Sir Peter Frederick Strawson (1919–2006), philosopher, was born on 23 November 1919 at 55 Castlebar Road, Ealing, London, the second son and second of four children (three sons and a daughter) of Cyril Walter Strawson (1888–1937) and his wife, Nellie Dora, née Jewell (1890–1975), both schoolteachers. His younger brother, John
(b. 1921), became a major-general in the British army and a distinguished military historian. Between them he and Strawson produced more than twenty books.

Strawson was educated at Christ's College in Finchley, from where he won an open scholarship to read English at St John's College, Oxford. Arriving there in 1937 he decided instead to read philosophy, politics, and economics. This was primarily because he had discovered the attractions of philosophy and his own talent for it, but also because he wished to pursue a course that might enable him to understand better the impending war and its political consequences. In philosophy he was tutored by J. D. (John) Mabbott, who later became the president of St John's, and also by H. P. (Paul) Grice, an extremely brilliant philosopher, with whom Strawson subsequently both collaborated and on some issues fundamentally disagreed. In 1940 Strawson was, amusingly and shamefully, awarded a second in finals. His philosophy answers produced admiration in one youthful examiner, Isaiah Berlin, but disapproval in an older one, A. D. (Sandy) Lindsay, the master of Balliol. They compromised, to Berlin's shame, on a second. Rumour had it that Berlin's ability to support Strawson was hampered by his having lost the disputed scripts in a taxi, though this may be apocryphal.

After leaving Oxford in the summer of 1940 Strawson was called up into the army, serving first in the Royal Artillery, before reaching the rank of captain in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. He was demobilized in 1946, having on 27 October the previous year married Grace Hall Martin (b. 1919), on whom he had conferred the nickname Ann, by which she was subsequently known. Peter and Ann Strawson shared the same date of birth. They had four children, Julia (b. 1950), Galen (b. 1952), later a philosopher, Robert (b. 1954), and Virginia (b. 1961).

Strawson was committed to a career in philosophy, but was handicapped by his degree. He went first to the University College of North Wales at Bangor, as an assistant lecturer, but after winning the John Locke scholarship in 1946, and receiving the backing of Gilbert Ryle, he went to University College, Oxford, initially as a lecturer, and then, from 1948, a fellow. He spent his career, and life, in Oxford, although he travelled widely, principally in America, Europe, China, and India, where he was especially highly regarded. He remained a fellow of University College until 1968, when he became Gilbert Ryle's successor as Waynflete professor of metaphysical philosophy, which meant transferring to Magdalen College. He held this post until he retired in 1987. Thereafter he continued an active philosophical life, resuming his working relation with University College, which provided him with rooms until his death. He received many honours during his life, most notably election as a fellow of the British Academy in 1960 and an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1971. He was knighted in 1977, and a volume devoted to him in the famous and exclusive Library of Living Philosophers series was published in 1998.
Strawson re-entered Oxford philosophy at the beginning of what was to prove its golden period. Around him was an array of highly talented and intellectually energetic philosophers, including Grice, Richard Hare, G. A. Paul, Geoffrey Warnock, J. O. Urmson, and Anthony Quinton, constituting a terrific powerhouse for the subject, along with the more senior figures of Ryle and J. L. Austin, the latter being the main influence on the group, given his combination of a frightening critical presence with a conception of philosophy as properly done only by a close attention to language as it is used, which seemed, initially at least, to represent a novel and liberating approach to the subject. Strawson eventually emerged as the most formidable philosopher within that group, not only because of a quite remarkable and wide-ranging creativity and an unsurpassed speed of understanding and critical response, but also because he helped to overturn the Austinian paradigm, both by having in many people's eyes the better of Austin in a famous disagreement between them about truth, but also by simply doing plausible philosophy, especially in his book *Individuals* (1959), in a non-Austinian but not obviously unsuccessful way. Strawson led Oxford away from the Austinian straitjacket.

One of Strawson's main interests was the philosophy of language, and it was in that area that he achieved international fame when he published, in *Mind* in 1950, what was almost his first article, 'On referring'. In it he criticized a widely accepted theory of Bertrand Russell's about the role in English of the definite article 'the'. Russell thought that 'The F is G' should be analysed as equivalent to 'There is one and only one F and it is G'. Strawson, by contrast, held that there is no uniform way to capture the role of 'the' and that there are uses that Russell's analysis does not cover, namely where it forms part of an expression picking out an object, rather than saying there is such a thing. Strawson introduced the notion of presupposition to capture the relation between such uses of 'the F' and the idea that there is an F, a notion that linguists subsequently took up. Strawson wrote much after that about reference, expanding and modifying his views, but always maintaining that Russell's theory was inadequate. His first book, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (1952), which was a study of the nature of formal logic, explored among other things the issue, related to the dispute with Russell, of how far expressions in ordinary language have the same meaning as expressions in formal languages. Strawson's view was that ordinary language has no precise logic. This was another theme in Strawson's writings about language, which placed him in opposition to some popular systems of his time, including the approach to language championed by the American philosopher Donald Davidson. Strawson himself did not construct a theory as to how language functions, but some later developments in linguistics indicated how it might be done.

