Introduction to Essays in Radical Empiricism

by U. T. Place, Fall 1999; edited by T. W. Place

Editor's note (January 2023):
This is a compilation of introductions that U. T. Place wrote in 1999 to books intended to form a book series under the title "Essays in Radical Empiricism". Place couldn't finish this project because of his death on 2 January 2000. The idea was that the books would consist of his published and unpublished papers. Each book would start with an introductory chapter, with the first three sections being the same for all books. These sections were called "Radical Empiricism", "Metaphilosophy", and "Conceptual Analysis" and are reproduced in this document as the first three sections. In each book, these sections were to be followed by a section that introduced the theme of the book in question. All the finished sections that introduce a theme are included here. Because not all themes are covered this way, I added sections from a letter in which Place discussed his "Nachlaß" in October 1999. The themes on which Place published and that are missing in this overview are, amongst others, language learning, the evolution of language, and emotion and mood.

Radical Empiricism

The common strand which unites all the theses argued for in [my philosophical work] is a philosophical position which I call "radical empiricism". A radical empiricist acknowledges the vital importance of the *a priori* discipline which we depend [on] for our assurance of their truth once we move from talking about things in their presence to providing and receiving information from others about those that are absent from the current stimulus environment of both speaker and listener. But *a priori* reasoning can never *by itself* tell us anything about the world and universe in which we find ourselves. It can only do that in so far as it is securely anchored at key points to what exists as a matter of contingent fact by an appropriate observational procedure, systematic observation, measurement or controlled experiment, as the case may be. However, [my philosophical papers], though they rely extensively on observations made by others, do not contain or relay any observations made by the writer and revealed [there] for the first time. Their function is rather to analyse, interpret and integrate what is available elsewhere. The purpose of this enterprise is simply to separate wherever possible what is true from what is false. Following up [on] the practical implications of the conclusions reached, I leave for the most part to others.

Metaphilosophy

Radical empiricism is a philosophical doctrine, but it is a philosophical doctrine which is reflexive in the sense that it is intended to apply as much to philosophical enquiry as to any other form of truth determination. But what is philosophy? That is a philosophical question and, like all such questions, it is one to which, as things stand, no agreed answer can be given. Some speculations on the origins of philosophy as a special form of human intellectual endeavour and of its subsequent influence on the history of religion and science are presented in *The Tower of Babel: Some speculations of the role of technology, language and trade on the evolution of religion, philosophy and science*. I describe my own adolescent reaction to the apparent insolubility of a particular philosophical problem, the mind-body problem, in *From mystical experience to biological consciousness: a pilgrim's progress*. For our present purposes suffice it to say that according to radical empiricism, philosophical questions are decidable, but like all such questions they can only be decided in the light of relevant observation. But what are the relevant observations in the case of a philosophical question such as the question 'What is philosophy?'

Conceptual Analysis

In order to understand the nature of the observations required to settle philosophical questions and indeed the very possibility that such observations could and do exist, we have to accept that a philosophical question is in the first instance, at least, a question about the meaning of words, not about the subject matter we use those words to describe. But determining the meaning of words in a way that is going to be useful for philosophical purposes is not a simple matter. Looking up the word

in a good dictionary is not enough. As Frege (1884/1950; Austin 1961) has taught us, the meaning of a word is the contribution that it makes to all the well-formed and intelligible sentences in which it occurs in that particular sense within a particular natural language. It follows from this that in order to determine the meaning of a particular word, we need to examine a representative sample of intelligible well-formed sentences containing it, noting in particular such features as what substitutions can and cannot be made within the sentence without altering the sense or meaning of the sentence as a whole. In so doing the investigator is performing a series of what I have called (following Garfinkel 1964/1967) "ethnomethodological thought experiments" in which the linguistic conventions governing the construction of such sentences are revealed, see *The Role of the Ethnomethodological Experiment in the Empirical Investigation of Social Norms* (1992). This is the procedure first described and illustrated by Wittgenstein in the *Blue and Brown Books* (Wittgenstein 1962) and called by him (Wittgenstein 1953) "a grammatical investigation". Through the work of the Oxford ordinary language philosophers, Gilbert Ryle, John Austin and my own tutor in philosophy as an undergraduate at Oxford in the late 1940s, Paul Grice, it has become known as "conceptual analysis".

