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# From Mystical Experience to Biological Consciousness: A Pilgrim's Progress?

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## Abstract

*I recount the history of a thought process leading from an adolescent interest in mystical experience to an article entitled 'Is consciousness a brain process?' (Place 1956) in which I gave an affirmative answer to that question. A psychological research project designed to demonstrate the adaptive function of a personality transformation brought about through mystical experience becomes an attempt to resolve the mind-body problem through an empirical evaluation of the hypothesis that consciousness is a behaviour-controlling process in the brain. The mystic's insistence on the inadequacy of words to describe such experiences leads through the logical positivist's claim that religious language is nonsense, to the view that nothing that introspecting subjects say about their experiences is inconsistent with anything the physiologist might say about the brain processes in which on this view they consist.*

## I. 'Is consciousness a brain process?'

This paper records a thought process which led from a childhood interest in religion, through an adolescent interest in mystical experience as a psychological phenomenon to the publication in the *British Journal of Psychology* for 1956 of a paper entitled 'Is consciousness a brain process?'. In that paper:

"The thesis that consciousness is a process in the brain is put forward as a reasonable scientific hypothesis, not to be dismissed on logical grounds alone."  
(Place, 1956, p.44)

Although its impact on the psychologists to whom it was addressed has never been as great, that paper marks a watershed in *philosophical discussion* of the mind-body problem, one whose impact, though by and large restricted to professional philosophers in the English-speaking

world, had an effect comparable to that of Descartes' *Meditations* more than three hundred years earlier. Before its thesis was drawn to the attention of philosophers by J.J.C. Smart in his 1959 paper 'Sensations and brain processes', it was taken more or less for granted that whatever answer to the mind-body problem is true, materialism must be false. Today the opposite is the case. It is equally widely assumed by philosophers that some form of materialism or "physicalism" must be true.

My adolescent interest in mystical experience taught me three things that contributed to the thesis I formulated in 'Is consciousness a brain process?':

- 1). The *summum bonum* lies not so much in the immortality of the individual human consciousness as its ultimate annihilation. This makes the conclusion that consciousness dies with the brain much less repugnant, even from a religious standpoint than it might otherwise have been.
- 2). An individual's private experience has a powerful transforming influence on the way that individual behaves. This implies that theories such as psycho-physical parallelism and epiphenomenalism which imply that there is no causal influence of experience on behaviour must be false.
- 3). It is impossible to capture adequately in words the character or "qualia" of a private experience. When we describe what it is like to have a particular experience, we are not ascribing any kind of property to the experience itself. We are simply comparing it with the kind of experience which typically accompanies a sensory encounter with an object or situation of a particular kind, the acquisition of particular belief or which typically induces a particular type of emotional response. Once we appreciate that such descriptions are only similes, we realise, as I put it in my paper,

"that there is nothing that the introspecting subject says about his conscious experiences which is inconsistent with anything the physiologist might want to say about the brain processes which cause him to describe the environment and his consciousness of that environment in the way he does." (Place, 1956, p. 50)

## **II Parental influences and the discovery of religion**

In the paper of which this is a précis, I traced the story of my interest in religion back to an apparently secure and affluent childhood in the North Riding of Yorkshire during the 1930s and to the attitude of my parents to such matters. Here I shall mention only the most salient points of this story:

- 1). Neither my father or my mother attached much importance to religion, either in their own lives nor, apart from my mother's non-conformist and anti-Catholic prejudices, in their children's upbringing.
- 2). Both my parents were profoundly influenced by the Darwinian theory of evolution by variation and natural selection, my father because the popular image of "nature red in tooth and claw" fitted his experience in business, my mother because of her and her father's scientific training.
- 3). I first became fascinated with religion in all its aspects, beliefs, language, rituals, music, architecture and vestments, when at the age of 8 I was sent to a boarding preparatory school in the northern suburbs of London. Unusually for an institution of its size, the school had its own private chapel in which the rites of the Anglican Church were celebrated every Sunday.

4). I trace my fascination with religion partly to the novelty of the experience of religious worship, partly to the trauma of being precipitated for the first time into the grim struggle for survival which my father had taught me to expect in the cruel world outside the protection of our comfortable home, but chiefly to a deep sense of helplessness and insecurity bred by my father's age (he was 52 when I was born), his indifferent health, his constant re-iteration both of his own mortality and of the fragile nature of the affluence he had created for us, and what was for me at the time the totally mysterious process whereby he had created it.

