

**TO BE A PERSON AMONG PERSONS:  
PETER F. STRAWSON  
ON IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION**

**Key words:** the self, identification, particulars, „basic particulars” spatio-temporal system

**Ключевые слова:** самость, идентификация, особенность, „базовая особенность”, пространственно-временная система

**Schlüsselworte:** Selbstheit, Identifizierung, Einzelheit, Grund-Einzelheit, spatiotemporalen Systems

The famous book by the British philosopher Peter F. Strawson *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, first published in 1959, began a new era in the analytic philosophical tradition. Counter metaphysical movement at the beginning of XX century showed its inconsistency bounded with impossibility of pure linguistic analysis without a refunding to primal metaphysical categories. Strawson's idea of descriptive metaphysics makes an attempt to positively combine crucial ontological issues with constructive method of logico-linguistic investigations. The main matter of Strawson's heritage for our short study is represented by his thoughts about human identification and identity. This article aims to highlight a specificity of the analytic view on the issue of identity by the example of one of its first representatives. We will mostly concentrate our attention on the first, metaphysical part of „Individuals”, also using the second, logical one, as the instrument of review in the field of ordinary speech.

First of all, even if we have to point at self-consciousness theme in Strawson's ideas, there is a great task to distinguish between two fundamental metaphysics – revisionary and descriptive. Revisionary metaphysics, revealed by the author, is associated with creating a new thought structure that can be used for „better” or more correct thinking. Descriptive metaphysics, also represented by Strawson, is the way of philosophical investigation based on the describing actual or „real” mental structure. Strawson mostly links his method with descriptive way of thinking, but also emphasizes: „Perhaps no actual metaphysician has ever been, both in intention and effect, wholly the one thing or the other”<sup>1</sup>. It's remarkable, that new metaphysical

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<sup>1</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 9.

synthesis suggested by „Individuals” fully confirms this statement – the descriptive method generally tries to expose the actual structure of our thinking, at the same time, as any way of philosophy, it wouldn't be assumed without new conceptual references. Consciousness needs to have a „synthetic mirror” that helps to independently reveal its own conceptual scheme. These new „extraneous” notions and connections are also present in Strawson's philosophical position. However, the British philosopher realizes that there is no absolute model of actual thinking that can be done by the opportunities of his descriptive metaphysics or any other. The meaning of philosophical or even ordinary discourse changes constantly so no wonder that the same central subjects of our mind should be reopen again and again. „If there are no new truths **to be discovered**, there are old truths **to be rediscovered**”<sup>2</sup>.

The first significant point of Strawson's identity conception that we should exhibit is his comprehension of „particulars”. When we're saying „a particular” in the context of „Individuals”, it means taking into consideration something beyond its relation to its own attributes, features or qualities. It contains not only „things” in general, but also ideal notions about material objects. There's an easy way to imagine Strawson's particulars as elements of dissipative world before any conceptual connections could be done. „For instance, in mine, as in most familiar philosophical uses, historical occurrences, material objects, people and their shadows are all particulars; whereas qualities and properties, numbers and species are not”<sup>3</sup>. Particulars are presented as „atoms” of our conceptual scheme; the latter is based on the possibility to identify those entities. Identification of particulars is a base process for our everyday speech. We talk about something that should be comprehended, even more, when we recover a particular from our memory, for example, Aristotle, our mind tries to find an identifying reference, such as his profession, exterior or any recognizable fact about him. This operation is held by both participants – a speaker and a hearer.

This fact has proved the statement that identification of some kind of particulars depends on identification of particulars of another kind. Such a way of thinking, proposed by the British philosopher, describes the basic conceptual structure of human mind as a linked scheme consisting of particulars and identifying references, where the latter form moving boundaries of the former. He declares that a particular and an identifying reference are connected as different sides of the whole. Obviously, particulars couldn't be separated without identifying references. At the same time, the latter, if it's taken outside the particular, fades as an aimless action.

In general, identification of a dependent particular is based on the identification of an independent particular. What does it mean? Of course, it means that there should be primal particulars, what or which create a point of support for our knowledge and ordinary understanding. Nevertheless, Strawson tries to reveal all ways of identifying particulars before claiming „basic” particulars. In the field of his investigation, we can single out three types of identifying process, founded on different speaking or thinking situations.