Conceptual Analysis as the Empirical Investigation of Linguistic Convention

This theme is the *fons et origo* of all my work. Presenting conceptual analysis as an approach to language is diametrically opposed to what has been the dominant paradigm in linguistics for the past forty years, the linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky. Whereas Chomsky holds that the foundation of language lies in a pattern of syntactic structure formed of a self-contained system of *rules*, genetically imprinted on the brain conformity to which guarantees that a grammatically well-formed sentence is produced, I hold that language is primarily a form of behaviour used by one individual, the speaker, to control the behaviour of another individual, the listener, and which allows the listener to obtain access from the speaker to information about aspects of the environment to which he or she would otherwise have no access. Linguistic communication on this view is made possible by a set of linguistic *conventions*, the speaker's conformity to which is induced by a process of contingency-shaped learning in which the crucial reinforcement and disinforcement are supplied by the response of the listener to the speaker's utterance. See my *Rescuing the science of human behavior from the ashes of socialism* (1997) for the case for thinking that Chomsky's linguistics has deprived us of the Science of Human Behaviour.

Conceptual analysis is seen as a method for investigating the nature of the linguistic conventions, given that statistical studies cannot distinguish between behaviour that has a high natural probability of emission, but whose frequency is *constrained* by the conventions, and behaviour which has a low probability of emission, and whose frequency is *enhanced* by the conventions. It relies for this [as we have seen above] on the *ethnomethodological thought experiment* in which the investigator imagines the reactions of others to a situation in which a linguistic or other social convention is flouted. The reactions to flouted linguistic conventions, in its turn, rely on the *contingency-shaped linguistic intuitions* of native speakers of the language in order to distinguish those forms of utterance that the verbal community accepts from those which it rejects and punishes. The reliance placed on linguistic intuition in conceptual analysis is defended with the help of B. F. Skinner's theory of intuitive knowledge: *Do we have Intuitive Knowledge of What is the Case in All Possible Worlds* (1986).

Three specific techniques for applying conceptual analysis to the elucidation of linguistic convention are described extensively in the section *Conceptual Analysis and the Psychological Concepts of Ordinary Language* of my unpublished 1973-74 Amsterdam Lectures:

- *Introduction to the conceptual analysis of ordinary language*
- *Linguistic Rules and their classification*
- *Sentence frame analysis*
- *Definition in use and verification analysis*

Special emphasis must be placed on the study of the *verb aspect* and its use in distinguishing the fundamental ontological categories of *process*, *instantaneous event* and *ongoing state*, see From Syntax to Reality: The Picture Theory of Meaning. This brings us to the next theme.

The picture theory of meaning and its implications for metaphysics

Since the ethnomethodological thought experiments in which conceptual analysis consists rely for the validity of their conclusions on the contingency-shaped linguistic intuitions of native speakers of a particular natural language, the conclusions reached are *ipso facto* restricted in their scope to ordinary language and more narrowly to a particular natural language. In order for such conclusions to be of more general philosophical interest we have to be in a position to assume

(a)   that what is true in this case of one natural language is true of all other natural languages in which comparable sentences are formulable

(b)   that the linguistic devices which they reveal have an impact on the technical language of the various special sciences, social, biological and physical, if only by importing *conceptual confusions* from ordinary language,

(c)   that the nature of things existing external to language to which we refer when we use it has imposed itself on the language itself in such a way that, as I put it in *Is Consciousness a Brain Process* (1956):

> questions about the furniture of the universe are often fought and not infrequently decided merely on a point of logic

In order to be able to argue from the structure of sentences to the existence and nature of things, those sentences describe, we have to rely on a version of Wittgenstein's (1921/1961) Picture Theory of the Meaning of Sentences. The version I use holds that sentences, imperative as well as declarative, depict what Barwise and Perry (1982) call "situations", a term which covers both *events* whereby the properties of and/or relations between things change either at moments of time or over a period of time and *states of affairs* whereby they remain constant over a period of time. It is described in detail in my papers on *The Picture Theory of Meaning and the Correspondence Theory of Truth*:

- *From Syntax to Reality: the Picture Theory of Meaning* (1991)
- *Behavioral Contingency Semantics and the Correspondence Theory of Truth* (1992)
- *Holism and Cognitive Dissonance in the Discrimination of Correspondence Between Sentences and Situations* (1993)
- *Metaphysics as the Empirical Investigation of the Interface Between Language and Reality* (1996)
- *Linguistic Behaviorism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth* (1997)
- *The Picture Theory of Meaning: A Rehabilitation* (1999)

Needless to say, arguing from the structure of sentences to the existence and nature of the situations those sentences depict (Metaphysics) is not a simple matter. There are many pitfalls. Without a careful conceptual analysis of the sentences in question, all such conclusions must be treated with suspicion.

Conceptual analysis and the mind-body problem

From Mystical Experience to Biological Consciousness: A Pilgrim's Progress (2004) is an initial autobiographical introduction to my view of the mind-body problem which is based in part, particularly in the case of *Consciousness and the Zombie-within: a Functional Analysis of the Blindsight Evidence* (2000), on empirical evidence of neuropsychology and in part on a conceptual analysis of the concepts involved, in particular 'expect', 'anticipate', 'unexpected', 'noticing', 'paying attention', 'concentrating', 'watching', 'looking at', 'looking for', 'listen to', 'listen for', 'savouring', 'studying', 'being conscious of', 'being oblivious of', 'being conscious', 'being unconscious', 'having an experience', 'imagining something', 'seeing something in the mind's eye', 'hearing a sensation or a tune sound in one's head', 'recognising', 'construing', 'interpreting', 'remembering', 'reminiscing', 'deciding' and 'intending to do something', 'trying to do something'. Conceptual analysis is also deployed in developing and elucidating certainly technical and semi-technical concepts employed in philosophical discussion whose meaning is explained by reference to the ordinary language concepts. These include Mind, Mental Process, Instantaneous Mental Event, Dispositional Mental State, Consciousness, Private Experience, Sensation, Problematic Input, Motivationally Significant, Scanning Mechanism, "Evidence", Categorization, Conceptualization, Mental Imagery, Response Selection, Response Execution, Tendency, Capacity, Dispositional Property, Manifestation, Sustaining the Causal Counterfactual, Substantive Laws of Nature, Substantive Laws of the Nature of the

Dispositional Property Bearer.

My main publications on the mind-body problem are
- *The Concept of Heed* (1954)
- *Is Consciousness a Brain Process?* (1956)
- *Two Concepts of Consciousness: The Biological/Private and the Linguistic/Social* (1992)
- *We Needed the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction to Formulate Mind-Brain Identity Then: We Still Do* (1997)
- *The Two-Factor Theory of the Mind-Body Relation* (2000)
- *Consciousness and the Zombie-within: a Functional Analysis of the Blindsight Evidence* (2000)
- *The Causal Potency of* Qualia*: Its Nature and its Source* (2000)

Conceptual Analysis and the Conceptualist Theory of Universals

My account of universals is conceptualist in the sense that it denies the existence of universals as abstract objects over and above their instances; but it is also not a nominalist theory in that it denies that the practice of grouping things together into things of the same kind is simply a matter of grouping them together under a single collective name. In *Conceptualism and the Ontological Independence of Cause and Effect* (1996) the conceptual analysis is deployed in order to throw light on the nature of universals and the classification practices of humans and other living organisms. Then in *Philosophical Fashion and Scientific Progress in the Theory of Universals* (1992), I defend the view that only by deploying Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection can we resolve Kant's dilemma whereby if we claim, as I would, that universals are mind-made, we can never be certain that the universe, as presented to us by our own self-created conceptual schema, really does have the properties and pattern of relations we ascribe to it. At the same time I introduce the idea that the biological mechanism which allows us to group things together as instances of the same universal is a connectionist network in the brain. This acts as a trigger for *Eliminative Connectionism and its Implications for a Return to an Empiricist/Behaviorist Linguistics* (1992) in which I defend connectionism as a radical alternative to the digital computer and the Turing Machine as a model for the working of the brain, while in *Connectionism and the Problem of Consciousness* (1999) I discuss some features of connectionist networks which may be involved both in the process whereby the zombie-within us builds up a background of expectations against which to automatically alert consciousness to the unexpected and in the process in consciousness whereby such problematic sensory inputs are categorized.

