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### Royaumont Revisited

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## ARTICLE

# ROYAUMONT REVISITED

Søren Overgaard

Michael Dummett has claimed that the only way to establish communication between the analytic and Continental schools of philosophy is to go back to their point of divergence in Frege and the early Husserl. In this paper, I try to show that Dummett's claim is false. I examine in detail the discussions at the infamous 1958 Royaumont Colloquium on analytic philosophy. Many – including Dummett – believe that these discussions underscore the futility of attempting to bridge the gap between Continental and analytical philosophies in anything like their current shapes. I argue, however, that a close study of the Royaumont proceedings rather reveals how close some of the analytical speakers were to some of their Continental listeners.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*, Michael Dummett compares analytical philosophy and phenomenology with the Rhine and the Danube, rivers that 'rise quite close to one another and for a time pursue roughly parallel courses, only to diverge in utterly different directions and flow into different seas' (Dummett 1993, 26). The image is supposed to suggest the fruitlessness of attempting to establish contact between analytical philosophy and Continental philosophy in anything like their current shapes. To support this view, Dummett refers to the fact that

futile conferences, composed of British analytical philosophers and French phenomenologists in equal numbers, used to take place in the 1950s, in the hope of establishing communication; but it seems to me that communication is more likely to result from an effort on both sides to understand how their respective styles of philosophy originated from those at one time quite close to one another, and certainly giving no appearance of founding divergent schools.

(*ibid.*, ix)

Elsewhere in the book, Dummett goes as far as to assert that '[w]e can re-establish communication *only* by going back to the point of divergence' (ibid., 193, my emphasis), that is, by going back to the philosophies of Frege and the early Husserl.

In this paper, I wish to challenge these claims. I want to take another look at the most infamous of the 'futile conferences' to which Dummett refers, namely the 1958 Royaumont Colloquium,<sup>1</sup> and see whether genuine communication really was beyond reach of the participants. I believe that some of the Royaumont papers and, in particular, the discussions that followed them, are well worth a second look. For, as I will argue, when read carefully now, fifty years later, they do not lend support to Dummett's view as much as show quite clearly how close some of the analytical speakers were to some of their phenomenological listeners. In particular, I will argue that the discussion at Royaumont of the papers of Ryle, Urmson and, especially, Strawson constitutes a useful starting point for exploring affinities and possible points of contact between Oxford ordinary language philosophy and phenomenology in the Husserlian or Merleau-Pontian tradition. Briefly and somewhat boldly put, both schools tend to view philosophy as engaged in a second-order, reflective examination of aspects of ordinary experience or linguistic use, with which we may be implicitly familiar, but of which we have no explicit overview. Due to limitations of space, however, I will take the phenomenologists' commitment to this metaphilosophical picture more or less for granted,<sup>2</sup> and instead concentrate on the analytical side of the Dummettian gulf.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I briefly go over that for which the Royaumont Colloquium is probably most infamous: the arrogance displayed by some of the participants. That arrogance was real enough, even if the most notorious example turns out to be fictitious. However, as I go on to show in detail in Section 3, there are other reasons, deeper and philosophically more interesting reasons, why the desired dialogue was not achieved. Mutual misunderstandings, in particular surrounding the role and status of philosophy vis-à-vis empirical science,

<sup>1</sup>There is some confusion as to when precisely this conference took place. Incredibly, there is no mention of this in the preface and introduction to the Royaumont proceedings, and commentators' suggestions range from 1958 through to 1961. Indeed, decades after the event, Strawson tentatively conjectured that it took place in the early 1950s (Strawson 2008, xxiv–xxv). Hacker (1996, 274) says 1959, though this is probably a typo; in Critchley (1998, 4) and Merleau-Ponty (1992, 59, 173) the year is said to have been 1960; and in Strawson (1992, 312) and Urmson (1992, 294), the translator and editor Richard Rorty lists the year 1961. 1958, however, seems to be the correct year. I base this claim on Austin (1979, v), Quine (1960, x), Hacker (1996, 163, 297), as well as on the publisher of the Royaumont proceedings, Les Éditions de Minuit, URL = <[http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.com/f/index.php?sp=liv&livre\\_id=2308](http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.com/f/index.php?sp=liv&livre_id=2308)> (accessed 25 November 2008). In any case, this confusion only testifies to the extent to which this crucial philosophical event suffers from insufficient philosophical attention.

<sup>2</sup>But see, for example, Husserl (1970, 148–52, 175–6, and passim) and Merleau-Ponty (1962, xiii–xiv).

repeatedly led the discussion into blind alleys. Section 4 explores some of the underlying affinities and convergences that the constant derailing of the discussion prevented the two parties from recognizing. In particular, it is argued that both parties were trying to articulate an account on which philosophy is to be distinguished from science not by some special ‘subject matter’, but rather, by the special aim or interest guiding philosophical inquiries. Then, in Section 5, I make a brief attempt, focused on Strawson, to indicate that the aims and interests appealed to in at least one prominent version of the analytical view should be thoroughly congenial to transcendental phenomenologists. Finally, a brief conclusion sums up the results of this return to Royaumont.

## 2. CONTEMPT FOR THE CONTINENT

The theme of the 1958 meeting at Royaumont was the nature of analytic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The impressive list of speakers included Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, P. F. Strawson, W. V. O. Quine, Bernard Williams, J. O. Urmson and R. M. Hare; and in the audience were A. J. Ayer, Charles Taylor, and continental philosophers such as Jean Wahl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and H. L. Van Breda, the founder of the Husserl-Archives in Leuven. It was hoped that this conference would lead to mutual understanding between Anglo-American philosophy, in particular ordinary language philosophy, and continental European philosophy, in particular phenomenology. The meeting was no success. In the words of someone who attended it, the conference was ‘a dialogue that didn’t come off . . . [F]ew left it much wiser than they came – at least as far as the subject of the conference was concerned’ (Taylor 1964, 132–3).

Various factors contributed to the failure of the Royaumont Colloquium. For example, several of the English speakers seemed more concerned to explain their supposed advances over Russell and the early Wittgenstein’s logical atomism, the logical positivists, and the ideal language philosophy of Carnap and others, than they were interested in relating their points to philosophers working in another tradition (cf. Leblanc 1964). Given the theme of the colloquium, however, this was understandable. Yet a somewhat arrogant presumption of superiority, and even a measure of contempt for the ‘Continentalists’, on the part of some of the Oxonians, shines through parts of the discussion. This arrogance, too, seems to have played some role in the failure of the Royaumont Colloquium.

