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KNOWLEDGE AND ITS OBJECTS: REVISITING *THE BOUNDS OF SENSE*

Quassim Cassam

1

These are the opening words of *The Bounds of Sense*:

It is possible to imagine kinds of worlds that are very different from the world as we know it. It is possible to describe types of experience very different from the experience we actually have. But not any purported grammatically permissible description of a possible kind of experience would be a truly intelligible description. There are limits to what we can conceive of, or make intelligible to ourselves, as a possible general structure of experience (1966: 15).

The investigation of these limits is an investigation of the ‘necessary structure of experience’ (1966: 15-16). This is Kant’s programme in the first *Critique* and also Strawson’s programme in *The Bounds of Sense*. Yet Kant and Strawson conceive of this programme in very different ways, and Strawson’s conception of it is in many ways even harder to pin down than Kant’s. Fifty years after its publication, *The Bounds of Sense* remains a scintillating book, a brilliant contribution to philosophy and its history. Yet there are important questions about Strawson’s project and his methodology to which *The Bounds of Sense* does not provide clear answers. In his later work Strawson provides clues to his earlier thinking but these clues have rarely been explored.

The project of uncovering the supposed necessary structure of experience presupposes answers to at least these three questions:

1. The purpose question: what is the point or purpose of a philosophical investigation of the necessary structure of experience? Is such an investigation supposed to be intrinsically worthwhile, philosophically speaking, or does it serve some other philosophical purpose? What other purpose might that be?

2. The source question: what is the source or basis of limiting or necessary general features of experience? For any feature F that is identified as a necessary feature of experience the question can be asked: why is F necessary, or what makes F a necessary feature of experience?
3. The means question: by what means is it possible for philosophy to establish the necessary structure of experience? How can necessary features of experience be identified?

Strawson identifies Kant's responses to these questions and rejects all of them. An important issue facing sympathetic readers of *The Bounds of Sense* is whether Strawson has answers to these same questions and, if so, whether they are any better than Kant's.

Kant's overall aim in the first *Critique* is, of course, to explain how synthetic *a priori* knowledge is possible and this provides his answer to the purpose question: the ultimate purpose of his investigation of the necessary structure of experience is to explain how synthetic *a priori* knowledge is possible. 'Propositions descriptive of that structure' have a 'distinctive character or status' (Strawson 1966: 44) and Kant tries to capture this distinctive character or status by classifying such propositions as synthetic *a priori*. Other synthetic *a priori* knowledge flows from our knowledge of the necessary structure of experience.

Here is how Strawson describes Kant's answer to the source question: 'whenever [Kant] found limiting or necessary general features of experience, he declared their source to lie in our cognitive constitution (1966: 15). For example, Kant holds – and Strawson agrees with him- that all the sensibly given material of experience must be ordered in space and time. For Kant, this is a reflection of the contingent fact that space and time are the forms of human sensibility. Since our experience is, in this way, constrained by our cognitive constitution, necessary general features of our experience can be discovered by investigating that constitution, and this is Kant's answer to the means question. An investigation of

necessary general features of experience that have their source in our cognitive constitution is in some sense psychological but because Kant regards propositions describing the necessary structure of experience as *a priori* his psychology is ‘transcendental’ rather than empirical. Frustratingly, he does little to explain how a transcendental investigation of the necessary structure of experience is itself possible.

Strawson has no time for any of this. He rejects Kant’s answer to the purpose question on the basis that Kant ‘nowhere gives even a moderately satisfactory theoretical account of the dichotomy between analytic and synthetic *a priori* propositions’ (1966: 43). He describes Kant’s answer to the source question as ‘incoherent’ (1966: 16), and he famously dismisses transcendental psychology as an ‘imaginary subject’ (1966: 32). Yet he remains sympathetic to a number of Kant’s specific claims about what experience must be like and argues that Kant’s conception of his own investigation masks ‘the real character of his inquiry’ (1966: 16). This makes it all the more pressing that in the course of unmasking the real character of Kant’s inquiry Strawson should himself supply satisfactory answers to the three questions. It is clear in retrospect that the challenge of understanding *The Bounds of Sense* is, in part, the challenge of understanding Strawson’s view of the purpose of his own investigation of the necessary general features of experience, the source of these features, and its underlying methodology.

