

On the Relativity of “Really”:

A Critique of Strawson on Science and Perception

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1. *Introduction*

1.1 In his article “Perception and Its Objects”, P. F. Strawson defends a common-sense standpoint on the nature of perception against its scientifically-inspired opponents. In order to do so, he must establish that these standpoints, despite appearances, do not really contradict each other. However, I think that in this case the appearances are not deceiving. First, I explain the apparent conflict between the scientific standpoint and the common-sense human perceptual standpoint. Next, I outline Strawson’s attempt to reconcile the two via the notion of relativization to a standpoint. Finally, I argue that Strawson’s attempt fails because in the end the notion of relativization to a standpoint is incoherent.

2. *Opposing Standpoints*

2.1 In the last few pages of his article “Perception and Its Objects”, Strawson tries to reconcile two opposing standpoints: the scientific standpoint and the common-sense human perceptual standpoint. According to the first, objects do not possess any properties except those which our best physical theories attribute to them (Strawson, pp. 98-9)¹. Physical objects do not, for example, have sensible properties such as colors. According to the second, in cases of veridical perception physical objects really do possess the sensible properties they seem to have (Strawson, p. 100 and p. 103), colors being a prominent example. Because perception is *direct* according to the common-sense standpoint (Strawson, p. 106), colors cannot be properties of perceptual intermediaries such as sense-data. So if there are any cases of veridical color experience, at least some colors must be properties of the external, physical objects of our perception; otherwise all color experience is illusory.

¹ This and all subsequent page references are to *Vision and Mind*.

2.2 It would thus seem that we face a dilemma. If the scientific standpoint is correct, we are the victims of a massive amount of perceptual error. If the common-sense standpoint is correct, our best physical theories are radically incomplete, for then there is a large class of properties that they cannot account for, and do not even acknowledge to exist. Yet it seems that one or the other of these views must be right: Either colors are “out there” waiting to be perceived in the external, physical world, or they are not. Is there any way out of this? Can we have our chromatic cake and eat it too?

3. *Strawson's Aim: Reconciliation through Relativization*

3.1 Strawson apparently thinks that we can. In order to do so, we must take a cue from the way we talk when we ascribe visual properties to things. For the same thing may look one way to Jones in one circumstance, another way to Smith in the same circumstance, and still another way to Jones in a different circumstance. The same mountains might look red at a certain distance in a certain light and blue at a different distance in a different light (Strawson, pp. 106-7). And the same fabric that looks purple in one light may really be green (Strawson, p. 107). Such property ascriptions are relative to a perceptual point of view that is regarded as standard, and we only recognize the relativity when things deviate from this standard (Strawson, p. 107). Sometimes, though, we can change the standard: “Magnified, the fabric appears as printed with tiny blue and yellow dots. So those are the colors it really is. Does this ascription contradict ‘it’s really green’? No; for the standard has shifted” (Strawson, p. 107). And of course we can also shift the standard back (Strawson, p. 107). Strawson thinks that we can give a similar account of the apparent conflict between the scientific and common-sense standpoints. The difference is that in this case we do not shift from one perceptual viewpoint to another, but from a perceptual viewpoint to a scientific one. Thus ascriptions of color are, for example, true relative to the common-sense human perceptual standpoint, and false relative to the scientific standpoint. As Strawson rightly notes, “This method of reconciling scientific and common-sense realism requires us to recognise a certain relativity in our conception of the real properties of physical objects” (Strawson p. 108).

4. *Critique of Relativization*

4.1 Is this relativity compatible with realism? I think not. For if realism is true, in cases of veridical perception we perceive things just as they really are. But if Strawson is right, we cannot speak of “the way things really are” independently of some standpoint. What then can it mean to say that there are cases of veridical perception? It can only mean that we perceive things as they really are *in a certain standpoint*. The question now becomes, “What is it for things to *be* a certain way *in* a certain standpoint?”

4.2 Let us elaborate on this a bit. To make things clearer, suppose that instead of saying, e.g., “That mountain is really blue”, we turn ‘really’ into a sentential operator and say: “It is really the case that that mountain is blue.” Now we can ask, for all sentences P, does “It is really the case that P” entail P? If it does—and it certainly seems to—how can divergent property ascriptions in different standpoints *not* be inconsistent? For then the sentence “It is really the case that that mountain is blue”, asserted in whatever standpoint you please, entails “That mountain is blue.” Thus, if someone asserts “It is not the case that it is really the case that that mountain is blue” in any standpoint, this entails “It is not the case that that mountain is blue”, and that clearly contradicts “That mountain is blue.” And this is problematic for Strawson’s view, for according to his view these seemingly inconsistent sentences *could* be truly asserted in different standpoints.