The most notorious example of Oxonian arrogance is Ryle’s reply to Merleau-Ponty’s question whether the phenomenological programme and the Rylean one were not at bottom the same. Ryle, so the story goes, replies

<sup>3</sup>The proceedings of the conference were published, in French, under the title *Cahiers de Royaumont, Philosophie N° IV: La Philosophie Analytique* in 1962. References to this volume will be made using the abbreviation ‘PA’.

as follows: ‘I hope not’ (*J’espère que non*).<sup>4</sup> The trouble with this otherwise striking example of philosophical arrogance is that no trace of it is found in the actual records of the discussion between Merleau-Ponty and Ryle. Merleau-Ponty does suggest, in fact more than once, that Ryle’s philosophical agenda is not significantly different from the phenomenological one (PA, 93, 94, 96; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 65, 66, 68); but it seems that Ryle never comments on these suggestions. A question of Merleau-Ponty’s that Ryle does respond to, however, is the question whether he is still committed to the philosophical programme of Russell and Wittgenstein. ‘My response is’, says Ryle, ‘*I certainly hope not!*’ (*j’espère bien que non!*) (PA, 98; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 69). In its proper context there is little arrogance in Ryle’s remark. Ryle, Austin and the other Oxford analysts were confident that they had made a decisive break with the logical atomist programme of Russell and the early Wittgenstein, and there is no indication that Ryle offered a similarly dismissive response to Merleau-Ponty’s repeated calls for a rapprochement between phenomenology and Rylean analysis.

If this infamous example of Oxonian arrogance is based on confusion, however, there are other striking examples in *La philosophie analytique*. Consider Ryle’s paper, which, unlike most of the others, did relate the programme of linguistic analysis to that of phenomenology. The paper is polemically titled ‘Phenomenology versus “The Concept of Mind”’. In the first section Ryle offers what he admits is a ‘caricature’ of Husserl’s phenomenology (PA, 67; Ryle 1971a, 181), against the background of which he then proceeds, in the rest of the paper, to outline the virtues of his own approach in *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle’s caricature is at times outright ridicule: he portrays Husserl as a pompous would-be philosophical *Führer* with no sense of humour and no understanding of science (PA, 68; Ryle 1971a, 181); a philosopher who was ‘bewitched by his Platonic idea that conceptual enquiries were scrutinies of the super-objects that he called “Essences”’ (PA, 67; Ryle 1971a, 180–1), and who, as a consequence, was led ‘into a crevasse, from which no exit existed’ (PA, 67; Ryle 1971a, 180).

It is worth reflecting briefly on Ryle’s choice of approach. Suppose you are invited to present a paper at a conference on the kind of philosophy that you subscribe to, to a group of philosophers, some or most of whom subscribe to some different brand of philosophy, say Thomism or logical positivism. You choose to start out by offering a caricature of Thomas Aquinas (or Moritz Schlick and Carnap, as the case may be). You make sure it is a mixture of oversimplifications, deliberate distortions and simple ridicule. Then you go on to list the many ways in which your own philosophical approach is vastly superior to the philosophy you have just

<sup>4</sup>Critchley (1998, 4; cf. Glock 2008, 63; the source is Leslie Beck’s preface to PA). Critchley, somewhat dramatically, goes on to say that ‘[i]t is this “I hope not”, this steadfast “no” in the face of the perceived exoticism of the Continent, that is so revealing of an ideological prejudice that surely should have no home in philosophy’ (1998, 4).

caricatured. This, surely, is not the strategy of someone who wants to engage in real philosophical dialogue.

Consider what Ryle says in response to Van Breda's protest against both the distortions and the ridicule of Husserl. 'I do not know if the caricature resembles [Husserl], and I care little if it does ... I would hope that this debate does not degenerate into another colloquium on Husserl' (PA, 87; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 61). One may certainly agree with Ryle that questions concerning the correct exegesis of Husserl should not be allowed to take over the agenda. Yet, given the strategy Ryle adopts in his paper, his response surely displays an almost incredible arrogance. The point of the contrast between phenomenology and *The Concept of Mind* is to show the advantages of the latter over the former. The reason why that agenda was very relevant at Royaumont was that, as Ryle undoubtedly knew,<sup>5</sup> there were many people in the audience who would consider themselves heirs, in some sense at least, to the phenomenological project. Thus, when Ryle replies that he really does not care whether his caricature has anything to do with Husserl, this amounts to saying that he does not care whether he has even come close to identifying the types of view that Van Breda, Merleau-Ponty and others would be prepared to endorse. The strategy of the paper, however, was to show the virtues of the Oxford approach via a contrast with phenomenology. Therefore, the confession that Ryle does not care whether he comes close to a correct description of the latter approach ultimately implies that he does not care whether his paper will sound the least bit convincing to his phenomenological audience.<sup>6</sup>

Ryle's attitude thus gives us a taste of 'the contempt in which "Continental" philosophers are often held at Oxford, which hardly accords them the status of worthy interlocutors' (Taylor 1964, 133). However, it would be a mistake to think that this is the main factor responsible for the failure of the Royaumont Colloquium. For one thing, one should not construe Ryle's paper as a wholesale rejection of phenomenology. Ryle states, for example, that his book *The Concept of Mind* 'could be described as a sustained essay in phenomenology, if you are at home with that label' (PA, 75; Ryle 1971a, 188); indeed, later in the paper he refers to 'my phenomenology' (*ma phénoménologie*; PA, 82; Ryle 1971a, 194). Ryle also speaks with approval of Sartre's analysis of the imagination (PA, 81; Ryle 1971a, 193). All in all, Ryle could be seen as offering an internal criticism of phenomenology, rather than a blanket rejection of all things phenomenological.

<sup>5</sup>In his autobiographical sketch, Ryle relates that he was 'amused to find [Husserl's phenomenology], together with Heidegger's Existentialism, becoming the *dernier cri* in France after the Second World War' (Ryle 1971b, 9).

<sup>6</sup>As a partial excuse, one might point out that Ryle seems not to have believed that such dialogue was a real possibility anyway. Speaking of 'the wide gulf that has existed for three-quarters of a century between Anglo-Saxon and Continental philosophy' (PA 68; Ryle 1971a, 182), he comes close to anticipating Dummett's view.

More importantly, there are other, more substantial reasons why the dialogue did not ‘come off’. These reasons include a certain reluctance, on the part of most Oxford analysts, to give an account of their own methods and aims; but, as we shall see in the next section, they also include one or two rather colossal misunderstandings on the part of some of the Continental philosophers. Taylor is right to suggest that the main reason for the failure of the Royaumont Colloquium was that both parties were insufficiently prepared to really engage with each other’s work (Taylor 1964, 133). Once we clear away some of the misunderstandings and caricatures, we will be able to see how close the two parties actually were to each other.

### 3. SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

I shall first look at Urmson’s paper, which attempts to place ordinary language philosophy in its historical context. The classical analysis of Russell and others assumed that a major source of philosophical problems was the fact that many linguistic expressions, although fine by ordinary standards, could nevertheless mislead because their real ‘logical form’ was concealed by their grammatical form. Philosophical problems could therefore be disposed of by supplying logically conspicuous translations of the problematic expressions. Of particular interest were ‘reductive’ translations that were supposed to reveal that what appeared to be propositions referring to basic entities, properties, and relations were in fact complexes – ‘logical constructions’ – of other more fundamental entities, properties and relations. However, as Urmson argues in his contribution to the Royaumont conference, and elaborates in significant detail in his 1956 book *Philosophical Analysis*, reductive analysis proved to be an almost impossible task outside formal logic and mathematics – the fields in which Russell had originally applied the method with considerable success (PA, 15; Urmson 1992, 296; cf. Urmson 1956, 146–62). Outside the latter fields, a suggested *analysans* rarely seemed a convincing translation of its *analysandum*.<sup>7</sup>

One response to this was to blame ordinary language: if it did not lend itself to reductive analysis in this way, then that would merely go to show that natural languages were ‘faulty, unsuitable as objects of scientific philosophical investigation, vague muddles best forgotten in the study’ (Urmson 1956, 160). The proper thing to do, then, would be to construct artificial languages, purified of all vagueness and ambiguity – ideal languages to which classical analysis could be applied (PA, 15; Urmson 1992, 297).