2

The experience whose necessary structure is at issue in *The Bounds of Sense* requires both particular intuitions and general concepts.¹ That is, it involves the recognition of particular items as being of such and such a general kind. Relatedly, it is also self-conscious experience, in the sense that it involves subject of experiences being able to refer different experiences to ‘one identical subject of them all’ (1966: 101). Suppose, to use a label that Strawson doesn’t use, experience that has these features is described as *reflective* experience.

Regardless of whether experience *has* to be reflective, Strawson's interest is in the structure of reflective experience, and one of the central purposes of his investigation of its structure is to bring out the incoherence of certain philosophical accounts of this kind of experience. The primary target in this connection is the hypothesis of a pure 'sense-datum' experience. Sense-data are purely mental objects that aren't distinguishable from the subject's experiences of them.² Their *esse* is their *percipi* and the sense-datum hypothesis is that a possible reflective experience *could* be limited to experience of sense-data.

Strawson's 'objectivity argument' against this hypothesis turns on the idea that unless some of the concepts under which particular experienced objects are recognized as falling are concepts of mind-independent objects there will be no room in experience for 'the thought of experience itself' (1966: 107) – Strawson refers to this 'transcendental self-consciousness' – and hence no possibility of the subject of experience being able to refer different to one identical subject of them all.³ The upshot is that genuinely reflective experience must be structured so as to constitute experience or knowledge of mind-independent objects. This 'transcendental' argument against the hypothesis of a pure sense-datum experience is an anti-sceptical argument. If it works, then reflection on the necessary structure of reflective experience brings out the incoherence of supposing that it is possible for to have this kind of experience without also having knowledge of mind-independent objects. Reflective experience *requires* knowledge of objects.⁴

Writing nearly thirty years after the publication of *The Bounds of Sense* Strawson was prepared to concede that his objectivity argument 'fails of its purpose' (1995: 416) since even a purely sense-datum experience could be, under certain circumstances, transcendently self-conscious.⁵ By this point he was sceptical both about the *ability* of transcendental arguments to refute scepticism and the *need* to argue against scepticism. These arguments start from the premise that we have experience of some specific type, say reflective experience. They then

argue that a necessary condition of the possibility of such experience is that we know, or are in a position to know, certain truths about mind-independent reality. This type of argument has been described as ‘knowledge-directed’ (Peacocke 1989: 5) and Strawson’s argument against the hypothesis of a pure sense-datum experience in *The Bounds of Sense* is a good example of a knowledge-directed transcendental argument. Its central aim is to establish that experience ‘necessarily involves knowledge of *objects*, in the weighty sense’ (1966: 88), that is to say, knowledge of the existence of mind-independent objects. In later years Strawson was prepared to admit that his argument for this claim failed not just because of specific problems with the argument itself but also because he became increasingly sceptical about whether knowledge-directed transcendental arguments can ever deliver the goods. The right response to scepticism, Strawson later argues, is not to attempt to rebut it by argument, transcendental or otherwise, but to point out that it is ‘idle, unreal, a pretence’ (2008: 15).

Strawson’s doubts about the success of knowledge-directed transcendental arguments were sparked by the publication in 1968 of Stroud’s paper on transcendental arguments.⁶ For Stroud, the most that transcendental arguments can establish is the need for us to *believe* that certain propositions are true.⁷ Such ‘belief-directed’ transcendental arguments are less modest than they sound. Suppose that one were to argue not that experience necessarily involves *knowledge* of objects in the weighty sense but the *belief* that such objects exist and are among the objects of our experience. Yet there are sceptical philosophers who have experience but claim not to have this belief. Showing what people must *believe* is no easy task but Strawson was unimpressed by philosophers who claim not to believe in the existence of objects in the weighty sense.⁸ In conversation he argued that external world sceptics *do* believe in the existence of mind-independent objects, whatever they say in the course of philosophical discussion.⁹ They do have this belief because, as subjects of reflective experience, they must have it.¹⁰

Belief-directed transcendental arguments are still concerned with necessary conditions for experience and one might worry that even if *we* can't conceive of alternative ways in which conditions of the possibility of a certain kind of experience might be fulfilled 'this inability may simply be due to lack of imagination' (2008: 18). In some of his later work Strawson's response to this worry was to recommend, in place of the project of investigating the *necessary* structure of experience, the project of uncovering looser connections between 'the major structural features or elements of our conceptual scheme' (2008: 18). This would mark a return to the 'descriptive metaphysics' of *Individuals* and the abandonment of the ambitious programme of *The Bounds of Sense*.¹¹ For fans of the latter work, Strawson's willingness to give up on its anti-sceptical arguments and its attempts to uncover substantive necessary conditions of experience might come as a disappointment. But the best response to such disappointment is to come up with a knowledge-directed transcendental argument that actually works, and *The Bounds of Sense* shows just how difficult this is in practice.