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<sup>2</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Therein, p. 15.

First of them is relative identification; it can be characterized as identification within adjusted range of particulars that had been suggested by a speaker or a text. It's unnecessary for this type to give a concrete reference on implied being, because a hearer creates his own identity within a story frame given by an addresser. This narrative type of identification is correct within a created story, but not within history.

The second type is demonstrative identification. The essence of such recognition is related to sufficient conditions when „the hearer can pick out by sight or hearing or touch, or can otherwise sensibly discriminate, the particular being referred to, knowing that it is that particular”<sup>4</sup>. The demonstrative identification can be useful when perceiving is being held just now or at least a moment ago. „It is just the entire scene, the entire range of particulars now sensibly present”<sup>5</sup>.

It's notable, that a gnostic or a distinguishing role of demonstrative identification is, probably, much higher than we can find in the first steps of Strawson's reflections. Only demonstrating identification experience can create space for the other types of identification. A direct perceiving is a necessary condition for building up a correct extrapolating model for identifying references. For example, we can identify an unknown town by referring to „a town” generally or to another known settlement. But we would never be able to identify a particular „town” without travelling or, at least moving experience. That is the argument which can be found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>6</sup> and it's a significant refinement for Strawson's identification structure. Space perception is based on our body-movement experience. We surmise that a hearer knows what we are pointing at, because we suppose that he has the similar movement and perceptive experience.

The last type of identification suggested by the British author is non-demonstrative identification. This one is usable in cases when the identified particular „is not within the range of those sensibly present”<sup>7</sup>. This kind of recognition is associated with agreement between identifying description represented by an addressee and perceiving of the description by an addresser. For a correct explanation of some not currently sensible entities, it's enough to infer the same sector of the universe as the hearer does. In fact, we're not required to know that our identifying reference applies certain uniqueness. „All that is necessary, in order for identification to be secured, that the hearer should come to know, on the strength of the speaker's words, what, or which, particular the speaker is in fact referring to”<sup>8</sup>. It's also obvious, that demonstrative and non-demonstrative methods can be combined in different ways. The identifying reference to the particular which is currently not sensible can be related with the sector of the universe which both participants of the speech are occupying at the moment.

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<sup>4</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Therein, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by C. Smith, „Routledge”, London 1962, p. 112–171.

<sup>7</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Therein, p. 20–21.

Strawson realizes that his identification model in terms of the principle of seeking the most similar particular couldn't be consisted without reasoning the presence of a universal spacio-temporal structure of the world. „For all particulars in space and time, it is not only plausible to claim, it is necessary to admit, that there is just such a system: the system of spatial and temporal relations, in which every particular is uniquely related to every other”<sup>9</sup>. That is one of the most controversial conclusions ever made by Strawson: he insists that identification as the general process of humane mind is fully based on finding similarity in terms of equality.

Strawson's general system tries to move Kantian idea of space-time from the field of subjective „a priori” to the sector of objective identifying relationships. Of course, the British philosopher doesn't declare that time or space is a subsequence of the identification process. He is more likely to assume a fundamental status of relations between particulars towards subjective special and temporal senses. But declaration of the necessity of the scheme doesn't prove that identification within this entire „space-time” system is fully depended on the basis of identity.

Naturally, space couldn't be revealed by a typical person without establishing particulars as opposition to the entire existence. The ontological issue of stacking in the „solid being” had been widely described by E. Levinas' phenomenology. In his investigation *Totality and Infinity* the origin of human identity was related to the necessary escape from anonymous existence<sup>10</sup>. Strawson's conception solves this problem by claiming „basic particulars” and the above-mentioned spatio-temporal scheme.

At the same time Strawson's entire system doesn't expose the way of subjective agreement between different perceptions. As the author declares, the spacio-temporal system is unique and universal for all living beings. How can one distinguish between identification and establishing of equivalence? For example, there was a glass on the table. A minute later, we see the glass pieces on the floor. We haven't seen what's happened. So are we identifying the glass pieces immediately as new particulars with unique relation to the same glass or as the same glass in terms of remaining identity? It's obvious that the second statement sounds more plausible. We also need to associate this situation with any case of an object's crashing or separation before we are able to identify a piece as the same remaining object. But even that experience doesn't give us enough conditions to immediately confirm the identity. This simple case reveals a significant role of self-ascribing in respect of particular identification. For physical or scientific matter identifying relations should be unique but it's possible only within synthetic scientific objectiveness.

