

On Reidentifying Particulars

As early as 1890 William James remarked that a “sense of sameness is the very keel and backbone of our thinking” ([4], p. 459). In *Individuals* [6], Peter Strawson takes a similar line of thought. While first arguing that we possess a *unified spatio-temporal framework of knowledge of particulars*—viz. a unified conceptual scheme—fitted together by means of identifying references to certain particulars, in the second chapter he turns to establishing that—according to this ordinary conceptual scheme—the reidentification of particulars persisting through time must be possible. For otherwise we would lack the means of merging the piecemeal impressions perception provides into a holistic picture.

In this essay I shall first provide some background on the notions of *identity* and *(re)identification of particulars*. I shall then, in section 2, come to outline Strawson’s argument for his claim that particular reidentification is a necessary condition for our having the conceptual scheme we do. In section 3, I shall consider a criticism on Strawson’s account: Fred Dretske [2] attempts to show that there might be relations other than particular-identity “adequate to support a spatial comparison between different occasions” ([2], p. 137). Finally, in section 4, I shall come to conclude that Dretske’s remark is, though perhaps an interesting consideration, irrelevant to Strawson’s argument.

1 What are Identical Particulars?

Examples of particulars, as Strawson conceives them, are material objects, people, and their shadows,¹ but not colors, numbers and properties.² According to *Leibniz’s Law* identical particulars share all their properties. If A and B are identical then A has every property of B and vice versa. Strawson, however, distinguishes between two kinds of identity: *numerical identity* and *qualitative identity*. While the former describes a relation holding between one thing and itself, such that there is really only one thing (A and B are the very same entity), the latter allows for there being actually two things sharing all their *non-spatial* properties, i.e. A and B are in fact distinct but not distinguishable other than from their spatio-temporal position. This distinction might be illustrated by Max Black’s famous example of two *indiscernible* (qualitatively identical) spheres in empty space [1]. Although both spheres have all the same (non-spatial) properties,³ they are really two (not numerically identical).

¹I will use the terms ‘particular’, ‘object’, and ‘thing’ interchangeably hereafter. Their application is not restricted to non-living things and meant to include, since the special question of personal identity is not in focus here, what we ordinarily refer to as ‘persons’ or ‘individuals’.

²For present purposes let us accept this view and set metaphysical debates concerning the ontological status of abstract objects (such as numbers etc.) aside.

³In Black’s example, however, the spheres do not even differ in their spatial properties. Since they are located in empty space and symmetrically related to one another they do share all their spatial and

Despite possible complaints about the blurriness of this distinction, for current purposes it does the job: *reidentification* of particulars is recognizing numerically identical entities, viz. identifying the very same individual and no other and differentiating it from other (similar) co-existing entities. Although numerical identity implies qualitative identity,⁴ it is important to note that qualitative identity is not sufficient for numerical identity (which is exactly what Black's case is intended to show). For if we reidentify something we need to pick out the very same entity uniquely (say, one of the spheres) as opposed to qualitatively identical things that really are distinct (the other sphere).

As long as we are merely concerned with cases of continuous observation, the above might be considered an easy matter. But how, for example, can I be assured of the identity of Toby yesterday with Toby tomorrow if I have not seen him today? An evil daemon could have replaced Toby by Tim, a qualitatively identical twin today; and if so, I could not have noticed this exchange for my observation was interrupted.⁵ Thus, a skeptic would argue, it is unreasonable to suppose Toby yesterday is identical to Toby tomorrow. However, we usually do. But what warrants our belief that the very same individual has persisted through time? The answer, Strawson argues, essentially turns on the nature of our unified conceptual scheme: "Whatever our account [of our unified conceptual framework] may be, it must allow for discontinuities and limits of observation." ([6], p. 33) Put in a nutshell, identity must hold over time—even if our observation is non-continuous—because reidentification is a necessary condition for our having the conceptual scheme we do, viz. a unified spatio-temporal framework of knowledge of particulars. Strawson's argument for this claim shall be considered in the following section.

2 A Transcendental Argument

In *Individuals* Strawson argues that in order for us to possess our unified conceptual scheme—which, as he shows prior to this argument, must be the case since otherwise there would be no way for us to meaningfully communicate with others—it is necessary that we allow for particular reidentification:

There is no doubt that we have the idea of a single spatio-temporal system of material things; the idea of every material thing at any time being related, in various ways at various times, to every other at every time. There is no doubt at all that this is our conceptual scheme. Now I say that a condition of our having this conceptual scheme is the unquestioning acceptance of particular-identity in at least some cases of non-continuous observation.

relational properties and are nevertheless actually two.