3

What is Strawson's answer to the source question? If there are necessary general features of experience what accounts for their necessity or indispensability? At times it seems as though he is determined to say as little as possible in response to this question. In *The Bounds of Sense* he limits himself to the comment that to say that experience must exhibit such-and-such general features is just 'an abbreviated way of saying that we can form no coherent or intelligible conception of experience of a type of experience which does not exhibit those features' (1966: 271). But just because *we* can't form a coherent conception of experience that lacks a certain feature F how is it supposed to follow that experience *must* exhibit F? What we can make intelligible to ourselves is surely a reflection of our cognitive limitations, in which case it seems that Strawson's answer to the source question is not, in the end, so very different from Kant's. As Strawson asks

Is it not, after all, easy to read the very formulation of the programme – “the determination of the fundamental structure of any conception of experience such as *we* can make intelligible to ourselves” – in such a way as to suggest the Kantian-seeming thought that any necessary limits we find in such a conception are limits imposed by *our* capacities? (1966: 44).

Naturally he rejects this explanation of the feasibility of the Kantian programme but he offers no alternative explanation. Instead he simply says that he can see ‘no reason why any high doctrine at all should be necessary here’ and that ‘there is nothing here to demand, or permit, an explanation such as Kant’s’ (1966: 44). But even if this is right it doesn’t follow that there is nothing here to demand or permit *any* explanation.

In his later writings on Kant Strawson is much more forthcoming.¹² In these writings he sketches a realist, anti-Kantian argument of which there are hints in *The Bounds of Sense* but isn’t fully developed there. The key to this argument is the ‘trivial truth’ that ‘knowledge must be subject to its objects, epistemology to metaphysics’ (1992: 12). On this account, necessary general features of experience are a reflection of the nature of the *objects* of experience.¹³ For example, the reason that the sensibly given material of experience must be ordered in space and time, and that we cannot make ‘intelligible to ourselves’ any other conception of experience, is that the objects of experience are in themselves spatio-temporal. This argument moves from claims about the nature of reality to claims about the conditions under which it is possible to have experience of reality. Here is how Strawson, in *The Bounds of Sense*, characterizes the contrast between this approach and Kant’s approach:

Are the spatial and the temporal the ways in which particular instances [of general concepts] are ordered and *hence* the ways in which *we* become aware of them as ordered? Or are they *our* ways of becoming aware of particular instances as ordered and *hence* the ways in which they are ordered? (1966: 52).

The latter is Kant's view. Strawson doesn't explicitly endorse the first approach but it is clear that this is where his sympathies lie. For Kant, space and time are *subjectively* necessary conditions of experience, necessary conditions that are grounded solely in the nature of the subject of experience. It seems that for Strawson they are *objectively* necessary conditions, that is, conditions of experience that are grounded, at least in part, in the nature of the objects of experience.

Strawson is far more explicit about this in his later writings. There is particularly clear and unambiguous statement and defence of the realist approach in his paper 'Kant's New Foundations of Metaphysics'. His question here is whether, as Kant supposes, it is simply a bare inexplicable fact of human sensibility that we have just the spatial and temporal forms of sensibility that we do have and hence that our experience is spatio-temporally structured. This is Strawson's response:

Well, one very simple explanation, or ground of explanation, would be this: that the objects, including ourselves, *are* spatio-temporal objects, are *in* space and time – where by 'objects' is meant not *just* 'objects of possible knowledge' but objects, and ourselves, as they really are in themselves.... once granted that objects are themselves spatio-temporal, then space and time provide the uniquely necessary media for the realization of this possibility in sensible intuition of objects (1997: 239-40).

Here a claim about the necessary structure of experience is derived from an assumption about the nature of reality. Kant argues from mind to world, Strawson from world to mind, and there is no talk of what we can and can't make intelligible to ourselves.