For an ordinary mind it's impossible to settle a fully correct scheme of those relations, it's mostly based on permanent self-substantiation of identity which is never approaching to claim a full equivalence. In any direction of thought we leave place to „re-admit” individuality. If this glass is mine, I'd disappointedly say that the glass was most likely broken, but if I see the remains of any object for the first time, I'll confirm with surprise that probably the glass was broken. So, on the one hand,

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<sup>9</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingens, „Martinus Nijhoff Publishers”, London 1979.

we have a spatio-temporal position of a body, and, on the other, a position of an identifying particular within my own being (mine, recognizable, not recognizable, not mine etc.). Normally, we identify objects not only because of gnostic references, but also due to our desire intentions – it's impossible to be absolutely indifferent to identifying an object or a person.

A widely known French philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes the Strawson's conceptual structure as a model where the issue of identification is represented only in the term of identity which is not correct. „The self is indeed mentioned in this passing remark [identification of anything through a basic particular], but it is immediately neutralized by being included within the same spatiotemporal schema as all the other particulars. I would readily say that, in *Individuals*, the question of the self is concealed, on principle, by that of the same in the sense of idem (...) Identity is described as sameness (memete) and not as selfhood (ipseite)”<sup>11</sup>. Ricoeur stresses that Strawson's concept of self-designation within spatio-temporal scheme ignored the matter of human „entity in the world”. What is fully acceptable within bodies, cannot be completely assumed within persons.

The other Strawson's note about human conceptual scheme is linked with „re-identification”. The latter was generally described by the author as an opportunity of identifying extrapolation. He emphasizes: „More generally, we must have criteria or methods of identifying a particular encountered on one occasion, or described in respect of one occasion, as the same individual as a particular encountered on another occasion, or described in respect of another occasion”<sup>12</sup>. Reidentification is a necessary condition in respect of correct referential identification, because we cannot identify all elements which are needed only in the way of sequential references. So the essence of this process is linked with simplification requirement. This requirement is based on insufficiency of human physical opportunities. Simply, we cannot continually observe all of the particulars that we use. Reidentification, at the same time, is a process that is closely bounded with the idea of „qualitative recurrences”. Such mechanism of recognizing is created by the conditions of our spatial and temporal presence. The last allows us to identify a particular within experience of the „same patterns or arrangements of objects”. Hence, we don't need to have a continuous observation for identification of non-occasional objects. But they have to be potentially observable, because the conditions of spatio-temporal system should be satisfied. Evidently, that should be a three dimension body with time-duration characteristics. Otherwise, the object fades away even from our imagination.

The conceptual scheme of our mind which is inscribed in spatio-temporal framework shows itself as a linked thought within the four dimensions' scenario. There is no possibility of thinking of potentially „unreal” beings because we can only imagine something that might take place in space and time. Nevertheless, this dimension's criteria is not an a-priori condition of senses, it's a consequence of our contact with merely definite world.

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<sup>11</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blarney, „The University of Chicago Press”, Chicago 1992, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 31.

Let's return to the issue of particulars; in „Individuals” the question about the ground of related identification was settled with introduction of basic particulars – bodies and persons. As it was explained above, the conceptual scheme of ordinary mind which is mostly based on non-demonstrative identification and reidentification processes should have a point of support to indicate the „origin” of any particular. Those kinds of particulars can be characterized as independent, non-relative basis for perception of all observable and hidden objects. Without such primary „patterns” we wouldn't be able to divide our continuous contemplation into individuals. Basic particulars cannot be reduced to any other type of particulars; they serve as the origins of references, but fully separated from feedback.

So, the first category of the primary particulars represented by Strawson's metaphysics is bodies. The term „bodies”, was taken by the British mostly in physical terms. In fact, bodies are basic particulars because they fully satisfy the following conditions:

- They're three dimension objects with endurance through time (according to the spatio-temporal system);
- They cannot be reduced to any other particular within human ordinary perception possibilities;
- They can serve as the ground to reference on any material object or a constructed notion.

