

[This paper is published with minor editorial changes and without the abstract and the appendix in G. Graham and E.R. Valentine (Eds) (2004). *Identifying the Mind: Selected Papers of U. T. Place*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 14-29.

The paper was already finished in 1996. A shortened version was presented to the Mind and Brain symposium, organized by Dr. Peter Fenwick at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, in November 1996 and to the Eleventh Annual Conference of the British Psychological Society, History and Philosophy Section, York, March 1997. It was published under a different title and edited by Anthony Freeman including an editorial introduction and footnotes as Place, U. T. (2002). A pilgrim's progress? *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 9(3), 34-52.]

FROM MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE TO BIOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS?

Ullin T. Place

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?'. in which I argued for an affirmative answer to that question. For the first time in recent history the materialist thesis was presented in a form in which it could withstand what had previously been regarded as decisive philosophical objections. The paper contains a critique of the "phenomenological fallacy" in which I draw attention to how little we can really say about the properties of our private experiences. This argument owes much to the insistence of the mystics on the inadequacy of words to describe *their* experiences.

I. Introduction

The story I shall tell you this morning is a piece of autobiography. But it is not, as you might suppose, a record of my own mystical experiences. For I do not claim to have had any. It is rather a record of 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 forty years ago in the *British Journal of Psychology* for 1956 of a paper entitled 'Is consciousness a brain process?'.

II 'Is consciousness a brain process?'

In that paper, as I say in the abstract, "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)

It is widely accepted that that paper marks a watershed in philosophical discussion of the mind-body problem, one whose impact, though confined to discussions of that particular issue by professional philosophers in the English-speaking world, ranks in the magnitude of its effect with that of Descartes' *Meditations* more than three hundred years earlier.

Needless to say, the idea that human behaviour is mediated and controlled by the activity of the brain and that conscious experiences are an integral part of that control process was not new. The idea is to be found in the writings of the Greek physician and philosopher Hippocrates of Cos sometime around the turn of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. It appears in the works of the Roman poet Lucretius, and in the 16th century in the writings of Hobbes and Gassendi. In the 18th century it appears in La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine* and in Cabanis' doctrine that the brain digests sense impressions and excretes thoughts. In the 19th century, many physiologists were materialists in this sense. Earlier this century, moreover, the idea that the relation between consciousness and the brain activity with which it is known to be correlated is an identity relation was proposed by the psychologist E.G. Boring in his *Physical Dimensions of Consciousness* of 1933.

In philosophy, on the other hand, ever since the debate between Hobbes and Descartes ended in apparent victory for the latter, it was taken more or less for granted that whatever answer to the mind-body problem is true, materialism must be false. It is this that has now changed.

Since the late 1960s it has been virtually impossible to find a reputable philosopher, in the English-speaking world at least, who is prepared to defend mind-body dualism in the form in which it was defended by Descartes. Although everyone agrees that there is still a problem - philosophers need to keep problems like this alive in order to justify their continued existence as a profession - almost everyone now accepts that some form of materialism must be true. Even in this country, where the mind-brain identity theory, as it has come to be called, has never had the same following as in Australia or the United States, I know of no philosopher who would be prepared to defend the form of mind-body dualism or idealism which was taken for granted by their predecessors of forty years ago.

Many factors contributed to making my paper the turning point it has turned out to have been, not least the fact that its thesis was adopted and introduced to a philosophical audience by J. J. C. Smart, then Professor of Philosophy in the University of Adelaide, who had appointed me in 1951 to take charge of the teaching of psychology within his department and who had participated in the debates at Adelaide during 1954 in which the thesis of my paper was knocked into shape (see his 'Sensations and brain processes' which appeared in *Philosophical Review* in 1959). But what made the difference, as far as philosophers were concerned, between this and earlier versions of materialism were two things:

1. For the first time, a clear distinction was drawn between materialism as the claim which Smart and I rejected that what the individual is *talking about* when she describes her conscious experiences are processes in her brain, and materialism in the form which we endorsed which holds that those experiences are *as a matter of fact*, though she doesn't know it, processes in her brain.
2. In response to the objection that conscious experiences have properties or *qualia*, as they have come to be known in the recent philosophical literature, which it makes no sense to apply to a brain process, we pointed out 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)

III The influence of mysticism (a) the via negativa

It is this last point that brings me to the topic of this talk. For, although it has other sources which I have described elsewhere (Place 1989), part of what led me to see how very little we can really say about our

conscious experience was the insistence of the mystics on the inadequacy of words to describe *their* experience, an inadequacy epitomised by the so-called *via negativa* in which all that can be said about the intrinsic properties of such experiences is ‘Not this. Not that’.