On the latter account, there is no trace of the Kantian-seeming thought that the limits of experience are set by our cognitive capacities. Unlike *The Bounds of Sense*, 'Kant's New Foundations of Metaphysics' doesn't avoid the source question even though the answer it

offers is one that Kant would undoubtedly have found unacceptable. Are there good reasons not to accept this answer or to regard the argument of ‘Kant’s New Foundations’ as a clue to Strawson’s thinking in *The Bounds of Sense*? One consideration is that tracing the necessary structure of experience to the nature of the objects of experience might be hard to reconcile with the answer to the purpose question in *The Bounds of Sense*. The objects that are themselves spatio-temporal are also mind-independent. *Once granted* that the objects of our knowledge are mind-independent and spatio-temporal in themselves it might perhaps be legitimate to conclude that spatio-temporal intuition is a ‘uniquely fundamental and necessary condition of any empirical knowledge of objects’ (1997: 240). However, the assumptions about the nature of objects that Strawson makes in ‘Kant’s New Foundations’ certainly aren’t ones that would be acceptable to the external world sceptic against whom Strawson is arguing at various points in *The Bounds of Sense*. So it is quite understandable that Strawson’s answer to the source question in his later work is one that he doesn’t quite endorse in *The Bounds of Sense*. From the perspective of the latter work this answer would be question-begging, and this is one good reason not to regard the argument of ‘Kant’s New Foundations’ as a reliable clue to Strawson’s earlier thinking.

The fact that in his later work Strawson is prepared to base claims about the necessary structure of knowledge or experience on very substantive assumptions about the nature of objects in themselves is a clear indication that by this stage he has given up on the project of refuting scepticism or, for that matter, transcendental idealism. The untenability of these views is something that he now takes for granted and this frees him to represent knowledge as subject to its objects. However, there is a concern about this approach that has nothing to do with scepticism or transcendental idealism. The concern is that it doesn’t follow from the fact that objects are in themselves spatio-temporal that our *experience* of them must be spatio-

temporally structured. To suppose that it does follow is to derive epistemological conclusions from metaphysical premises in a way that is not obviously correct.

Consider, first, what it would be for the spatial and the temporal to be our ways of becoming aware of objects as ordered in relation to one another. A natural thought is that distinct objects are experienced as distinct by being experienced as being in different places, or existing at different times. For example, as long as two qualitatively identical spheres are experienced as being in different places they are experienced as numerically distinct. For ‘although distinguishable spatio-temporal objects falling under the same general concept might certainly be distinguishable in many other ways, the one way they *could not fail* to be distinguishable – the one way in which they are *necessarily* distinguishable – is in respect of their spatial and/or temporal position’ (1997: 240). Strawson’s way of making this point in *The Bounds of Sense* is to say that ‘space and time are the forms of particularity’ (1966: 52). That is, ‘spatio-temporal position provides the fundamental ground of distinction between one particular item and another of the same general type, hence the fundamental ground of identity of particular items’ (1966: 49). However, it does not follow that particulars can only be *experienced* as distinct from one another by being *experienced* as being in different locations. To recognize that this doesn’t follow is to recognize that there is no simple way to derive an epistemological conclusion from a metaphysical premise.

The point is easiest to see when the epistemological conclusion concerns the specific conditions under which two objects can be *judged* to be distinct. Suppose that a and b are particulars and I know that a is pink and b is not pink. Then, as Daniel Warren observes, ‘I can infer that a and b are numerically distinct. I don’t need to consider the spatial features of a and b in order to distinguish them’ (1998: 187). This is so even if spatio-temporal position is the fundamental ground of distinction between a and b. What about the conditions under which it is possible to *experience* two objects as numerically distinct? When senses other than

sight are considered there is again no easy transition from ‘space and time are the forms of particularity’ to ‘the only way to experience objects as numerically distinct is to experience them as occupying different positions in space or time’. After all, two people can be *heard* and therefore experienced as numerically distinct just by the different sounds of their voices, without being heard or experienced as occupying different positions in space or time.