⁴At least this seems to be true on Strawson's view. In general, however, an endurantist would have to assume that if an individual's non-essential properties change this does not usually create a new (numerically distinct) individual.

⁵The reader might object that I should recognize a change in personality as soon as I meet Tim (whom I falsely assume to be Toby). However, for the example's sake even such properties as personality traits and mental states are subject to the twins' identity, i.e. Tim and Toby are indistinguishable physically as well as psychologically. Whoever is not willing to imagine such a case might go with two evenly sized perfectly round balls of identical appearance and made of the same material.

([6], p. 35; his emphasis)

The argument for the latter claim sets out by assuming the skeptic was right in holding particulars do not persist through time. It ends with the conclusion that this assumption has to be rejected. The skeptic's position, Strawson claims, is "necessarily avoidable" ([6], p. 33). In the remainder of this section the argument shall be sketched.

- (1) Suppose we were never willing to ascribe particular identity in cases of non-continuous observation.

Going back to the case illustrated above, this means that my recognizing Toby tomorrow as the same Toby I met yesterday is false. I am by no means entitled to assume he is the very same person.⁶ Having David Hume's famous say, "[t]his propensity to bestow an identity on our resembling perceptions, produces the fiction of a continu'd existence"—a fiction that "as well as the identity, is really false" ([3], p. 150).

If the skeptic was right, Strawson continues, there would be no means by which we could combine all our discontinuous perceptions into a holistic framework.

- (2) If (1) is true then (3) holds.

- (3) Each new stretch of observation yields a new spatio-temporal system.

Since we cannot, *ex hypothesi*, reidentify any object observed at time t_1 with one observed at a later time t_2 where there is an interruption between observation at t_1 and t_2 , we are inclined to say that the spatial system our observation at t_1 yields does not share a single particular with that originating from our observation at t_2 .

- (4) All these systems would be "wholly independent" ([6], p. 35) of one another since they are constituted of and only of the particulars they contain.

As Strawson argues, a skeptic would be committed to (4) simply because she has no way of putting things together (since she is unable reidentify any objects). If (4) is true, Strawson continues, then the question of identity is not a sensible one to ask; for not even the general possibility of there being the same item at different stretches of observation would exist.

- (5) The question of identity does only make sense if different systems (can) share at least some item.

The transition from (4) to (5) might seem problematic for two reasons: first, (5) now reflects Strawson's view; second, it needs a further assumption. Strawson does not make this explicit here, but as is obvious from his discussions, he clearly assumes particulars to be enduring entities.⁷ Where this assumption originates from our experience, i.e. endurantism is part of *how we conceive the world*. Thus, (5) is justified. From here, Strawson turns back to the skeptic's view.

⁶Note that an obvious problem with this formulation of the skeptic's position is that it already presupposes the possibility of particular reidentification, the very thing it intends to deny.

⁷Endurantists claim that objects are wholly present at any given point in time. Their properties at each time t_i are relations between them and a certain part i of time. This view contrasts with the perdurantist's position of objects consisting in temporal parts (or slices) having the properties of a part

- (6) Since—according to (4)—it is not the case that different systems share at least some item, it is not a meaningful question to ask for identity of particulars across non-continuous stretches of observation if (3) is true.

We have already seen that for the skeptic (3) is beyond doubt. Therefore, the question of identity across non-continuous stretches of observation would not be meaningful for her.

However, Strawson replies, we do ordinarily ask questions of this kind, indicating our conceptual scheme permits them.

- (7) Our ordinary conceptual scheme permits such questions; thus they are not meaningless.

Once again it is obvious from his reasoning that Strawson assumes our every-day language to mirror our general conceptual scheme. By way of analyzing how we speak, he thinks, we can eventually understand our thinking. Since we can only think—and thus utter—what our ordinary conceptual scheme permits, meaningful linguistic utterances indicate the structure of our conceptual scheme.

Now, because we can meaningfully make inquiries about identity across stretches of non-continuous observation, our ordinary conceptual scheme requires the possibility of reidentification of particulars (from (5)).

- (8) It is a necessary condition of our unified system of spatio-temporal relations that its subsystems are not independent of one another.

Stretches of non-continuous observation do not yield independent systems but rather ‘subsystems’ of a single unified spatio-temporal system—our general conceptual scheme—that share at least some parts. This, finally, is Strawson’s deathblow against the skeptic. By *modus tollens*⁸, given (2) and having rejected (3) by means of (7) and (8) we have to deny (1) and thus must—at least in some cases—be willing to ascribe particular-identity. Hence,

- (9) Reidentification of particulars persisting through time must be possible.