5). Having become fascinated by religion, I soon became aware, due to the conflict between my mother's non-conformist religious background and the Anglican beliefs and practices I was experiencing at school, to differences in religious belief. That such differences should persist seemed to me intolerable, and I can remember at the age of about 10 resolving that when I was older I would settle this matter once and for all by arranging a congress of the leaders of different faiths and knock heads together until some consensus on such matters was reached. A naive idea no doubt, but one which, as I hope to show, foreshadowed what was to come.

### **III Mysticism and the evolution of a research project**

I discovered mysticism in the spring of 1940 when I was 15 and World War II had been going for less than a year. I was introduced to it through Evelyn Underhill's (1911/1930) book, *Mysticism*. I was attracted to mysticism for two reasons:

1). It appeared to offer a way, not so much of controlling, as of redirecting what I then saw as my own unacceptable aggressive and sexual impulses, while at the same time giving the moral strength to withstand both the horrors that the war was then threatening to inflict on all of us, my own death and that of my parents, particularly my elderly father.

2). It presented religion not as a set of beliefs and a set of rituals which make sense only in the light of those beliefs, but as a personality-transforming psychological process, one which evidently transcended the particular religious tradition in terms of whose imagery and symbolism the process is described and expressed. This meant that when, later in the same year (1940), I encountered in the pages of a book entitled *The Churches and Modern Thought* by Vivian Phelips (1906/1931) the arguments of the so-called "rationalists", using that term, in the sense of someone who puts rational argument and scientific evidence before faith in deciding matters of religious belief, I was ready with the counter-argument that although all religious *doctrines* are either demonstrably false or at best undecidable, there is no denying the empirical facts of mystical experience and the personality transformation wrought thereby.

It was Phelips' book and his discussion of mysticism in particular that re-awakened the idea that, as I have already described, had come to me some five years before, that it was my mission in life to settle the issue of differences in religious belief once and for all. Now, however, I saw it, not as a matter of knocking heads together in some gigantic congress of religious leaders, but as a research project designed to demonstrate the reality and adaptive utility, in the Darwinian sense, of the personality-transformation induced by mystical experience. In order to equip myself to carry out this project, I needed to study two disciplines, psychology and social anthropology, before specialising in the psychology and anthropology of religion and religious experience in general and mystical experience and the attendant psychological processes in particular.

### **IV Oxford 1943**

Between January and March 1943, before I was called up for war service, I had the good fortune to spend a term at Oxford. As soon as I arrived, I began to explore the possibility of putting this scheme into practice. I contacted the then Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion, Canon L. W. Grensted, who had written a book on the Psychology of Religion (Grensted, 1930) from a broadly psycho-analytic perspective. He was sympathetic to my proposal, but pointed out that psychology was not then available as an undergraduate degree at Oxford, and that in order to go on to psychology at the postgraduate level, I would need to read philosophy.

At the time this news was very unwelcome. I had formed a poor opinion of academic philosophy a year or so earlier from reading a Olaf Stapledon's (1939) two-volume Pelican paperback *Philosophy and Living*. The first three chapters of that book are devoted to a discussion of the mind-body problem which Stapledon takes to be the central problem of philosophy around which all else revolves. He expounds the principal theories one by one, interactionism, psycho-physical parallelism, epiphenomenalism and the dual aspect theory, illustrating each with a neat little diagram. The arguments for and against each are rehearsed and examined; but at the end the problem remains unresolved. My reaction to this was to see it as just another case of a theological dispute of the kind which from the age of 10, I had seen it as my mission to resolve. Now however, I had a different idea of how that resolution was to be achieved. Endless philosophical haggling over the centuries had plainly got precisely nowhere. The resolution of the problem would come only by applying the methodology of empirical science. Thus it was that the resolution for the mind-body problem through empirical psycho-physiological research became a sub-plot, as it were, to the main research objective of establishing the adaptive function of mystical experience, soon to be moved centre stage as the prospect of realising the mysticism project became increasingly remote.