IV The influence of mysticism (b) the functions of consciousness

But this is not the only aspect of ‘Is consciousness a brain process?’ which, with hindsight, can be seen to have its roots in the story I shall tell. Another feature, curiously enough, which has its links with my adolescent preoccupation with mystical experience is the conception of consciousness as part of the biological equipment, not just of human beings, but of all warm-blooded creatures and perhaps some cold blooded ones as well, which has evolved by virtue of its function in controlling the behaviour of the organism in ways that would not be possible without it. This issue of the functions of consciousness in the control of behaviour is not specifically discussed in ‘Is consciousness a brain process?’. It is, however, discussed in an earlier paper entitled ‘The concept of heed’, published in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1954, to which ‘Is consciousness a brain process?’ was intended as a sequel.

In ‘The concept of heed’ I criticised Ryle's attempt in his (1949) book *The Concept of Mind* to extend the dispositional analysis of our ordinary mental concepts from verbs such as ‘knowing’, ‘believing’, ‘wanting’, ‘intending’ and ‘being vain’ or ‘intelligent’ where it makes no sense to talk of someone spending time doing these things, to a group of mental activity verbs which he refers to as ‘heed concepts’, verbs such as ‘looking’, ‘listening’, ‘watching’, ‘savouring’, ‘paying attention’, ‘concentrating’, ‘studying’, ‘enjoying’ and ‘trying’, which one can quite properly be said to spend time doing. Ryle's contention is that when we say of someone that they are paying attention, we are not referring, as was traditionally supposed, to an internal mental activity of monitoring what is going on, we are saying that he or she is doing whatever else he or she is doing with a particular disposition, with a disposition to succeed which an inattentive performer lacks. In the paper I defended the internal monitoring theory of attention by pointing out that paying attention to what one is doing, though in most cases a necessary condition of successful performance, is not sufficient. Not only must one have acquired the skills involved, one must also pay attention to, and thus become conscious of, the right features of the

task. In order to succeed in a game such as tennis, attention must be focused on such things as the trajectory of the ball coming towards one and on the intended trajectory of one's own shot. Acute consciousness of the kinaesthetic feedback from one's muscular movements would be a fatal distraction.

In addition to this emphasis on the role of attention and consciousness in the performance of a motor skill, a function which is needed as much by an animal as by a human being, I also drew attention in the paper to two other functions of consciousness which are exclusively human, that of providing the internal stimulus without the occurrence of which a speaker cannot give a first-hand description of what is impinging on his or her sense organs at the time or give a first-hand report of that event on some subsequent occasion in the future.

This functional account of consciousness which, as I shall try to show later, can be much elaborated and refined in the light of recent neuropsychological evidence stands in sharp contrast to doctrines such as epiphenomenalism and psycho-physical parallelism which seek to protect dualism from empirical disconfirmation by depriving consciousness of *any* causal role in the control of behaviour. Put that way, you can perhaps appreciate how someone who was attracted to the idea of mystical experience by the possibility it offered of transforming the individual's behavioural dispositions in a more ethically acceptable direction, should feel that, if the only way to preserve dualism is to deny the causal efficacy of consciousness, dualism must be rejected.

V My father's influence

But so much for the endgame. Let us now go back to the opening moves.

I was born in 1924 in Northallerton, the county town of what was then the North Riding of Yorkshire. My father was the second of five sons of a joiner and carpenter in the village of Langton-on-Swale, a few miles to the north west of Northallerton, who with the help of his sons had built up a successful business, buying, felling, processing and selling home grown timber. My father's role in the business was to buy the standing timber and this gave him the experience and contacts which enabled him after the end of the First World War to acquire a considerable fortune by speculating in the purchase and resale of the large country estates which were then coming onto the market all over the country, partly as

a consequence of the introduction of death duties by Lloyd George in his 1911 budget and partly as a consequence of the decimation of what in those days we referred to as The Great War.

By 1930 when I was five, he had made enough money to purchase a converted farm house in the country 4 miles south of Northallerton where we lived cocooned and insulated from the harsh realities of the post-depression years surrounded by what, by present day standards, was a veritable army of servants, a housemaid, a parlour-maid, a cook, a kitchen-maid, looking after us children, a nanny, a governess and a nursery-maid, looking after my father's in-house office, a secretary and an accountant, and outside two chauffeurs and two gardeners.