<sup>7</sup>I here disregard the questions whether Urmson’s characterization of classical analysis is correct, and whether his criticism is fair. I am simply noting the way Urmson and other post-war Oxford philosophers viewed the earlier analysts. For a fuller picture, see Russell’s (1959, 215–30) reply to Urmson’s criticism.

Another response, however, was to argue that in so far as our philosophical questions concern statements employing our ordinary terms (of chairs, trees, human beings, etc.), then it is not clear how the construction of other languages can provide the understanding that we seek. Our philosophical questions do not concern statements in those ideal languages, but statements in our natural language. It therefore seems that artificial languages may at best serve an auxiliary function in so far as their simplified logic may help to illuminate certain features of the infinitely more complicated logic of our ordinary language; but this would presuppose, and could thus never replace, the careful study of ordinary language itself (PA, 111; Strawson 1992a, 316; cf. PA, 18; Urmson 1992, 299).

The second approach was, of course, precisely the one recommended by the Oxford philosophers. It has something important in common with classical analysis and ideal language philosophy. The adherents of all these types of analysis think that philosophical questions are, in some sense, questions that should be addressed by examining language. Some think that the right procedure is to offer logically conspicuous translations; others think that we need to construct ideal models of language. The Oxford philosophers, however, think that if a philosophical problem arises about such things as seeing a table, or knowing that there is a table in this room, then the primary philosophical task is that of *describing* how expressions such as ‘I know ...’, ‘Do you see ...?’, and so forth, are used in ordinary contexts.

As the notion of decomposing something into its constituent parts is no longer on the Oxford philosophers’ agenda, it is understandable that some of them would feel uncomfortable with the concept of ‘analysis’ (Austin in PA, 331–2; Urmson 1956, 187). Austin famously suggested that ‘linguistic phenomenology’ might be a better term, although he found it ‘rather a mouthful’ (Austin 1979, 182). Ryle, as mentioned, states that *The Concept of Mind* could be described as an essay in phenomenology (PA, 75; Ryle 1971a, 188). Given the new *descriptive* agenda, it does indeed seem that an important point of contact with Continental phenomenology has become visible. Under the banner of a return to ‘the things themselves’, phenomenologists view the central task of philosophy as a descriptive reflective elucidation of non-philosophical experience. Austin’s adjective ‘linguistic’, however, marks a crucial methodological difference, for while phenomenologists will typically hold that what is needed is a descriptive examination of various intentional experiences, with a view to clarifying, ‘transcendentally’, how the objects of such experiences come to be presented or represented with the meaning that they have, the Oxford analysts insist that what needs reflective elucidation is the use of linguistic expressions.

To the audience at Royaumont, no less than to the Oxonians themselves, the programme of classical, reductive analysis would seem to have an obvious and close relation to traditional metaphysics. The aim of reductive, or ‘new-level’, analysis was to reveal the basic constituents of the world – ‘to

understand the nature of ultimate reality' (Urmson 1956, 47). This, in the eyes of Urmson, was the 'traditional, backward-looking element' in classical analysis (*ibid.*, 50). So-called 'same-level' (or logical) analysis, by contrast, was the 'forward-looking' element: for the systematic attempt to resolve philosophical puzzlement by offering translations or paraphrases of problematic expressions was a purely linguistic procedure, which could easily be detached from the classical analysts' metaphysical agenda (*ibid.*). Indeed, the linguistic orientation so detached survives in the procedure endorsed by Urmson and his colleagues – the procedure of describing ordinary language use.<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, as already indicated, this descriptive, non-reductive agenda would have struck a sympathetic chord in the phenomenological listeners. On the other hand, however, it would have been difficult for them to see what was specifically philosophical about the procedure – all metaphysical ambitions apparently being abandoned along with the reductive element. How is the procedure of ordinary language philosophy different from that of empirical studies of language and language use? What is the *philosophical* import of this way of proceeding?

Urmson's Royaumont paper, unsurprisingly, generates precisely these sorts of question. In response to the paper, the Belgian philosopher Leo Apostel raises the question whether Oxford philosophy does not simply study language for its own sake, and if so, to what extent the task is not better left to lexicographers and other linguists. Urmson replies as follows:

I do not think that one can say that the end which, according to my account, analytical philosophers have had in view is the same as that of lexicographers and semanticists who have used the traditional methods of their disciplines . . . I think that the analysts of the contemporary Oxford School are less interested in giving a general empirical description of how people talk than in discovering (if I dare use this phrase) the *logical* rules which govern the use we make of words and of turns of phrase.

(PA, 31; Urmson 1992, 306)

Here, a crucial theme for the discussion at Royaumont is introduced: the difference between philosophy and the empirical sciences. Urmson distinguishes the analyses of Oxford philosophy from the activities of lexicographers by reference to the end or purpose that the analysts have in mind. What distinguishes the philosopher is his or her interest in the 'logical rules' that govern language use. In other words, the philosopher studies the same 'object' as the lexicographer studies – language use – but has the different aim of clarifying logical relations between concepts and turns of phrase.

<sup>8</sup>For a fuller account of same-level and new-level analysis, see Beaney 2007, in particular the supplementary document on the Cambridge School of Analysis.

Urmson's audience, however, is not entirely satisfied with this explanation. Perelman, another Belgian, pursues the question further, asking Urmson to clarify how 'this analysis differs from what men normally do when they interpret the terms used in the practice of their respective professions' and, in particular, 'what sense is given to "logical rules" in philosophical analysis' (PA, 33; Urmson 1992, 307–8). As to the first question, Urmson admits that the difference is 'principally a matter of degree' (PA, 33; Urmson 1992, 308). The second question, however, is met with what appears to be a complete capitulation:

it is very hard to say just what we mean when we use such an expression as "implicit logical rules". I only used this notion for the sake of self-defense in the course of discussion, and I do not find it very clear myself.

(PA, 34; Urmson 1992, 308)

This is a spectacular confession to make on what must be a crucial metaphilosophical point. Yet, strangely, none of the other Oxford analysts comes to Urmson's aid.

Closely related questions are raised after Strawson's paper 'Analysis, Science, and Metaphysics'. Strawson's point of departure is again the contrast between the new Oxonian approach, on the one hand, and that of classical analysis and ideal language analysis, on the other hand (PA, 105–12; Strawson 1992a, 312–16). However, the paper issues in the delineation of some five strands of the philosophical enterprise, the fifth of which rehabilitates the metaphysical aspiration in a purged, descriptive form, firmly opposed to the 'revisionary' metaphysics of most of the philosophical tradition (PA, 115; Strawson 1992a, 318; cf. Strawson 1959, 9). The details of Strawson's account need not concern us, beyond remarking that, again, the phenomenologists in the audience must have felt sympathy with the general drift of great parts of it. However, they also encountered a clear statement of the view that the linguistic method is superior to other philosophical methods.