Strawson claims a basic status of material bodies in the light of above-mentioned unitary framework requirement. He declares: „Material bodies constitute the framework. Hence, given a certain general feature of the conceptual scheme we possess, and given the character of the available major categories, things which are, or possess, material bodies must be the basic particulars”<sup>13</sup>. Elimination of bodies from our experience causes destruction of the spatial world. No-spatial world model, supposed by Strawson, was confronted with difficulties of solipsism that raised a necessity for the second basic particular.

Persons are another kind of basic particulars applied in Strawson's conceptual model. Normally, we distinguish between a thinking subject and a subject with physical characteristics, but, as Strawson emphasizes, they are just different sides of a single entity. The author proves this statement through the analysis of our ordinary self-ascription mechanism. We are continuously ascribing to ourselves actions, intentions, sensations, thoughts, feelings, location (near, on, in, at etc.) and position (down, up, right, left etc.). It is an obvious fact that all mental categories are ascribed to the very same thing to which physical characteristics and situation are ascribed<sup>14</sup>. It proves that persons include features of bodies but in the special way. As well as bodies, persons should have spatial and temporal characteristics. But at the same time we can ascribe predicates of states of consciousness and physical predicates only to persons.

The general question is: Why do we always associate our states of consciousness with the same body? The answer is grounded on sources of our experience. It must be admitted that human perception mostly depends on body position. Strawson, for

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<sup>13</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Therein, p. 89.

example, pays his attention to our sight. We can see only observable range of places where our body is. That fact immediately eliminates from our self-identification the bodies which are located out of our perception range. At the same time, within observable range we are able to see only objects in front of some body's face; this statement makes us able to neglect bodies which are turned to the other sides. And, finally, when eyelids of some body are closed, the subject of consciousness sees nothing. The same identifying operation could be performed in any situation of perception within any type of senses. The most applicable case is our touch sense: the subject of consciousness feels warm or cold only when an ember or a piece of ice touches this body but not the other. Basing on similar arguments, the British philosopher summarizes: „for each person there is one body which occupies a certain causal position in relation to that person's perceptual experience, a causal position which in various ways is unique in relation to each of the various kinds of perceptual experience he has; and – as a further consequence – that this body is also unique for him as an object of the various kinds of perceptual experience which he has”<sup>15</sup>. Evidently, ascription of corporal characteristics to the states of consciousness doesn't show a matter of self-identification, but it providently delivers us from conceptual dualism of body and mind.

One of the main tasks of Strawson's metaphysics is to prove the common nature of persons' concept. Within this issue, he distinguished between the two types of philosophical view on the matter of human selfhood. The first one is the Cartesian represented by Descartes and his followers. It's based on the „double nature” doctrine, which describes a person as the unity of distinct substances with its own properties and states. The second type of view is called „No-ownership type”. The latter is associated with L. Wittgenstein and M. Schlick. The main idea of this position is that uniqueness of body is considered as not sufficient reason to give rise to „ego” formation. But the same uniqueness is considered as sufficient explanation for the statement „that states of consciousness are to be ascribed to something in a special way”<sup>16</sup>. This position was marked by the author as incoherent. „No-ownership «idea is linked with misleading thinking about» special ascribing” – it involves the denial that someone's states of consciousness are anyone's. The Cartesian point of view is also inconsistent with the facts given by the British. Strawson proves that in view of the double substance conception „uniqueness of the body does not guarantee uniqueness of the Cartesian soul”<sup>17</sup>.

In the light of these denials, the British philosopher tries to answer the primal questions of identity that have been neglected by his precursors: „why are states of consciousness ascribed to anything at all?” and „why are they ascribed to the very same thing as certain corporeal characteristics, a certain physical situation?”<sup>18</sup>. The author detects a connection between these two questions. It is based on the statement

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<sup>15</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> Therein, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Therein, p. 101.

<sup>18</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*, „Routledge”, London 1996, p. 102.

that possibility of ascription is a necessary condition of consciousness entity and a person in terms of a unique basic particular is the only instance for such ascriptions.