My father was already 52 when I, his eldest child, was born. His health was already showing signs of wear and tear. He suffered from chronic bronchitis due to heavy cigarette smoking, a duodenal ulcer and heart trouble. He was already well on the way to achieving his three life ambitions, to own a Rolls-Royce, to send his children to public schools and to devote as much as possible of his plentiful spare time to his passion for fly-fishing for trout.

Although he was a man of considerable moral integrity, with a strong sense of public duty - he was a magistrate, a county alderman and chairman of the Finance Committee of the North Riding County Council - he was not when I knew him a religious man. The only occasion on which I can remember him attending a church service was in the chapel at my preparatory school when he and my mother were waiting to take me out on a Sunday morning. He had had a religious phase in his youth. As a teenager he had been befriended by the local vicar and given special tuition which meant that he was much better educated and widely read than would have been expected from someone who had left school at the age of 14. Not surprisingly, this tuition included a significant element of religious instruction. Shortly after, as a young man, he became interested in the works of Annie Besant and her Theosophy movement. I only discovered this *after* I had already become interested in mysticism myself. So any connection between the two episodes must be a matter of genetics rather than parental influence. In any case, he had put these religious interests firmly behind him when he settled down to the serious business of earning a living and making his way in the world. His philosophy of life, to use that hackneyed phrase, was a version of the popular Darwinism of his day. Based on his experience in business, he saw and conveyed to us children

a picture of life as a desperate struggle for survival in a cruel world. The nightmare image of nature "red in tooth and claw" surfaced repeatedly, particularly when he overindulged on his regular whisky nightcap.

This picture of the world that awaited us in the future was in sharp contrast to the comfort and apparent security of life as we experienced it at home. Moreover, my father increased the sense of anxious foreboding by constantly reminding us that he was an old man in none too robust health, who would not always be around to protect and provide for us. The *Angst* that this created was exacerbated by the mystery surrounding the way he made his money. He emphasised our dependence on his ability to make money and the fragility of what he had created, but offered no guidance as to how we in our turn were going to survive in the dangerous and hostile world he described.

VI Preparatory school and the discovery of religion

My first experience of that dangerous and hostile world beyond the safety and comfort of home came when, at the age of 8, I was sent to a boarding preparatory school for boys 200 miles away in the northern outskirts of London. That traumatic experience coincided with my first significant encounter with religious belief, religious language and religious ritual. I have no doubt that my enduring fascination with the latter developed as a response to the anxiety generated by the former. My preparatory school was somewhat unusual for institutions of its size in having its own private chapel, a neat brick building in the Early English Gothic style, where we attended Matins and Evensong according to the rite of the Church of England, every Sunday, with Holy Communion for those qualified to take it once a month, and, once a year for some of the older boys, a service of confirmation by the Lord Bishop of St. Albans complete with mitre, cope, pectoral cross and pastoral staff. For the first time I had my own copies of the Christian Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and Hymns, Ancient and Modern. These I devoured avidly, particularly the obscurer recesses of the Book of Common Prayer, such as the service of Communion and Athanasian Creed. To this experience and the reading it inspired, I owe a love of church music and medieval church architecture, a fascination with medieval monasticism and with ecclesiastical vestments, particularly as represented on the monumental brasses of the medieval period.

But there was also a more intellectual concern. I was scandalised by the existence of differences in religious belief; and I can remember, sometime around the age of 10, resolving that when I was older I would organise a congress of the leaders of the different sects and faiths and compel them to resolve their differences and decide the issues once and for all. A naive idea no doubt, but one which, as I hope to show, foreshadowed what was to come. But to explain what led me to that thought, I need to say something about my mother's religious background.

VII My mother's influence

As with my father, religion played no great role in my mother's life. She would occasionally drag the family off to attend a service in our local parish church, but it was evident that this was more from a sense of social duty than from any sense of religious obligation. As children we were brought up to say grace before and after meals and to say prayers for the welfare of the family, before going to bed at night; but though these practices were condoned by our parents, the initiative came from the nursery staff, from Nanny and the governess. Although I did not appreciate its significance until much later, from the point of view of the development of my own religious attitudes the most important fact in my mother's religious background was that through her father she was a direct descendant of Margaret Fell, the Mother of Quakerism, who, after the death of her first husband, Judge Thomas Fell, married George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, whose follower and protector she had been since his first visit to Ulverston in 1652. However, the family had been expelled from the Society in the early 19th century, because one of my ancestors had "married out". Consequently, my mother was not brought up as a Quaker. Though decisively non-conformist in outlook, the family was not affiliated with any particular sect. Partly for this reason, partly because of the Quaker background, partly because, when my mother was young, the family attended the services of a sect known as the 'Peculiar Baptists' who, like all Baptists, believed in delaying baptism until the individual is old enough to accept it as a matter of deliberate choice, and partly because of my grandfather's scientific training and outlook, my mother was never baptised. Nevertheless, she thought of herself in her later years as a member of the Church of England with a perfect right to take communion whenever she saw fit - and woe betide any vicar who dared to challenge that right.