## V Logical Positivism

Nevertheless, despite these reservations about the possibility of achieving anything through philosophical debate, I chose from amongst the limited number of courses that were available in wartime Oxford a section in the Theory of Knowledge which, contrary to my expectations, I found fascinating. What led to this change was the encounter with logical positivism, partly in the form of A. J. Ayer's (1936) *Language, Truth and Logic* and partly from attending lectures on Hume from one of the founding members of the Vienna Circle, Friedrich Waismann. Logical Positivism offered the prospect of ending the perpetual cycle of philosophical debate by showing that all the traditional philosophical problems arose from failure to distinguish matters of fact which were to be decided by the relevant empirical science and issues of logic and language which were to be decided by the application of formal logic to the analysis of sentences. It also maintained that religious statements, since they cannot be verified, are literally nonsense. This was congenial both to my rejection of religious belief in favour of religion as a psychological process, and with the insistence of the mystics that no words could possibly capture the ineffable quality of the experiences they were struggling to describe.

## VI Oxford 1946-9

When I returned to Oxford in 1946 I was delighted to find that there was a proposal to introduce a new honours school in which psychology would be combined either with philosophy or with physiology. Needless to say, I was soon queuing up to be amongst the first batch of undergraduates to be admitted to this Honours School when it opened for business in October 1947. Despite the

fact that by this time my interests were moving away from mystical experience towards the mind-body problem, on completing my degree in 1949 I spent a year reading for the post-graduate Diploma in Anthropology at Oxford with Social Anthropology as my special subject, exactly as prescribed by the project as I had conceived it in 1943. I shall always be grateful to that experience for adding a social dimension, not only to my conception of religion, but to my concept of psychological, linguistic and philosophical research. But by the time I left to take up an appointment as Lecturer in Psychology in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide, South Australia, in April 1951 although I took my collection of books on the subject with me, the mysticism project had been effectively and, as it turned out, permanently shelved.

## **VII Ordinary language philosophy**

When I returned to Oxford in 1946, logical positivism was being replaced by ordinary language philosophy, as expounded by Ryle, Austin and my own tutor in philosophy, Paul Grice. Ordinary language philosophy appealed to me for the same reasons that logical positivism had done. Traditional philosophical debates were dismissed as conceptually confused. Their total liquidation within twenty years was confidently predicted. The same distinction was drawn between empirical and conceptual issues. The philosopher's expertise was again restricted to issues of language.

Where ordinary language philosophy differed from logical positivism was firstly in tracing the source of conceptual confusion back to deviations from ordinary usage rather than to mistakes in formal logic. But more important for me were two sets of lectures which I attended in 1947, the behaviourist analysis of our ordinary psychological language presented by Ryle in the lectures which were later published as *The Concept of Mind* (Ryle, 1949), and Austin's refutation of phenomenalism in his 'Sense and sensibilia' lectures published posthumously in 1962. These developments were further grist to my mill. In particular, abandoning phenomenalism, once Austin had demonstrated its absurdity, was like waking from a bad dream. Sentences describing features of the public world on whose aptness as descriptions of those features all observers agree appeared, as they still do, a far more secure foundation of empirical knowledge than sentences in a private sense-datum language, whose words (as Wittgenstein puts it)

"refer to what can only be known to the person speaking" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 89)

This too was congenial to my interest in mysticism. For if our ability to communicate depends on our language being anchored to features of the public world, it explains why the mystics find such difficulty in communicating private experiences which have no obvious correlates in that world.

## **VIII Behaviourism**

One consequence of studying psychology alongside philosophy during the heyday of Oxford ordinary language philosophy was that the acknowledged behaviourism of Ryle and the unacknowledged behaviourism of Wittgenstein was to awaken an interest in the neo-behaviorism of Tolman, Hull and Skinner whose different formulations were then the focus of theoretical debate within psychology. It was through this that I became, as I remain, a behaviourist.

To say that I became and remain a behaviourist is not to say that I deny the existence of conscious experience or the possibility of studying it scientifically. It means that I view consciousness as an integral part of the causal mechanism in the brain which transforms input into

output, stimulus into response, thereby controlling the interaction between the organism and its environment. Consciousness is a behaviour-controlling process in the brain.

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