This is not to say that epistemology can be completely detached from metaphysics or that the conditions for knowing have nothing to do with the conditions for being. There is a case to be made that the conditions for knowledge or experience of objects must at least be sensitive to the existence and identity conditions of ‘objects’.¹⁴ The challenge is to figure out what specific form this sensitivity has to take, that is, how the nature of objects of knowledge or experience is registered by the supposed necessary conditions for experience or knowledge of objects. This issue is not seriously addressed by Strawson either in *The Bounds of Sense* or in his later work, and this is a problem for his ‘realist’ response to the source question. There remains the alternative of returning to the idea that necessary features of experience are simply a reflection of what we can and can’t make intelligible to ourselves. Perhaps the concern that this makes Strawson’s answer to the source question rather similar to Kant’s answer can be addressed but this would require him to be more forthcoming than he is in *The Bounds of Sense*.

4

As Strawson notes, Kant sees the fact that limiting or necessary features of experience have their source in our cognitive constitution as ‘indispensable as an explanation of the possibility of knowledge of the necessary structure of experience’ (1966: 15-16). In other words, Kant thinks that there would be no way of accounting for our knowledge of what is necessary for experience if necessary features of experience did not have their source in our cognitive constitution. Assuming that necessary features of experience *do* have their source in

us, and are known to have their source in us, they can be discovered by knowing ourselves in the relevant respects. Transcendental philosophy thus becomes an exercise in self-knowledge, albeit self-knowledge of a rather peculiar and specialised kind, and is only possible because and to the extent that the relevant self-knowledge is possible.

What is Strawson's answer to the means question? Towards the end of *The Bounds of Sense* he says this:

There remains the question concerning the kind of argument, or test, by which certain features are shown to be indispensable in any coherent conception of experience we can form. Here we may remark to begin with that we are concerned with the temporally extended experience of conceptualizing or thinking beings. This conception is filled out, given content, by reference to general features of our actual experience which are exhibited in relations of progressive or mutual dependence (1966: 271-2).

To illustrate, one feature of our actual experience is that it is self-conscious: we can think of our experiences as *our* experiences. Another feature of our actual experience is that it is self-reflexive or 'transcendentally' self-conscious: it provides room for the thought of experience itself, in the sense that we are capable of thinking of our experiences as *experiences*. These two features of experience are related in the following way: if experience is self-conscious then it must be self-reflexive. This is the '*necessary* self-reflexiveness of experience' (1966: 107) but we can only conclude that experience must be self-reflexive on the assumption that it is self-conscious. The final link in the chain connects the self-reflexiveness of experience to its being experience of an objective world. So the argument moves from self-consciousness to self-reflexiveness to objectivity. Any coherent conception of self-conscious experience that we can form must be the conception of it as experience of an objective world.

This is the objectivity argument that Strawson later described as failing of its purpose, and concerns about *what* he argues are closely related to concerns about *how* he argues. For example, on what basis is he saying that self-consciousness, self-reflexiveness and objectivity stand in relations of ‘progressive or mutual dependence’? Take the relationship between self-reflexiveness and objectivity. To assume that these are features of our actual experience is to assume that we actually have experience of mind-independent objects and this can’t be what Strawson intends. His position is, rather, that our actual experience can be assumed to be self-reflexive, and that it follows from this that it is experience of mind-independent objects. This only follows, however, if experience of mind-independent objects is a necessary condition for experience to be self-reflexive. What kind of necessary condition is this and by what means can such necessary conditions be known?

Some of the necessary conditions that interest Strawson are *analytically* necessary, as is clear from this passage from ‘Kant’s New Foundations’:

Now it is not a mysterious but an analytic truth that judgement involves concepts; that concepts are such as to be applicable or inapplicable in one or more instances; that judgements or propositions are capable of truth or falsity. From considerations such as these it is not too difficult to show that the possibility of the fundamental logical operations is inherent in the very nature of the judgement or proposition (1997: 238).

Strawson uses these considerations to criticise Kant’s idea that it is beyond explanation why we have the particular forms or functions of judgement that we actually have. These are the forms of judgement from which Kant derives his categories. The implication of Strawson’s discussion is that it can be known that we do and must use the categories in our thinking by reflecting not on the nature of the objects of our knowledge but on the concept of judgement. Analysis of this concept is the means by which Strawson’s argument proceeds.

Whatever the merits of this line of thinking, it doesn't help with the objectivity argument. Strawson was absolutely clear in discussion that he never regarded experience of mind-independent objects as an analytically necessary condition for reflective experience and that many of his claims about necessary conditions of experience in *The Bounds of Sense* had a different status. He sometimes described them, somewhat mysteriously, as non-analytically but still conceptually necessary conditions.¹⁵ For the most part, though, he referred to a 1970 article by T. E. Wilkerson. Wilkerson's view of his project in *The Bounds of Sense* was the one he endorsed.¹⁶ This is both significant and surprising since Wilkerson interprets Strawson as proposing sufficient rather than necessary conditions. If Wilkerson's reading is right then all the talk of necessary conditions in *The Bounds of Sense* is, at best, misleading.