Consequently, although both my parents agreed that we as children should be brought up as members of the established church and should attend Church of England schools, my mother refused to allow me to be baptised according to the service of baptism as set out in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The reason for this was that it contains a statement to the effect that anyone who dies unbaptised must inevitably go to Hell. I was, therefore, baptised at home by the local Congregational minister, sadly the only contact I have ever had with that ancient branch of what is now part of the United Reformed Church. By the time my sister was born some eighteen months later, proposals had already been made for a revision of the Prayer Book. Consequently, her baptism was delayed for some two years in anticipation of that event. Despite the refusal of Parliament to sanction the 1928 Prayer Book, she was eventually baptised at the same time as the elder of my two younger brothers by an Anglican vicar who was prepared to overlook the lack of parliamentary authority and use a form of the baptism service which omitted the offending statement. These facts about our baptism which we learned quite early in life, combined with the fact that my mother's brother had, much to her disapproval, married a Roman Catholic, and been compelled to allow his children to be brought up in that faith, had made me conscious of differences in religious belief and with the fact that such matters were open to dispute some time before my own interests in religion had been aroused.

A third fact about my mother's intellectual and religious background which is important in this connection, was her own and her family's scientific background. Her paternal grandfather was co-founder of a firm of pharmaceutical chemists in Liverpool and was honorary secretary to the "Liverpool Gallery of Inventions and Science". Her father followed his father into the business and was himself a trained and meticulous analytical chemist. My mother was given an education which enabled her to enter Liverpool University and later King's College, London, to read for a degree in Analytical Chemistry, which included Physics as well as Organic and Inorganic Chemistry and Bacteriology. The idea behind this was that she should eventually assist her father in that aspect of the business. She failed to graduate, not if her own autobiographical account is to be believed, because of any defect in her final examination performance, but because of prejudice on the part of her examiners arising from her well-known activities as a militant suffragette. She was not the only member of the family with a scientific training. One of her brothers was

a civil engineer. Her sister's husband was an electric engineer and their son, my first cousin was, when we were still children, well on the way to becoming the distinguished geologist he now is.

I mention these facts by way of explaining how it came about that despite the fact that my own education up till the age of 18 consisted of no more than a couple of hours instruction in science, I became aware at a relatively early age that many traditional doctrines of religious belief such as those connected with the creation of the universe had been superseded by scientific research and formed the opinion that such research offered a way, the only way, of resolving issues that had been debated by theologians and philosophers for centuries.

VIII Puberty and the discovery of mysticism: (a) Evelyn Underhill

I must now move forward a further five years to the spring of 1940 when I was 15 and World War II had been going for less than a year. It was then that I discovered mysticism. I was introduced to it through two books which I found on the shelves of the library of the public school where I was a pupil. The first and most influential was *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill (1911/1930). The second was a little book called *Protestantism* by the then lately retired Dean of St.Paul's, W. R. Inge (1927/1931).

I was attracted by the idea of mysticism as described by Evelyn Underhill for three reasons:

1. It presented religion not as a set of beliefs and a set of rituals which made sense only in the light of those beliefs, but as a personality-transforming psychological process. Moreover, although she did not discuss the mysticism of the oriental religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, it was clear from those she did discuss that mysticism was something that transcended particular religious faiths. Not only were there mystics from all the different sects of Christianity listed in her pages. There were pagan Neoplatonists, Jewish mystics such as Philo, and Islamic mystics such as the Sufis. The different faiths merely provided a language in terms in which what was obviously the same psychological process was described and interpreted.