4.3 Strawson could reply that there is no trouble here, for we have failed to index our sentences to the different standpoints. Since on his view sentences are only true in a certain standpoint, we should add in indexes to standpoints to make this fact explicit. Thus, instead of plain old “P” we have “P-in-standpoint-S”. So what we *can* say is that “It is really the case that P-in-standpoint-S” entails “P-in-standpoint-S”, and Strawson would say there is nothing wrong with the latter sentence. For him “P-in-standpoint-S” and “not-P-in-standpoint-R” are not genuinely inconsistent, because P and not-P are indexed to different standpoints. But I think such indexing makes sense only if the indexes make sense. Can we make any sense of a sentence’s being true only *in* a certain standpoint? I think the answer is “no”, as I will now argue.

4.4 As we have seen, Strawson thinks that divergent ascriptions of properties, when relativized to different standpoints, are not genuinely inconsistent with each other: “The

appearance of both volatility and conflict vanishes when we acknowledge the relativity of our reallys” (Strawson p. 107). If that is so, why do ascriptions of properties need to be relativized? For there are statements in different standpoints that do not even *seem* to contradict each other. I can say, concerning the very same chair, both “That chair is wooden” and “That chair is made of quarks.” These sentences, though they *may* be relativized to different standpoints, could also be truly asserted in a single standpoint. Yet, if Strawson is right, the sentence “That chair is brown” can be truly asserted in the human perceptual standpoint and the sentence “That chair has no color” can be truly asserted in the scientific standpoint, though presumably they could *not* be truly asserted in a single standpoint. While Strawson does say (p. 108) that we can combine two standpoints in a single sentence, I think he means that different *aspects* of the sentence belong to different standpoints, not that the whole sentence does. As I understand Strawson, one can say something like: “Considered from the scientific standpoint, that chair has no color, but considered from the human perceptual standpoint, that chair is brown.” This combines two standpoints in a single sentence. But surely one could *not* say something like: “Considered from the scientific standpoint, that chair has no color, but considered from the scientific standpoint, that chair is also brown.” So the fact—if it is a fact—that we can combine two standpoints in a single sentence does not entail that we can truly assert inconsistent sentences in a single standpoint.

4.5 Now, suppose someone utters the sentence “That chair is brown” in a common-sense perceptual context and then utters the sentence “That chair is brown” again, this time in a scientific context. That sentence either has the same truth conditions in both contexts or different ones, assuming that it is not without truth conditions in either of them. If it has the same truth conditions, it cannot be true in one context and false in the other, on pain of contradiction. Thus if “That chair is brown” is true in the human perceptual standpoint it is also true in the scientific standpoint, and so it cannot also be the case that “That chair has no color” is true in the scientific standpoint. Conversely, if “That chair has no color” is true in the scientific standpoint, it is also true in the human perceptual standpoint, assuming that sentence has the same truth conditions when uttered in a common-sense perceptual context. And if that is so it cannot also be the case that “That chair is brown” is true in the human perceptual standpoint. So if these sentences have the same truth conditions in both standpoints, they must have the same truth value in each of them, and Strawson’s view falls apart. If they have different truth conditions in the different

standpoints, it is no surprise that each could have a different truth value in different standpoints; for the fact that the same sentence can have different truth values if it is assigned different truth conditions is a truism, and is something that can hardly resolve the conflict between the standpoints of human perception and science. And that means that Strawson's account cannot do what it was meant to do.

5. Conclusion

5.1 In conclusion, Strawson's account simply will not work. If one finds it appealing, I think it is because the notion of relativization to a standpoint has a certain charm, for it gives one the thrill of flirting with a contradiction. But we have seen that ascriptions of properties are either consistent or inconsistent: If they are consistent there is no need to relativize to a standpoint, and if they are not consistent, no relativization can reconcile them. Thus Strawson's view is contradictory, and for that reason it is consistent neither with realism nor with anything else. Its aim to reconcile science and the common-sense view of perception is certainly praiseworthy, but it remains a noble attempt to do the impossible.

References

Strawson, P.F., "Perception and Its Objects", in *Vision and Mind: Selected Readings in the Phenomenology of Perception*. Alva Noe and Evan Thompson (eds.). The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England 2002.