The questions of philosophy, says Strawson, 'are problems, difficulties and questions *about* the concepts we use in various fields, and not problems, difficulties and questions which arise *within* the fields of their use' (PA, 112; Strawson 1992a, 316). In other words, philosophical questions are questions of a '*second order*', *reflective* questions about the 'concepts used' in, for example, scientific fields; they are not '*first-order*' questions within a particular scientific field. For a phenomenologist, this would seem closely related to the point that philosophy is not supposed to contribute to our stock of empirical knowledge about the world, but is, rather, to clarify reflectively the 'conditions of possibility' of there being any world manifested or revealed to us in the first place. Phenomenologists would think of this type of inquiry as one to be carried out mainly in reflection on

types of world-experience. Strawson, in stark contrast, concludes his paper with the following remarks:

[T]he actual use of linguistic expressions remains [the philosopher's] sole and essential point of contact with the reality which he wishes to understand, conceptual reality; for this is the only point from which the actual mode of operation of concepts can be observed. If he severs this vital connection, all his ingenuity and imagination will not save him from lapses into the arid or the absurd.

(PA, 118; Strawson 1992a, 320)

Strawson apparently takes it that, having argued that philosophy is reflective, and that what it reflects on are the concepts we use in various domains of discourse, science or life, it follows that we need to examine 'the actual use of linguistic expressions'. Indeed, he states that language use is the philosopher's *sole* contact with that which he or she aims to understand. In the discussion, when challenged to defend the passage quoted, Strawson says that

I should defend the passage ... by saying that the philosopher's principal task is the understanding of how our thought about things works, and that we cannot find out about these workings except by looking at how we use words. To put it another way, linguistic usage is the only experimental datum which we possess that is relevant to inquiry about the behavior of our concepts.

(PA, 125; Strawson 1992a, 324)

Experience, it seems, is not something for the philosopher to study, at least not to the extent that she wants to inquire into the 'behaviour of our concepts'; and the latter task, Strawson insists, is the principal task of philosophy.

I want to examine in some detail the discussion these remarks spawned, in particular between Strawson and the phenomenologist Van Breda. This brief discussion, with its disastrous misunderstandings, is not only an important key to an understanding of the failure of the Royaumont conference (as well as a classic example of analytic–Continental miscommunication). It also revolves around, and in a way renders salient, the crucial metaphilosophical difference between phenomenology and Oxford analysis. Van Breda uses Strawson's closing words as a point of departure for a sketch of what the former takes to be at the heart of the failure of communication between analytical and Continental philosophers. 'For the phenomenologist', Van Breda says, 'the thesis that the sole point of contact with that reality which philosophy wishes to understand is language is entirely inadmissible' (PA, 127; Strawson 1992a, 325). He continues:

To say that the reality we wish to understand is *conceptual* reality is still more objectionable ... To the question 'What does the philosopher want to

understand?’ Continental philosophers would firmly reply that it is *not* conceptual reality, but the world in which we live, in all its complexity.

(PA, 127; Strawson 1992a, 325)

It is already clear from this that Van Breda has misunderstood Strawson’s position. Evidently, Van Breda takes Strawson to be restricting the focus of philosophy to some special region of reality, a Platonic realm of abstract ideas. As if ‘conceptual reality’ was intended to refer to a *drittes Reich* of immaterial, abstract ‘meaning-stuff’, distinct from the ordinary world of persons, utensils, animals, trees, and so forth. Obviously, this is not Strawson’s view. When asked by Jean Wahl to clarify ‘if he intends [“conceptual reality”] to signify a reality which is purely and strictly conceptual’ (PA, 131; Strawson 1992a, 327), Strawson immediately admits that the term ‘is ambiguous and was an unhappy choice. All that I meant by it was “the facts about our concepts”’ (PA, 132; Strawson 1992a, 328).

It gets worse. Van Breda goes on to allege that Strawson claims ‘that language is the *only* point of contact with reality’. Contra this, Van Breda insists that precisely when you adopt a descriptive approach, it is clear that ‘there are a great many ways of being-in-the-world’. Language, then, does not have ‘the privileged status’ that Strawson has claimed for it (PA, 127; Strawson 1992a, 325). It seems that Van Breda has failed to identify the reflective level to which Strawson’s remarks are intended to pertain. Strawson, of course, would not claim that there are no such things as perceptions, memories, feelings, imaginations, etc., and that these are, at least on a great many occasions, ways of being in contact with reality. His is not the (silly) claim that we can only be in contact with things in and through *talking about* them. It is for the *philosopher* – it is in the philosopher’s special, reflective enterprise – that language use is supposed to constitute the only point of contact with the object of study, the only ‘experiential datum’; that is, Strawson makes no general claim about the ways in which a human mind may or may not be in contact with the world.

In fact, crucially, in his response to Van Breda, Strawson suggests that any such claims would fall outside the domain of philosophy. The latter says, ‘neither the concept of a relation with the world, nor that of existence in the world, strikes me as very clear. Can’t we simply leave all that to the psychologists?’ (PA, 129; Strawson 1992a, 326). Strawson repeats this point, while correcting Van Breda’s misunderstanding, in the following way:

I am aware of many ways of standing in relation to things in addition to that particular way which makes use of conceptual structures. But it seems to me that the study of these other relationships belongs elsewhere – in history, the social sciences, scientific research.

(PA, 130; Strawson 1992a, 327)

Of course we perceive things, and remember them, and so on, but the proper object of philosophy, again, is language use, not experience. Science takes care of the rest.

Obviously, we are back, then, with the question that embarrassed Urmson. Interestingly, this time the question is directed the other way, against the phenomenologists. Van Breda interrupts Strawson with the outburst: 'But you have to distinguish what you are doing from what the philologist does!' (PA, 130; Strawson 1992a, 327). Urmson could not give a very satisfactory account of how Oxford analysis differed from one particular empirical enterprise – linguistics; and now Strawson objects to including in the descriptive theme of philosophy anything except the use of linguistic expressions on the ground that anything but language use is the proper subject matter of some empirical science. It is small wonder that Van Breda's reaction is rather heated. We still lack a satisfactory account of how linguistic analysis is to be distinguished from lexicography and other branches of linguistics, but that does not seem to prevent Strawson from taking the distinction for granted, and using it as a basis for branding Van Breda's phenomenological agenda as one that properly belongs to psychology or the social sciences.

Strawson, however, does not seize the opportunity to clarify the question that Urmson left hanging. In fact, he ignores Van Breda's remark on the need to distinguish between philosophy and philology, and proceeds to respond instead to something else Van Breda says. Apparently it is not the case that he simply overlooks the question, or forgets it in the heat of the discussion, for Perelman raises a very similar issue a little later: 'If I do not understand how certain concepts work, I do not thereby encounter a philosophical problem, but only a philological one. A philosophical problem arises from encountering a difficulty, a contradiction, not just from simple ignorance' (PA, 135–6; Strawson 1992a, 329). Strawson responds as follows: 'It does, indeed, often arise out of a contradiction or a paradox. But it may also arise simply out of something which, in the course of our study, provokes our curiosity' (PA, 136; Strawson 1992a, 329). Perelman, obviously feeling that his point has not been properly addressed, retorts: 'But the instinct of curiosity which directs inquiry is not specifically philosophical. It underlies all intellectual disciplines, not philosophy alone' (ibid.). Unfortunately, however, we never receive any clear answer to the question how linguistic analysis differs from empirical linguistics, or how philosophical questions differ from linguistic questions. 'Facts about our concepts', surely, is what the lexicographer studies; and Strawson never ventures to say precisely what distinguishes the philosophical interest in such facts from that of the linguist.