More specifically, as Strawson adds, these shared particulars that can be reidentified across various subsystems, have to be spatially extended, enduring basic particulars, viz. material bodies.

There are several things to note at this point. First, Strawson has to make two essential assumptions in order to get his refutation of the skeptic going: our possession of a unified conceptual scheme, and that objects endure through time. Were we to reject only one of those, his argument would collapse. Second, as turns out later in Strawson’s discussion, his account of the identity of things seems to built upon the

i at time t_i . However, the details shall not concern us here. For current purposes just note that the question of identity could still make sense for the perdurantist (but not the endurantist) if comparing two systems that do not share a whole particular: the perdurantist could claim there to be distinct items that in fact are temporal slices of the same particular. Strawson himself would probably refute such reasoning on the grounds that endurantism best reflects our ordinary experience.

⁸ $a \rightarrow b, \neg b$ therefore $\neg a$

identity of places. This is problematic, as the ontological status of places is not entirely clear. Furthermore, the identity of places, mutually depends upon the identity of things, which raises a circularity problem. Though Strawson himself argues that the apparent circle be incomplete, Bernard Williams [7] raises the worry that it might *de facto* be complete. Third, but not at the core of our considerations here either, the ontological priority of material bodies is debatable.

In the following section I will turn to Dretske's criticism on Strawson's account of re-identification. The bottomline is that Dretske attempts to show how there might be relations other than particular-identity connecting the different subsystems of our general conceptual scheme.

3 Dretske's Criticism

As his argument demonstrates, Strawson thinks that different schemes can be related only if they share a particular. This, however, might be fallacious. As Dretske [2] argues, there could be relations other than particular-identity "adequate to support a spatial comparison between different occasions" ([2], p. 137), be it e.g. causal or similarity based relations. A common reference point (a shared basic particular) might thus not be necessary to relate spatial systems from successive observations. If this is right, Dretkse continues, Strawson's argument fails to establish the necessity of particular reidentification. I shall present this criticism in more detail below.

On Dretske's view, any relational account of space and time faces a dilemma when confronted with non-continuous observation. Either it is (a) formally inconsistent or it (b) cannot define the 'same place' at different points in time. Since Strawson proposes our unified conceptual framework be a system of spatio-temporal relations he is committed to this problem—and, as Dretske sees it, Strawson does not offer a satisfying solution.

(a) On the first horn of the dilemma objects persist through change. If so, their relational properties undergo alternations throughout the objects' existence (for instance, Toby could move around a table). Since we are considering a relationsist view the occurrence of different spatial properties at different times must be expressed in relational terms. But this seems impossible; as Dretske puts it "[l]acking such devices as tensed predication⁹ [...] the relational idiom does not afford a consistent means of describing this sort of change" ([2], p. 133; my footnote). We would have to express—in purely relational terms—that one object, say a table, can be at the left of another, say Toby, at time t_1 while being at its right at time t_2 . Even if we were to assume a vocabulary for such temporal relations, Dretske argues, claims like "Toby is standing to the right of the table and Toby is standing to the left of the table." remain formally inconsistent for they require temporal elements other than relations to turn out non-contradictory.

I am not entirely convinced Dretske is right here. Depending on how we modify

⁹Examples of tensed properties are 'presently being in Osnabrück', 'having written this paper on Monday' and 'going to go on a holiday next week'.

our vocabulary I take it to be at least generally conceivable that an object's having different properties at different times could be captured in relational terms. Here again I shall not enter the debate for it will not heavily impact the arguments at issue.

(b) On the second horn of the dilemma objects do not persist through change. As a consequence, Dretske argues, we do not have a permanent reference system available; everytime something changes or our observation of a particular was interrupted it could really go out of existence and something new could come into existence. Problematically, then there is no way in talking about identical particulars or the same place for neither could be identified across different times. It thus seems as if we are either committed to some sort of persisting objects or forced to give a new definition—one that has to be independent of particulars for otherwise those would, again, have to persist—for reidentifying places such that we can fit together the subsystems. Since Dretske already blocked the way for the former alternative in his considerations concerning (a), there is only one way to go: a new definition for *being in the same place*. He offers the following:

X is in the same place as $Y =_{df}$ For all W , if W is a reference object, then if X is spatially related to W by R , then there exists a Z such that W is exactly similar to Z (in all non-spatial respects) and Y is spatially related to Z by R . ([2], p. 138)

This way, Dretske seeks to avoid Strawson's need for reidentifiable particulars while still having the means for piecing various stretches of non-continuous observation together. Therefore it is possible to have a unified conceptual scheme even without particular reidentification, and thus Strawson's necessity claim is undermined—or at least so Dretske argues.