The Vices and Virtues of Linguisticism

Linguisticism is the practice whereby, instead of talking *de re* about objects, their properties and relations to other things and the events and states of affairs which are constituted by those properties and relations, as they actually exist in the world of space and time, we talk *de dicto* about the words, phrases and sentences we use to describe them. C. B. Martin in Armstrong, Martin and Place (1996, p. 71) writes:

> [I] reject the Linguisticism that renders properties being had by objects as merely a matter of predicates being true or false of the object, if any, to which the subject term refers.
>
> Predicates are linguistic and mind-dependent entities, whereas many properties of objects are not. Linguisticism is silly but it is also endemic and largely unnoticed by many passing ontologists. The suggestion of it needs expunging in the motto 'To be is to be the value of a variable', but appears unmistakeably in what can be described as a kind of *Holus Bolus* view[1] that suggests that it is the object *simpliciter holus bolus* that makes each of many statements about it true or false. But when the statements
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> (A) The passion fruit is round
>
> and
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> (B) The passion fruit is purple

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1. Cf. C. B. Martin 'Anti-realism and the world's undoing' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* **65**, 1984, 18-20.

> are true of one and the same object, in each case it is something in particular *and* different *about* the object that makes each statement true. The predicates are built to pick these out.

Am I alone in detecting a certain ambivalence towards linguisticism in this passage? Linguisticism is silly; but it is also endemic and goes largely unnoticed by those (philosophers) who practise it. This suggests a harmless idiosyncrasy, one which at least has the virtue of preserving the "holus-bolus" view of the nature of properties.

But there are occurrences of linguisticism which are actively mistaken and positively pernicious in their effects. An example here is the widely held doctrine that desires are propositional attitudes. This is mistaken on two counts. It is mistaken in its linguisticism, in assuming that to want something is primarily a matter of what someone is disposed to *say* when, in fact, it is a matter of what something (it could be a dog) is disposed to *do*, namely to accept the object of desire, once achieved, as the terminus of one's striving. But it is also mistaken in another respect. It is mistaken in supposing that what is important to the wanter is the truth of a proposition, the proposition that the wanter gets what he or she wants. In fact of course what the wanter wants is the object of desire, not the truth of the proposition that he or she gets it.

But notice that in this case the error is avoided, not by avoiding linguisticism, but [by] paying close attention to the linguistic forms used to express the phenomenon in question, in this case to the fact that, unlike propositional attitudes properly so called, the grammatical object of the verb is not an embedded sentence in *oratio obliqua* or indirect reported speech, typically introduced by the pronoun *that*. It is a verb phrase introduced by the preposition *to*.

Another example where close attention to grammatical forms pays dividends in terms of our understanding of the phenomenon itself is the one I focus on in Causal laws, dispositional properties and causal explanations, the observation (Goodman 1955/1965) that causal counterfactuals are "sustained" by individually quantified dispositional statements, and the view that the dispositions *qua* phenomena in the world of space and time are substantive laws of the nature of the dispositional property-bearer.

Causation, Dispositions and Intentionality

Intentionality and the Physical - A Reply to Mumford published [in 1999] in the *Quarterly Journal of Philosophy* ties up the loose ends left over from my account of the role of dispositions in causation in *Dispositions: A Debate* (Armstrong et al., 1996) while at the same time linking it to the theme of Intentionality as the Mark of the Dispositional as published in *Dialectica* in 1996 and to the theme of my 1997 articles in *Acta Analytica* On the Nature of Conditionals and their Truthmakers and *De Re* Modality Without Possible Worlds. I have also made use of this analysis of the role of dispositions in causation in both The Two Factor Theory of the Mind-Brain Relation and On the Causal Potency of *Qualia*: Its Nature and its Source thus tying it into the mind-body problem.