When Ayer intervenes with the reconciliatory observation that Strawson exaggerates the differences between the Oxonian approach and that of the phenomenologists and thereby 'needlessly provoke[s] Father Van Breda and his friends' (PA, 136; Strawson 1992a, 329), this is of no help in resolving the

issue. In fact, Ayer himself repeats the contention that the purpose of stressing the linguistic element is ‘to avoid confusion between the inquiry philosophers conduct and that conducted in such sciences as ethnology, psychology, and history’ (PA, 137; Strawson 1992a, 330), and he even suggests that by questioning the primacy of the linguistic method, the phenomenologists fall (‘only too easily’) into a trap the Oxonians have set for them (*ibid.*). Surely, from the point of view of Van Breda and ‘his friends’, it is still unclear why the linguistic method should be thought better equipped to draw the distinction between philosophy and empirical science.

The discussion of Ryle’s provocative paper ‘Phenomenology versus “The Concept of Mind”’ leads into essentially the same blind alley. The paper is built around the fundamental distinction between ‘factual’ and ‘conceptual’ inquiries (cf. PA, 66; Ryle 1971a, 179). Ryle, in particular, tries to stage a confrontation between the allegedly muddled Husserlian conception of conceptual inquiries as ‘some super-inspection of some super-objects’ (PA, 66; Ryle 1971a, 180) and the more adequate understanding developed in *The Concept of Mind*. He suggests that the latter book aspires to hold conceptual inquiries more clearly and firmly apart from factual ones than the super-inspection of super-objects model is able to. Indeed, ‘[i]f any factual assertions are made in [*The Concept of Mind*], they are there through the author’s confusion of mind’ (PA, 75; Ryle 1971a, 188).<sup>9</sup> After Ryle’s paper, Merleau-Ponty launches a number of questions to the speaker, one of which, again, concerns ‘the distinction between factual and conceptual research’ (PA, 93; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 65). Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty also phrases an aspect of this question in terms of the relation between linguistic philosophy and ‘linguistic science’ (cf. PA, 94; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 66), Ryle answers as follows:

We all know that the chemist or the astronomer does not resolve the problems with which he is engaged while meditating in an armchair – at least not all [the problems?], nor all the time. They use some instruments, they employ some techniques which for them are appropriate. For one, a telescope, a spectroscope, the examination of photographs; for another, a balance, test tubes, and a Bunsen burner. See here what comes to my mind when speaking of research of fact. Nothing very mysterious, as you see. But what matters is that the questions of fact of this order are not the province of philosophy. One will never say that so and so is a better philosopher than so and so because so and so knows a fact of which the other is ignorant. In any case, and in order to respond to your question, the distinction is sufficiently clear to fulfill what we expect from it.

(PA, 96–7; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 68)

<sup>9</sup>The aim of the book, as Ryle describes it, is ‘not to increase what we know about minds, but to rectify the logical geography of the knowledge which we already possess’ (1949, 7); to ‘rectify the logic of mental-conduct concepts’ (1949, 16).

The striking thing about this reply is not that it ignores Merleau-Ponty's reference to the specific relation between linguistic analysis and the science of linguistics. After all, Strawson, too, ignored this question (twice), and Urmson's attempt to reply to a similar one was unsuccessful. The striking thing about the quote is rather that Ryle merely offers a few trivial examples of what is involved in doing empirical or factual research – examples that hardly inform anyone at Royaumont of something they did not already know – and *gives no indication whatsoever of what sort of thing 'conceptual research' is*. That the latter is not the sort of thing you do with a telescope or a Bunsen burner is obvious enough, but the question to which the continental philosophers at Royaumont were persistently seeking an answer – the question concerning the metaphilosophical convergences and differences between linguistic analysis and phenomenological analysis – is not clarified the least bit by Ryle's reply.

By now, the debate is firmly placed in a deadlock. The Continentals think that they are still owed an account of the philosophical import of linguistic analysis, and of how it differs from empirical studies of language; and the ordinary language philosophers think that all the phenomenologists' talk about the world and our relations to it merely refers confusedly to the proper subject matters of various empirical sciences. Is there any way this deadlock could have been avoided? I think there is, and in the remainder of this paper I want to sketch how I believe a more fruitful dialogue could – quite easily – have been established.

#### 4. CONCEPTS, ESSENCES AND REALITY

A useful point of departure for this discussion is a remark Jean Wahl makes in an attempt to mediate between Van Breda and Strawson. Wahl asks whether the term 'conceptual reality' does not

really denote, at bottom, reality itself? Being human, we must, unfortunately, (as Father Van Breda would, I think, agree) see reality more or less in conceptual terms. Thus the passages which Father Van Breda has used to indicate his disagreement with Mr. Strawson may also be used to suggest how they might be brought to agree.

(PA, 131; Strawson 1992a, 327)

I assume that the reason why Wahl feels he has to lament the fact that must see reality in conceptual terms is a Kantian worry that when we impose our concepts on what is presented to us in sensory experience, then we prevent ourselves from having any access to reality as it is 'in itself'. However, his suggestion can easily be detached from such (questionable) notions; and certainly the Husserlian Van Breda, who assents to Wahl's suggestion, would want to so detach it. Basically, then, what Wahl is saying is that to

speak of our ‘concepts’, in the way that philosophers would want to speak of concepts, is not to speak of something essentially distinct from the world, or reality, as it presents itself to human subjects. To speak of the ‘concept of mind’, for example, is, *inter alia* at least, to say something about what a mind is, what minded creatures are (to us). To say something about the concept of a promise, the concept of pain, and the concept of perception, is also to say something about what promises, pains and perceptions are. Construed in this way, the Oxford analysts’ agenda is certainly not to study some mysterious Platonic realm of abstract entities. Nor is it to study words as such. While the lexicographer can have a legitimate interest in delineating all the peculiar features of the use of the English word ‘mind’, this is surely not the philosopher’s task.<sup>10</sup>

What, then, is the task of the philosopher? J. L. Austin has a useful suggestion here. In the general discussion that ended the Royaumont Colloquium, Perelman returns to the question concerning the aims and method of linguistic analysis (PA, 331). In his response, Austin remarks that

we use the multiplicity of expressions with which the richness of our language furnishes us in order to direct our attention to the multiplicity and the richness of our experiences. Language serves us as interpreter for observing the living facts which constitute our experience, which, without it, we would tend to overlook ... This means that language illumines for us the complexity of life.

(PA, 333; translation adapted from Spiegelberg 1981, 84)

It is perhaps not entirely clear how one is to understand the ‘illumination of life’ that Austin here identifies as an aim of philosophical inquiry. ‘A Plea for Excuses’, which contains Austin’s most elaborate treatment of metaphilosophical questions, does not seem, at first blush at least, to throw much more light on the issue:

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not *merely* at words (or ‘meanings’, whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. For this reason I think it might be better to use, for this way of doing philosophy, some less misleading name ... for instance, ‘linguistic phenomenology’.