The key to Wilkerson's discussion is the notion of 'material sufficiency'. There are cases in which, although x is logically possible without y, it is nevertheless true that y is materially sufficient for x (*ceteris paribus*) and that 'we are incapable given our conceptual resources of thinking of any other conditions which would be materially sufficient (*ceteris paribus*)' (1970: 211). The sense in which x is logically possible without y is that it isn't self-contradictory to posit x without y. By the same token, y isn't analytically necessary for x. But if y is materially sufficient for x *and* we can't think of any alternative conditions that would be materially sufficient then y is, as it were, as good as necessary for x from our perspective. To put it another way, y is, for us, *uniquely* sufficient for x.

Suppose that x is reflective experience and that y is knowledge of mind-independent objects. Showing that y is sufficient for x and that we can't think of other conditions which would be sufficient for x is, of course, not a means of establishing that knowledge of mind-independent objects is necessary for reflective experience. It is, however, a means of doing the next best thing: showing that *we* have no option but to conceive of reflective experience as experience of mind-independent objects. This, then, is the answer to the means question

that Strawson ultimately endorsed: don't look for means of identifying necessary conditions or features of reflective experience (other than logically necessary conditions) but concentrate instead on the identifying uniquely sufficient conditions by demonstrating the unworkability of other proposed sufficient conditions.

One obvious concern about this proposal is that it makes the objectivity argument invalid if the aim is to show that we actually have knowledge of objects. From the fact that knowledge of objects is materially sufficient for reflective experience and that we can't think of other materially sufficient conditions it doesn't follow that we have knowledge of objects even if we have reflective experience. This concern is addressed by Strawson in *Scepticism and Naturalism*, where he observes that whether or not transcendental arguments are 'strictly valid', that is, whether or not they manage to establish 'such tight or rigid connections as they initially promise' they do at least bring out connections of a 'looser kind' between 'the major structural features or elements of our conceptual scheme' (2008: 18). But the bringing out of such connections is not the official aim of the objectivity argument. Its aim is to establish that we actually have knowledge of mind-independent objects and on Wilkerson's interpretation the argument fails to do that. Indeed, on his interpretation, *all* such arguments, that is, all transcendental arguments, are '*deductively* invalid' (1970: 212).

There is also a concern about the notion of material sufficiency, which Wilkerson sees as causal. He writes at one point that while it is logically possible for a nut to turn and tighten on its own accord with no assistance from us, our usual concern is with 'the conditions which are materially sufficient for its tightening and turning – the conditions which make it natural that the nut should turn and tighten' (1970: 210). For example, the application and turning of a spanner is materially sufficient, *ceteris paribus*, for the tightening of the nut' (ibid.). This is clearly an empirical rather than a conceptual truth, and certainly not one that can be known by exploring connections between major structural features of our conceptual scheme. The

means by which materially sufficient conditions for nut-tightening are established are utterly different from the means by which Strawson seeks to establish the conditions for reflective experience. Like Kant, Strawson sees his investigation as non-empirical and this element of his approach is totally lost on Wilkerson's reading.

The simplest objection to endorsing Wilkerson's approach is that the conditions of reflective experience that Strawson identifies in *The Bounds of Sense* are no more plausible when interpreted as uniquely sufficient conditions than when interpreted as conceptually necessary. They aren't uniquely sufficient because they aren't sufficient: experience of an objective world (the objectivity condition) is not sufficient for one to be able to think of one's experience as experiences (transcendental self-consciousness) and the latter is insufficient for one to be able to self-ascribe one's experiences, to be able to think of them as all belonging to one self. Since these are points that Strawson repeatedly makes in *The Bounds of Sense* this make it all the more surprising that he should have been tempted by Wilkerson's proposal. Here are two representative passages:

It is not essential for Kant to maintain that his provisions are *sufficient* to explain the actual occurrence of self-ascription of experiences. It is enough that they are *necessary* to its possibility. It may be that they do not represent the full conditions we need to make satisfactory sense of the notion of self-consciousness; and yet Kant has successfully performed a difficult feat of abstraction of the more fundamental part of those full conditions (1966: 103-4).