Other papers that belong to this theme are
- Causal laws, dispositional properties and causal explanations (1987)
- Mental Causation is No Different from Any Other Kind (1996)
- Dispositions (1998)

Conceptual Analysis and the Behaviourist Repudiation of Mentalism [2]

Although my continued adherence to behaviourism as a standpoint in psychology owes as much to the fact that I learned and practised my trade as a psychologist at the time when behaviourism was the dominant paradigm in that discipline, I have consistently argued ever since my Psychological Paradigms and behaviour modification which appeared in *De Psycholoog* in 1978 that what makes mentalistic language unacceptable in a scientific psychology is its reliance on quotations of what the agent has said or might be expected to say in its explanations what she or he has done in the past and its predictions of what he or she will do in the future. Starting with my 'Skinner's Verbal Behavior I –

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2. This section is an edited version of the blog entry with the same name: Conceptual Analysis and the Behaviourist Repudiation of Mentalism.

why we need it' (1981) and continuing through my 'Skinner re-skinned' (1987), my 'Intentionality as the mark of the dispositional' (1996), 'Intentionality and the physical – a reply to Mumford' (1999) and 'Vagueness as a mark of dispositional intentionality' (1999) this argument has become entangled with a philosophical discussion of the distinction between T-intenTionality, the mark of the dispositional, and S-intenSionality, the mark of a quotation. Here T-intenTionality is a phenomenon to be explained, whereas S-intenSionality is a form of explanation to be avoided in a scientific explanation of language. Other papers which contain this argument, but without invoking the Intentionality/Intensionality issue, are my 'Skinner's distinction between rule-governed and contingency-shaped behaviour' (1988), 'What went wrong?' (1988), 'A radical behaviorist methodology for the empirical investigation of private events' (1993), 'Linguistic behaviorism as a philosophy of empirical science' (1996), 'Rescuing the science of human behavior from the ashes of socialism' (1997) and 'Behaviorism as a standpoint in linguistics' (1998).

From the standpoint of the hardline behaviourist, the trouble with this argument is that it does not justify the repudiation of all mental concepts in all circumstances. It does not justify repudiating the use of indirect quotations as an explanation of those aspects of human behaviour that are unquestionably determined by the agent's verbal formulation of the issues at stake. Moreover, there are a number of mental predicates, cognitive verbs such as 'pay attention' and 'notice', 'watch' and 'see', 'listen' and 'hear', 'expect' and 'recognise', and many verbs of emotion and motivation which either do not or need not imply linguistic competence on the part of the individual of whom they are predicated. I have attempted to examine all the objections to the use of folk psychological or mental concepts in a scientific psychology in my 'Folk psychology from the standpoint of conceptual analysis' (1996). What I have not done is a systematic survey of mental predicates designed to sort those locutions which imply linguistic competence from those that do not, although [Table] 5 in 'From syntax to reality: the picture theory of meaning' which classifies mental predicates partly according to aspect and partly in terms of the grammatical object of the verb would provide a useful starting point for such a survey. […]

Since there is nowhere else where my interest in Skinner's distinction between rule-governed and contingency-shaped-behaviour surfaces, it is worth remarking that this distinction has inspired two important features of my subsequent work. On the one hand Skinner's description of a rule as a verbal stimulus which controls the listener or thinker's behaviour by "specifying a contingency", where a contingency is to be understood as a three term causal relation linking (a) a set of antecedent conditions, (b) the behaviour called for under those conditions and (c) the consequences of so behaving. When generalised to sentence utterances in general, this notion of a contingency-specifying stimulus yields the doctrine of "behavioural contingency semantics" which is both the foundation of my behaviourist approach to linguistics and the inspiration for my rehabilitation of the picture theory of meaning.

At the same time, the observation that rule-governed behaviour is an exclusively linguistic and, hence, human phenomenon highlights the fact that animals too solve problems, and do so without the assistance of verbally specified rules. Problem-solving, moreover, clearly involves something more than the shaping of behaviour by its consequences in the past. So what does it involve? The answer I now give to this question is consciousness, construed as a system for processing sensory inputs which are identified as problematic by an automatic unconscious system in the brain which I call "the zombie-within" and which also mediates the automatic and unconscious contingency-shaping of behaviour as it becomes habitual. This is the theme of my paper 'Consciousness and the zombie-within' (2000).

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