(Austin 1979, 182)

What is clear, however, is that Austin denies that, as philosophers, we are merely interested in words. We are, he says, equally interested in something

<sup>10</sup>‘Mind’ has no exact equivalent in several European languages; but that does not render Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* worthless for those who philosophize in one of those languages.

else, which he variously identifies as ‘experiences’, ‘life’, ‘realities’ and ‘phenomena’. Attending reflectively to ‘what we would say when’ serves to illuminate, or sharpen our awareness of, ‘living facts’, experiences or phenomena that we might otherwise overlook. The point, it would seem, is to look at the world, or our life, *through* language. It is thus the world, with the *structure, meaning or significance that it has for us*, that is the focus of Austin’s philosophical interest. That is why he can talk, interchangeably, about ‘the realities’ and ‘the phenomena’.<sup>11</sup> When we sharpen our awareness of words, we become more acutely aware of the realities *as they are manifested* to us: the phenomena. Yet what could be the point of this attempt at achieving reflective clarity regarding the phenomena if not precisely to understand something about the appearance and structure of the world in which we live?<sup>12</sup>

Note that this interpretation of the passage from ‘A Plea for Excuses’ separates its point sharply from another point Austin sometimes makes, for Austin claims, at Royaumont and elsewhere, that there is no fundamental difference between philosophy and other types of inquiry. In particular, he envisions a time when ‘philosophers, grammarians, and numerous other students of language’ would team up and give birth to ‘a true and comprehensive *science of language*’ (Austin 1979, 232). In this context, Austin questions whether ‘there will prove to be any ultimate boundary between “logical grammar” and a revised and enlarged *Grammar*’ (ibid.; cf. PA, 347–8). Whatever precisely Austin had in mind as a common objective for this comprehensive science of language, there is obviously nothing that prevents philosophers from collaborating with scientists from other fields on themes of mutual interest. Currently, for example, an abundance of such cross-disciplinary research takes place under the heading of ‘cognitive science’; yet it is something else entirely to imagine that philosophy ceases to be a distinct type of inquiry. Here is the important point: precisely when we emphasize, with Austin, that the philosophical interest centres on the world *as seen through* language, as thematized reflectively with regard to its meaning and significance for us, then it becomes clear that this is not an interest that the grammarian or lexicographer has. For the latter, surely, words themselves are the objects of study; the aim is to gather knowledge about words and their ‘behaviour’. For the philosopher, however, the examination of words serves a different end. Therefore, it is confused – in fact, it is a return precisely to the confusion that reigned at Royaumont – to hold that Austin’s contention that we look not merely at words, but also at the realities or phenomena, misleadingly ‘suggests a view of philosophy as an empirical investigation’ (Hacker 1996, 175).

<sup>11</sup>Mundle (1979, 85–6) utterly fails to understand this passage.

<sup>12</sup>I interpret Cavell’s (2002, 99) remarks on the point of Austin’s philosophy as suggesting a similar reading.

However, once we have interpreted ‘conceptual reality’ in such a way as to include ‘phenomena’, that is, the world as it is given to us, there is no obvious transition to the claim that the *only* way to study ‘conceptual reality’ is by examining the actual use of linguistic expressions. Why can we not equally well establish contact with that which we wish to understand by looking at various sorts of things as they appear to us in various ordinary experiences? It might be helpful to look at the ordinary use of mental predicates or ‘perception’ words; but could it not be equally useful to reflect on our experiences of mental phenomena (our own and those of others) and perceptual experiences?

Strawson and Ryle will object, of course, that the examination of experience is the proper domain of the psychologist, into which the philosopher has no business intruding. However, as the discussion at Royaumont shows, this objection is not well founded. It is not clear why it could not be said with equal right that the ordinary language philosophers intrude into the domain of the lexicographer. The only reason we have been given at the Royaumont seminar for thinking that the latter is not the case is Urmson’s suggestion that the philosopher’s *interest* in linguistic use is different from that of the linguist and the lexicographer. This, however, brings out the crucial point that *what distinguishes the philosopher from the empirical scientists of various stripes is not that the philosopher studies a particular region of reality with which no empirical science is concerned*. Rather, it must have something to do with the *special interest* that governs the philosophical investigation.

This point, I think, is one on which phenomenologists and Oxford philosophers would all want to insist. Unfortunately, however, each party seems to view the other party as clinging to some notion of philosophy as having some special subject matter, in the sense of some realm of entities that it is the special privilege of philosophers to examine. Van Breda, for example, interprets Strawson’s views as implying that philosophy should examine its own realm of abstract objects; but, as we have seen, the moment Wahl formulates this interpretation lucidly enough for Strawson to see what he is being asked to commit himself to, the latter immediately abandons the term ‘conceptual reality’.

In return, Ryle, as we have also seen already, accuses Husserl of adhering to a version of the same questionable view. ‘Husserl’, says Ryle, ‘was so bewitched by his Platonic idea that conceptual enquiries were scrutinies of the super-objects that he called ‘Essences’ that he persuaded himself that these enquiries should and would grow up into another science’ (PA, 67; Ryle 1971a, 180–1). However, the ‘Platonic dream of a descriptive science of Essences is shattered’, Ryle insists, for concepts are ‘not things’ (PA, 75; Ryle 1971a, 187–8) – not even ‘super-things’. The task of post-Tractarian linguistic analysis is hence to ‘rescue conceptual investigations from the menace of ineffability without re-assimilating them to inspections of entities’ (PA, 75; Ryle 1971a, 188). Except for the caricature of

Husserl,<sup>13</sup> there is not much for the phenomenologists to disagree with in this. Whatever precisely the method of phenomenology is, it does not consist in the examination of some special realm of super-objects. When phenomenologists talk about the ‘essence Colour’, for example, this is merely a special, verbally hypostasized way of presenting general truths about what it takes for something to be a colour. Husserl’s rather misleading talk of *Wesensschauung* (‘intuiting essences’) notwithstanding, phenomenologists do not pretend to establish such truths in mysterious acts of quasi-sensory perception. Rather, they employ a method of imaginative variation that does not differ fundamentally from methods occasionally employed by analytic philosophers.<sup>14</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, Merleau-Ponty prefaces his long series of questions to Ryle with the remark:

I have also had the impression, while listening to Mr. Ryle, that what he was saying was not so strange to us, and that the distance, if there is any, is one that he puts between us rather than one I find there.

(PA, 93; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 65)

Phenomenologists, too, want to create a space for philosophy that makes it neither a branch of the empirical sciences, nor a dubious super-science of Platonic super-objects.

Once we are clear that neither party wants to embrace the view that philosophy is distinguished by some special object of study, one of the major obstacles to a fruitful dialogue has been removed. It cannot be the case, then, that the bare fact that the phenomenologist talks about our relations to the world is enough to show that he or she is invading the domain of sociology or psychology. Nor is the bare fact that the ordinary language philosopher proposes to study the actual use of linguistic expressions enough to demonstrate that he or she has failed to distinguish philosophy from lexicography or some other branch of linguistics. For it is *not the object examined, but the interest or aim of the examination* that is supposed to demarcate the philosophical investigation from various empirical investigations of the same range of objects.