Before I come to evaluate Dretske's criticism on Strawson's argument let me briefly point to some problems with the suggestions made.¹⁰ First, there is no way to ensure the subsystems we want to connect do share the same sort of geometry. Second, on Dretske's definition it remains entirely unclear how one is to determine the identity of a relation R_1 (holding between W and X) and a relation R_2 (holding between Z and Y) independently of particular reidentification. Third, and probably most damaging to Dretske's account, given his definition more than one object can be identical to itself: it is possible for two exactly similar—i.e. qualitatively but not numerically identical—objects W and Z to be in different places while bearing each the same relation R to X and Y , respectively. As an example consider Black's spheres again. Now replace one of the spheres with X being spatially related to W by R and the other by Y being spatially related to Z by R , where W and Z as well as X and Y are qualitatively identical. According to Dretske's definition, we would now be inclined to say that since W and Z are in the same place—which in fact is not the case. As already Nell [5] usefully remarks "Dretske's objections fall short on two counts; not only does his counter-system fail to pick out 'the same place' uniquely, it presupposes the very spatial framework at issue in speaking of 'the same relation, R'" ([5], p. 189).

¹⁰The following partly goes back to Edward Nell [5].

Despite these problems with Dretske's suggestion, his approach to the problem of persistence of particulars crucially differs from Strawson's. While Dretske avoids the first horn of the dilemma and takes the second, Strawson takes the first and avoids the second instead. The trouble with the second horn, viz. *(b)*, is that it offers no way of providing a permanent reference system for there are no persisting objects; this is essentially the kind of claim Strawson refuted with his transcendental argument. While he can now simply take the first horn this way is not open to Dretske, who holds that persisting objects give rise to formal inconsistency. Strawson, on the other hand, does not consider such problems. For him, the commitment to endurantism appears to not actually be a problem. In fact, he is assuming it anyway because persistence is part of our ordinary experience. Thus it must be appropriate when dealing with our general conceptual scheme. Since Dretske denies the very possibility of persistence he has to get round the problems in the second horn. In order to do so, he offers an alternative conceptual scheme without reidentification of particulars. Finally, Dretske argues he thereby undermines Strawson's argument for the necessity of particular reidentification.

However, as I will show in the last section, even if Dretske's counter-system was a feasible suggestion it would by no means undermine Strawson's argument. For Dretske and Strawson have indeed different objectives.

4 Cross Purposes

Thus far, Strawson's argument and Dretske's criticism have been outlined. Put briefly, Dretske claims that Strawson's argument fails to establish the necessity of particular reidentification. This is right insofar as Strawson really does not make such a general claim. Rather, as Strawson remarks early in the book, his considerations are intended "not to say that our concepts might not have been different, had the nature of our experience been fundamentally different. ([6], p. 29), and that "[f]or the time being [he] shall leave aside such possibilities, and raise, instead, questions about our own conceptual scheme." ([6], p. 30)

Strawson's considerations are thus restricted to our own, actual—not a possible—conceptual scheme; and so is his necessity claim. It is not claiming other conceptual schemes require particular reidentification or even that other conceptual schemes independent of reidentification are impossible.

Rather than disagreeing about the necessity of particular reidentification Strawson and Dretske talk past each other. Their major disagreement lies elsewhere: in the question of whether or not particulars persist through time. Here, again, Strawson bases his considerations on how we generally perceive the world. Since persistence is part and parcel of our ordinary experience for him persistence—more precisely endurance—of particulars inevitably (and irrespectively of any formal considerations like the ones Dretske makes) follows. It almost seems to me that here again they really have different objectives.

In the end, what seems like a serious struggle turns out to be talking at cross-

purposes: while Strawson wants to investigate our *actual* conceptual scheme Dretske tries to provide a *possible* alternative system. Such remarks, however, are simply irrelevant to Strawson's argument.

If Strawson is right in claiming that particular reidentification is the necessary means for fitting together the piecemeal impressions perception provides, viz. our having the unified conceptual scheme we do, then, no matter whether or not Dretske's counter-system could work, probably James was (almost) right in suggesting that identity is "the only vehicle by which the world hangs together" ([4], p. 459)—it serves as a means for unifying the world as we actually (not possibly) perceive it.

References

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