Strawson described his book *Individuals* (1959) as an exercise in descriptive metaphysics. The aim in part 1, which immediately attracted considerable attention, was to describe the types of thing that we fundamentally refer to, an issue continuing his focus on reference. Strawson argues that they are bodies and persons, and he provides an account of how bodies in space and time constitute a
framework that enables our thought about things, as well as an account of how we think about ourselves. In part 2, which attracted far less attention, he offered a theory of the distinction between subjects and predicates. As well as describing our thought Strawson argues that scepticism about our thought can be dismissed, since employing our basic categories even to locate claims to be uncertain about requires that we have knowledge of such facts. *Individuals* was therefore a work of metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language.

Strawson had a deep knowledge of the history of philosophy, and illuminated his own thoughts by relating them to the ideas of important figures from the past, for example, Gottfried Leibniz in the case of *Individuals*. In his next book, *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), Strawson engaged with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. He attempted to explain Kant’s thought and to sift the good from the bad in it, dropping transcendental idealism and the idea of the synthetic a priori, and extracting (from the *Transcendental Deduction* and the *Analogy*) a rich, extended argument designed to show that it is a condition for self-consciousness that one’s experience is of objects that are not oneself. Again the ultimate target was scepticism. Strawson’s book acted as a major stimulus to regenerate an interest in Kant among analytical philosophers.

Strawson wrote three other important books. In *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (1974), a book of which he was especially fond, he developed his approach to the distinction between subject and predicate and embedded it in a highly abstract account of grammar. *Scepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (1985), Strawson’s Woodbridge lectures at Columbia University, presented a further response to scepticism, and a defence of a relaxed realism about secondary qualities, meaning, value, and the mind. Finally, in *Analysis and Metaphysics* (1992), Strawson, with the aim of introducing philosophy to the reader, explained and engaged in philosophy according to his own conception of it. Strawson also published a large number of important articles, ranging over language, metaphysics, epistemology, and the history of philosophy, including a highly influential one entitled ‘Freedom and resentment’ (published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* in 1960), and the most important of these were republished in collections, notably *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (1971) and *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (1974).

Strawson’s main preoccupation was to oppose the distortions about our language, thought, and knowledge that philosophers characteristically generate when they approach our thought with metaphysical or epistemological prejudices. We cannot justify our scheme from outside, nor do we need to reduce parts of it to other parts to maintain their validity, nor can we dispense with it. Two distortions he combatted repeatedly were the mis-descriptions of experience attractive to empiricists like A. J. Ayer, and the scepticism about meaning attractive to the American philosopher W. V. Quine. He aimed to contribute to our understanding by removing these distortions and displaying links, dependences, and structure
within our conceptual scheme. Strawson’s aim to remove distortion made him similar to Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher whom he admired, but Strawson’s more constructive analyses represent a dissimilarity. Strawson contributed to the discussion of a very wide range of topics. It is a measure of his importance that his work was discussed by the leading philosophers of his time, including Russell, Wilfrid Sellars, Quine, Hilary Putnam, Michael Dummett, Davidson, and Saul Kripke. A large number of books and editions of journals had, even before his death, been devoted to his thought.

Strawson was primarily committed to doing philosophy well, part of that being a philosophy teacher, a role in which he was superb, both with undergraduates and graduates. He accepted, without relish or enthusiasm, the administrative roles that Oxford required of him, which he performed diligently. Unlike, for example, Freddie Ayer or Bernard Williams, he had no desire to contribute to public debates about morality, nor any desire to be a famous intellectual. His passions were more private. As he put it, ‘philosophy, friends and family apart, my life has been enriched by the enjoyment of literature, landscape, architecture, and the company of clever and beautiful women’ (Hahn, 21). He read and could quote vast quantities of English literature, especially poetry, which he himself also wrote, and he averred that a poet is what he would have most liked to be. This side to him, though, came out in his own writings, which avoided jargon and modish formalism, but were stylish, elegant, and distinctive. Indeed, he personified elegance, in manner, appearance, and speech. He was extremely mild mannered, which was somewhat ironic given that he focused on resentment and anger in his account of freedom. He was witty and could be unserious, playing long military games in his garden. Above all he exuded an apparently effortless intelligence. His students described encounters with him as like encounters with God. His speed of response to questions so impressed G. A. Paul, his first colleague at University College, that he compared Strawson to a chocolate dispensing machine: you put in a question and out came an answer.

Strawson continued publishing, lecturing, and taking part in philosophical discussion after his retirement, with no apparent loss in critical acuity. He grew, without complaint, frailer over time, despite retaining a capacity to out-walk most of those around him. He died of acute renal failure and colitis in the John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, on 13 February 2006, and was buried at Wolvercote cemetery, Oxford, on 27 February. On 8 July 2006 there was a gathering in Magdalen College, Oxford, to celebrate his life, and a group of distinguished people, including Mary Warnock, his brother John, Tom Nagel, and John Searle, spoke movingly of him as a person and a philosopher.
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