One sometimes has the impression that a further obstacle to genuine dialogue was a curious tendency, when faced with the other party’s favoured

<sup>13</sup>Which Van Breda had already rectified:

I am unable to hide my surprise at having heard Mr. Ryle, again just now, reduce Husserlian philosophy to a philosophy of Platonic essences. I believe that the present state of Husserl studies . . . do[es] not any longer permit this reduction of Husserlian phenomenology to a simply eidetic philosophy, above all, eidetic in the sense of Plato.

(PA, 85; Merleau-Ponty 1992, 59)

<sup>14</sup>Including ordinary language philosophers, as Thomasson (2007) persuasively argues. Husserl’s most elaborate discussion of the method of *Wesensschauung* is found in section 87 of his (1973).

approach, to ‘forget’ this point, crucial as it would be in each party’s defence of its own metaphilosophical outlook. In particular, some of the Oxonians apparently felt justified in accusing the phenomenologists of usurping the domains of empirical science because of the simple fact that they proposed to discuss our ‘relations to the world’; yet they could only do so by conveniently ‘forgetting’ what they would themselves insist on in defence of their own method: that it is not the object singled out for description that distinguishes philosophy from other inquiries, but the interests and aims that the description is intended to serve.

The question that should have been the focus of discussion, therefore, is the question concerning the proper aims and interests of the philosopher. An answer to this question, on which the Oxford analysts would insist, is that linguistic analysis aims to dissolve philosophical puzzles and paradoxes. Most of them would maintain, however, that this is only part of the story – that there is more to linguistic analysis than such ‘therapeutic’ efforts.<sup>15</sup> This invites the question what those further aims and interests might be. In the next section, I offer a brief sketch of one Oxford philosopher’s answer.

## 5. COMMUNICATION ESTABLISHED

One thing that is striking about Van Breda’s and Merleau-Ponty’s contributions to the discussion at Royaumont, including their responses to Ryle’s caricature of Husserl, is that they do not seem very concerned to emphasize the ‘essential’ or ‘necessary’ nature of phenomenological claims. Indeed, Van Breda, as we have seen, seems to downplay somewhat the ‘eidetic’ feature of Husserl’s philosophy. One reason for this is surely that the Continentals do not see any crucial difference between their own views and those of the Oxford analysts on this particular point. I think there is another, more fundamental reason as well – one that surfaces, albeit rather obliquely, in Van Breda’s discussion with Strawson. This reason has to do with the ultimate point of the reflective, philosophical enterprise. One way to express the phenomenological construal of this point is to say that phenomenology has a *transcendental* agenda. It is this agenda, and not the putatively ‘eidetic’ or ‘necessary’, or indeed ‘conceptual’ nature of philosophical propositions, which is the key to understanding the aim of phenomenological philosophy. In this section, I want briefly to inquire to what extent phenomenologists and *some* ordinary language philosophers could have converged on such a description of the philosophical agenda.

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Strawson (1992a, ch. 1). Ryle contrasts his own ‘chief, *thought not sole*, interest’ in linguistic ‘trouble-makers’ and ‘paradox-generators’ with Austin’s broader interests (Ryle 1971b, 14–15; my emphasis). Wittgenstein is frequently credited with a purely ‘therapeutic’ conception of the point of analysis, but I believe the accuracy of that characterization is questionable (cf. Overgaard and Zahavi 2009).

In the discussion of his Royaumont paper, Strawson says that ‘the philosopher’s principal task is the understanding of how our thought about things works’ (Strawson 1992a, 324). However, it is hardly immediately clear why the study of how our thought *works* is a philosophical one, let alone the principal philosophical task. With what are such disciplines as cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience concerned if not, *inter alia*, the question of how our thought ‘works’? The trouble is, of course, that Strawson’s description of the philosopher’s task here is just as ambiguous as Van Breda’s in terms of our ‘relation to the world’ or ‘our being-in-the-world’. Someone might think that Strawson’s characterization does not lend itself as naturally to a scientific classification as Van Breda’s does, because Strawson, unlike Van Breda, leaves the things themselves, the ‘world’, to science. This would be very naive. Our thought and language, too, are part of the ‘world’ and thus, legitimate objects of empirical science.

There is, however, one way of interpreting Strawson’s remark so as to make it indicate a possible genuine difference between philosophical inquiry and other types of inquiry. For if Strawson is trying to make a distinction between the various empirical studies of things in the world, and the reflective philosophical study of the ‘conditions of possibility’ of such empirical studies, then his point is a familiar one, as well as one that would be congenial to the phenomenologists. If, in other words, the point is that the aim of philosophy is to elucidate and make intelligible ‘transcendentally’ the meaning or conceptual structure of the world in which we find ourselves, then there is no reason for Merleau-Ponty or Van Breda to disagree.

It is not my intention here to reopen the discussion of transcendental arguments. Rather, I simply want to point to a reading of Strawson’s conception of the aim of what he calls ‘descriptive metaphysics’, which puts him almost in transcendental-phenomenological waters.<sup>16</sup> Descriptive metaphysics attempts ‘to understand our non-philosophical thought’ (Strawson 1992b, 110), or the ‘conceptual equipment’ with which we operate in non-philosophical life (*ibid.*, 6). In one sense, of course, we already understand this well enough. We are able to operate with this equipment. We interact with others, for example; we grasp what they are saying, what they want and how they feel, at least a good deal of the time. Sometimes, we are uncertain about what they are thinking or feeling; at other times, we feel certain, but are fooled. But in general we know well enough what sorts of things are other persons, what counts as another being in real pain as opposed to faking, and so forth. As Strawson emphasizes, however, ‘the practical mastery of our conceptual equipment in no way

<sup>16</sup>I do not, of course, claim that Austin, Ryle or Urmson would have followed Strawson in espousing transcendental philosophy. But nor is this necessary for the point I am making. For *communication* to be established, it is enough that there is substantial convergence between the views of just one card-carrying phenomenologist and one card-carrying Oxford analyst.

entails the possession of a clear, explicit understanding of the principles which govern it, the theory of our practice' (Strawson 1992b, 7). This reflective understanding is precisely what the descriptive metaphysician aims to provide.

Strawson is explicit that an important part of this task consists in exhibiting conditions for the possibility of central conceptual capacities or types of experience.<sup>17</sup> In chapter three of *Individuals*, for example, he argues 'that it is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness to oneself, in the way one does, that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself' (Strawson 1959, 99). One can say of a philosophy that aims to make this sort of point that it describes 'the actual structure of our thought about the world' (*ibid.*, 9), as long as it is understood that it is not a question of the structures and processes of our thinking, considered in isolation from the world outside our heads (if, indeed, such isolation makes sense). Rather, it is a question about the meaningful or 'conceptual' order of the world as it appears to us and as we engage with it – in thought, perception, feeling, action and so on. Thus, if the concept of a person is a primitive one (*ibid.*, 101), then this says not just something about the way we *think* about the world, it also says something about the world we perceive, the world in which we act. This is a world in which there are persons, in which we talk to persons, greet them and see them greeting us, fall in love with them, and so on, and in which these types of entity have a peculiar status that cannot be reconstructed by combining a *res extensa* with a *res cogitans*.