A person is not a pure individual consciousness; the term „person” was taken as the only particular for any people. „It [the concept of pure individual consciousness] can exist only, if at all, as a secondary, non-primitive concept, which itself is to be explained, analyzed, in terms of the concept of person”<sup>19</sup>. By this statement Strawson providently avoids the issue of solipsism. The unique idea of „any” person is initial; the concept of an individual person is secondary.

It’s also necessary to underscore that a „person” doesn’t replace consciousness; furthermore it doesn’t deny a crucial identifying status of consciousness. Because „there is nothing to stop us, and nothing does stop us, from making identifying references to a particular of a different type, namely the consciousness of that person. It is in this way that the concept of a particular consciousness can exist, as the concept of a non-basic, non-primary type of particular. And only in this way”<sup>20</sup>. We should realize that Strawson’s conception of identity generally tries to secure distance between the two philosophical extremes, namely, solipsism and vulgar atomism. The first danger, as we mentioned above, was overpassed by claiming a category of person as primitive and underived. The absence of the second extreme was secured by confirming the presence of entire spatio-temporal scheme where every identifying object should be opened for references.

Within Strawson’s structure all particulars are empirical particulars. It’s important to emphasize that basic particulars are some of the universals that occupy a main place only among the other particulars.

As the Cambridge philosopher B. Williams emphasizes: „Whatever account is to be assumed of the importance of basic particulars among particulars, it is important to see that in Strawson’s theory a decision of what particulars are basic particulars does not, by itself, provide any answer to the question of why basic particulars should be thought of as primary among things in general”<sup>21</sup>.

So we can confidently distinguish between the four general principles of Strawson’s scheme, without which this concept remains inconsistent with any philosophical requirements:

1. The presence of entire spatio-temporal scheme based on which any identifying reference can be done.
2. The presence of basic particulars – bodies and persons – with such crucial characteristics as spatiality and antecedence.
3. A person is the only particular to which both mental and physical predicates can be applied.
4. A particular of person is not a notion of private experience. It’s primitive, underived and usable for all rational beings.

Finally, the conceptual model represented by P.F. Strawson shows itself as a strict system which possesses a boundary structure (space-time framework) and primal elements (bodies and persons).

<sup>19</sup> Therein, p. 102–103.

<sup>20</sup> Therein, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> B. Williams, *Problems of the Self*, „Cambridge University Press”, Cambridge 1999, p. 133.



The system is mostly based on logical arguments with strong aspiration for saving a wide distance between identification and private experience. The mentioned feature of Strawson's conception is an expected consequence due to application of the analytic method within metaphysical issues. But at the same time, we should admit that such synthesis has more advantages than weaknesses.

The Strawson's project of „Individuals” made a great influence not only on the analytic tradition, within which identity issues became more popular. It also gave a new field of reflection for the continental philosophical discourse which remains relevant even now.

### **TO BE A PERSON AMONG PERSONS: PETER F. STRAWSON ON IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION**

#### SUMMARY

Strawson's philosophical investigation defined as „descriptive metaphysics” was the first successful attempt to apply analytic method to ontological issues of identity. The British philosopher rediscovered for the world philosophical community such categories as „particulars”, „individuals”, „identification” and others. The analytic tradition of philosophy inspired by the significance of „Individuals” became more concerned about the issues of identity and selfhood. The article describes the general principles of Strawson's conceptual model and reveals some of its advantages and drawbacks.

### **БЫТЬ ПЕРСОНОЙ СРЕДИ ПЕРСОН: ПИТЕР Ф. СТРАВСОН ОБ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ И ИДЕНТИФИКАЦИИ**

#### РЕЗЮМЕ

Философское исследование Стравсона, обозначенное как „дескриптивная метафизика”, было первой удачной попыткой применения аналитического метода к онтологическим проблемам вокруг идентичности. Для мирового философского сообщества британец по-новому открыл такие категории как „особенности”, „индивиды”, „идентификация” и другие. Аналитическая традиция философии, вдохновленная значением „Индивидов”, стала более заинтересованной проблемами тождества и самости. Статья описывает общие принципы концептуальной модели Стравсона и обнаруживает некоторые ее преимущества и недостатки.