Yet it has in effect been conceded to the critic that the fulfilment of the objectivity-condition is not sufficient to make self-ascription of experiences possible, i.e. to make fully intelligible the notion of self-ascription of experiences on the part of a subject capable of consciousness of his own numerical identity throughout the series of his experiences (1966: 106).

There is no plausible way of understanding Strawson as being concerned with anything other than necessary conditions of reflective experience in *The Bounds of Sense* and these are the conditions that need explaining. Since the nature of these conditions remains obscure the absence of a satisfactory answer to the means question comes as no surprise.

Yet somehow none of this seems to matter very much when one immerses oneself in Strawson's arguments. Strawson certainly isn't the only major philosopher who failed to give an entirely satisfactory account of the character of his own inquiry. Pressing philosophers on the status of their arguments is an easy game to play but in the end what matters is whether their arguments are plausible, deep and interesting. There are plausible arguments that are neither deep nor interesting and implausible arguments that are both deep and interesting. Whatever doubts one may have about the plausibility of some of the best known arguments of *The Bounds of Sense* of one thing there can be no doubt: these are just about as deep and interesting as it is possible for a philosophical argument to be.

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¹ As Strawson sees it, the requirement of the conceptualizability of experience ‘may reasonably be seen as a standard-setting definition of what is to count as “experience” (1966: 25).

² See Strawson 1966: 99.

³ ‘Objectivity Argument’ is a label used by other commentators rather than by Strawson himself. See, for example, Rorty 1970.

⁴ Strawson’s detailed argument for this conclusion runs from p.97 to p.112 of *The Bounds of Sense*. These pages are the heart of the book and, in my opinion, the best philosophy that Strawson ever wrote. For further discussion of this argument see Harrison 1970, Rorty 1970, and Cassam 1995.

⁵ Strawson made this concession in response to Cassam 1995.

⁶ Stroud 1968.

⁷ Stroud 1968: 255.

⁸ Viewed in a certain light, belief-transcendental arguments are *more* ambitious than ‘truth-directed’ transcendental arguments that are only concerned with showing what must in fact be the case. There are seemingly few limits to the false, eccentric or downright weird beliefs that ordinary self-conscious beings are capable of having. In Cassam 1996 I refer to this as the ‘problem of misconception’. Demonstrating that there can only be reflective experience if objects of perception *are* mind-independent is one thing, and such a demonstration is in no way threatened by the existence of subjects of reflective experience who deny the existence of mind-independent objects. The existence of such subjects is a problem for the view that we must *believe* that we perceive mind-independent objects. Presumably Berkeley didn’t believe this but had reflective experience.

⁹ My references to conversations with Strawson are to conversations we had in Oxford in the 1980s and 1990s. He was my B. Phil. supervisor from 1982 to 1984, and he also supervised my D. Phil thesis on transcendental arguments in 1985.

¹⁰ This was Strawson’s response to the problem of misconception.

¹¹ On ‘descriptive metaphysics’ see the preface to Strawson 1959.

¹² Strawson’s later writings on Kant haven’t had the attention they deserve. I believe that two of them, ‘Kant’s Paralogisms: Self-Consciousness and the “Outside Observer”’ and ‘Kant on Substance’ were written not long after *The Bounds of Sense* but Strawson decided not to publish them until after his retirement in 1987. In the meantime he gave them as talks to his annual graduate class on Kant in Oxford: 5 pm on Fridays in Magdalen College. Two later papers are ‘The Problem of Realism and the A Priori’ and ‘Kant’s New Foundations of Metaphysics’. All four papers are reprinted in Strawson’s 1997 collection *Entity and Identity and Other Essays*.

¹³ Compare Guyer 1987: 340.

¹⁴ As Peacocke puts it, ‘if an account of what is necessarily involved in something’s having a certain property makes reference to some substantial condition which must be met by things which have it, a thinker’s mental representation of that property must be suitably sensitive to the existence of this substantial condition’ (1993: 171).

¹⁵ In fact he often described them this way in discussion.

¹⁶ Strawson had a high opinion of Wilkerson’s paper and regarded it as the best way forward for an understanding of transcendental arguments. This is all a long time ago but I don’t think I’m misremembering.