eirenic a view of the longstanding controversy over scepticism.


His last book marked a return to form. For some years, Strawson had given a series of lectures at Oxford with the purpose of explaining his distinctive conception of philosophy to beginners. An invitation to deliver these lectures at the Collège de France led him to publish them in his fine, classical French under the title *Analyse et Métaphysique* (1985), and an English version followed in 1992. In this he describes lucidly but with extraordinary compression, his conception of the philosopher’ s task as that of tracing the connections which interanimate our most basic concepts.

Strawson retired from his Chair in 1987, though he taught as a visiting professor in the US as late as 1991, and he remained an active member of philosophical discussion groups in Oxford until the end of his life. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1960, and a foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1971. He was an Honorary Fellow of St John's, University and Magdalen Colleges. He was knighted in 1977.

Strawson's was an unusually happy life, for it seemed at all times to be singularly without impediments. His powerful mind moved naturally, swiftly and easily among problems whose interest for him was inexhaustible. He produced without struggle, though not of course without great industry, a flow of work which justly brought him high recognition. But he was also easily, and sometimes profoundly, pleased by many other things: by literature in both English and French; by the cities, art, and sunshine of Europe; by the English countryside; by gossip; by frivolity; by food and wine; by charming and sophisticated company. It was hard for his friends, who knew the whole varied range of his tastes and talents, to believe that he was ever bored.

Strawson is survived by his wife, Grace Hall Martin, whom he married in 1945, and by their two sons and two daughters. His son, Galen, is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Reading and at the City University of New York Graduate Centre.

Sir Peter Strawson, philosopher, was born on November 23, 1919. He died on February 13, 2006, aged 86.



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