Interestingly, Strawson suggests that 'descriptive metaphysics' cannot proceed via conceptual analysis alone. In his Royaumont paper, he says:

It is possible to stick to the scrupulous examination of the actual behaviour of words, and to claim that this is the only sure path in descriptive philosophy. But it seems to me that if we do no more than this, then the relations and the structures which we shall discover will not be sufficiently general, or sufficiently far-reaching, to satisfy our urge for full metaphysical understanding. For when we ask ourselves questions about the use of a certain expression, the answers we give ourselves, revealing as they are at a certain level, presuppose, rather

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Strawson (1959, 16, 29, 35, and *passim*; Strawson 1985, 22). A frequently recurring variation in Strawson's book on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is that philosophy attempts to articulate the general structure of any experience that we could make 'truly' or 'fully' 'intelligible to ourselves' (cf. Strawson 1966, 11, 49, 108, 120, 128, 259, 271). Strawson writes, for example, that 'the fulfilment of the objectivity condition is not sufficient to make self-ascription possible, i.e. to make fully intelligible the notion of self-ascription of experiences' (*ibid.*, 106). It seems to me that there are at least two reasons why it might be preferable to speak of 'conditions of intelligibility' instead of 'conditions of possibility'. The first is that it bypasses some questions and objections that can be raised about the notion of 'possibility'. For example, it shifts the burden of proof on to an objector Strawson considers in his (1985, 22–3). The second is that it is more in line with the thought that the aim of the philosophical reflective enterprise is *understanding*. Unfortunately, this matter cannot be pursued further here.

than exhibit, the general structural elements which the metaphysician wishes to discover.

(PA, 117; Strawson 1992a, 319; cf. 1959, 9–10)

A famous example of the full demand for understanding not being met by descriptions of the use of expressions emerges in chapter three of *Individuals*. In this chapter, as just mentioned, he argues for the ‘primitiveness of the concept of a person’ (Strawson 1959, 101). It is to *persons*, and not minds, brains or bodies that we ascribe psychological states; and in our conceptual scheme the concept of a person is basic in the sense that it cannot be analysed in terms of, for example, the concepts of ‘mind’ and ‘body’, cannot be reconstructed by any conjunction of the latter. So far so good: these may be interpreted as reminders of some aspects of the ‘behaviour’ of our mental concepts. Strawson, however, recognizes that, valuable as these points are, they fall short of the kind of full elucidation that we, as philosophers, seek.

For when we have acknowledged the primitiveness of the concept of a person . . . we may still want to ask what it is in the natural facts which makes it intelligible that we should have this concept, and to ask this in the hope of a non-trivial answer.

(Strawson 1959, 111)<sup>18</sup>

It is not enough to be told *that* the concept of a person is primitive; we also want to know, in a sense, *why* it is primitive; that is, we want to know what it is about our world, or part of our world, that makes it natural for the concept of a person to have the status it has.

How is one to conduct this sort of inquiry? How does one go about unearthing the conditions that make the primitiveness of the concept of a ‘person’ fully intelligible to us? At Royaumont, Strawson confesses that he ‘can offer no general recipe for achieving the sort of comprehension I have in mind here’ (PA, 117; Strawson 1992a, 319). But it seems to me that one very natural way of attempting to do it is by reflecting on how other people appear to us, how we experience them, in non-philosophical life; that is, by doing phenomenology. Phenomenology can help to reveal what persons, bodies and so on, are to us; and this, surely, can throw the right kind of ‘metaphysical’ light on the conceptual connections that Strawson has elaborated.

<sup>18</sup>Grice expresses a similar view when he states that

a philosopher who has reached a decision about how an expression, or family of expressions, is used may well want (and often *should* want) to go on to ask such questions as ‘Why do we use these expressions this way, rather than some other way?’

(Grice 1989, 179)

See also Cavell (2002, 99).

In fact, and with this observation I will end this section, in some texts Strawson is not at all dismissive of phenomenology. At Royaumont in 1958, Strawson might have presented himself as having little sympathy for the phenomenological perspective. Later, in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, discussing an allegedly Wittgensteinian, naturalistic reduction of ‘the matter of meaning’, much of Strawson’s discussion turns on whether the reductive account can ‘do justice to our experience’, ‘do justice to the phenomenology of thought’ (Strawson 1985, 78–9, 81, 91–2). The precise context is of little significance here. What matters is this: in the later book, Strawson clearly seems willing to accept that phenomenological considerations – centring on the question of whether philosophical accounts do justice to the way we experience things – are legitimate considerations to introduce in a philosophical discussion. With this concession, he seems to me to open up at least one possible route for taking metaphysical inquiry beyond the examination of the ‘behaviour of words’, without depriving it of its entitlement to the adjective ‘descriptive’. Moreover, and at least equally important in the context of the present paper, this concession removes the last remains of an obstacle to a genuine rapprochement between phenomenology and Oxford philosophy.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Let me end by briefly recapitulating the main conclusions to be drawn from this return to the Royaumont Colloquium. Royaumont undoubtedly was a failure. However, I submit that, philosophical prejudices and arrogance apart, this was primarily due to two factors:

- 1) Each party tended to view the other either as subscribing to a Platonist view of philosophy as a ‘super science’ of special, abstract entities, or else as confusing the proper philosophical domain with that of some empirical science.
- 2) Partially responsible for this was an apparent tendency on both sides to forget, when listening to the other party, something that both parties equally depended on: namely (cf. (d) below) the crucial notion that it was *not the object singled out for examination*, but the *aim or purpose of the examination*, which was supposed to distinguish philosophy from the empirical sciences.

The collapse of communication was thus due more to a certain methodological blind spot than to real, insurmountable differences. If the account given on the preceding pages is right, then at least some Oxford analysts:

- (a) would defend the idea of philosophy as a study distinct from empirical science;

- (b) would stress that philosophy should be descriptive;
- (c) believe that the essential difference between philosophy and science has nothing to do with a special subject matter or domain of objects unique to philosophy;
- (d) would distinguish philosophy from science by its special aim or purpose;
- (e) would identify that purpose as a reflective, second-order elucidation of the structure of our ‘thought’ about the world – or of the world as thought about (as experienced by us).

In addition:

- (f) There is some reason for thinking that, had the discussion not ended in the deadlock in which it ended, at least Strawson would have assented that an objective of such philosophical reflection is to make explicit the ‘conditions of intelligibility’ of such thought (or, again, of the world as presenting itself to us in the way that it does).
- (g) Strawson was ready to acknowledge a need to push philosophical inquiry beyond the assembling of ‘grammatical reminders’.
- (h) Finally, there is some reason to think that he might have been brought round to regarding phenomenological analysis as a legitimate approach to adopt in at least some philosophical investigations.

Due to obvious limitations of space, I have offered only a few hints as to the metaphilosophy of phenomenology.<sup>19</sup> However, I think it is uncontroversial to claim that most phenomenologists would agree with all eight points just mentioned. If so, the field is open for a rapprochement between phenomenology and at least one brand of analytical philosophy. *Pace* Dummett, there is no need to go back to ‘the point of divergence’ in Frege and the early Husserl. It is enough to go back to Royaumont.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>I have offered detailed accounts of this elsewhere (cf. Overgaard 2004, chs 1–3; Overgaard 2008).

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