2. A second feature that attracted me to mysticism was that it appeared to offer a way, not so much of controlling, as of redirecting into more morally acceptable channels the two deadly sins that were pre-occupying my thoughts at that time, anger and lust. I shall not attempt to explain, still less justify my

belief at that time that anger and sexual desire are intrinsically sinful, except to say in addition, factors in my own particular childhood experience, that this view has deep roots in the Christian, if not in the whole Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. What I now find difficult to justify is the persistence of this view at a time when, as I shall shortly explain, I was already proposing to defend my belief in the virtues of the mystical personality-transformation as a biologically adaptive mutation. To suggest that the survival of human species depends on limiting the expression of sexual and aggressive impulses is one thing. To suggest that it requires a *total* redirection of desire from the satisfaction of these impulses towards universal compassion and benevolence, is quite another. It may be argued that to have a minority of people in whom this transformation has occurred may have advantages in promoting the survival of the social order; but to propose this as an objective for all is biological nonsense.

Of course, in my reading of Evelyn Underhill I had been made aware of the sexual symbolism in the writings many mystics. I had also come across the idea which she mentions, particularly in connection with the writings of Coventry Patmore (1877; 1895) that mystical experience is very similar to and no doubt psychologically connected with the experience of sexual orgasm. But Coventry Patmore is talking about sexual consummation in the context of a loving Christian marriage, something very different from the grubby homosexuality I was currently experiencing in an all-male English public school of those days.

3. A third feature that attracted me to mysticism as portrayed by Evelyn Underhill was that it appeared to offer a personality transformation which would provide the inner strength needed to withstand all the pain and suffering that my father had led me to expect in the world beyond his protection and whose reality was emphasised daily as news of catastrophe, torture, misery and death came over the airwaves and in the newspapers as World War II unfolded. How could I, in my unregenerate state, hope to withstand torture at the hands of the Gestapo or the experience of a Nazi concentration camp? Even as the likelihood of those fears being realised receded as the war progressed, there was still the inescapable prospect of the death of my parents and ultimately my own death. But notice that what the mystical personality-transformation appeared to offer in this latter case, was not any assurance of life after death. It was rather the inner strength, not just to accept, but actively to welcome the prospect of one's own personal annihilation. There was nothing in this view of mysticism which was incompatible with the idea that

mystical experience is a process in the mystic's brain. There was even less call for a belief in a soul that survives the death of the body than there is in Buddhism with its belief in perpetual reincarnation until the final annihilation of the individual personality is achieved in Nirvana.

IX Puberty and the discovery of mysticism: (b) Dean Inge and my Quaker heritage

Had I not already discovered mysticism through Evelyn Underhill's book, Dean Inge's (1927/1935) little treatise on *Protestantism* would not have had the impact that it did. For although he was in his day one of the most outspoken advocates of what Baron von Hügel (1908) calls "the mystical element in religion" and had written his own introduction to the subject in his *Christian Mysticism* (Inge, 1899), in *Protestantism* it is frequently mentioned but not explained. Though Inge was well aware both of the mystical tradition in Pre-Christian Neoplatonism, having himself written a definitive two volume treatise on the *Philosophy of Plotinus* (Inge, 1918), and of the mystical tradition within the Catholic Church, in *Protestantism*, he presents the mystic's claim to be in direct communion with God in his or her own inner life as one of the motives behind the protestant rejection of the need for a priest or, for that matter, a long-dead saint, to intercede with God on behalf of the individual. With this bias in favour of mysticism, it is not surprising that the centrepiece of the book is his chapter on Quakerism. For it is in the practices and teaching of the Society of Friends that the mystical element in Protestantism appears in its most pure and unadulterated form. It was my reading of this chapter that led me to investigate my own Quaker roots, to read George Fox's *Journal* from cover to cover, to become an attender at Friends' meetings, getting into trouble at my public school for absenting myself from School Chapel on Sunday mornings in order to do so, to register for exemption from military service on grounds of conscience when called up in January 1943, and to apply successfully to join the Friends' Ambulance Unit the following April. In my submission to the tribunal applying to be registered as a conscientious objector, I conceded that in my present unregenerate state, I could not effectively meet evil with good and hope to prevail, but I believed that with the kind of personality change that develops through mystical experience that it should be possible. It was a possibility that I was concerned to keep open, one which I felt would be closed if I were to engage in military activity. Having long-since abandoned that aspiration, I find this argument not only unpersuasive,

but not a little smug. Nevertheless, though I find it difficult to work out a consistent attitude either emotionally or intellectually on the issue of violence, the Quaker peace testimony has left a deep mark.

X Puberty and the discovery of mysticism: (c) Rationalism and the origin of a research project

In the same year (1940) in which I discovered mysticism, I first encountered the arguments of the so-called "rationalists", using that term, not in its technical philosophical sense, but in the sense of someone who puts rational argument and scientific evidence before faith in deciding matters of religious belief. This was in the pages of a book entitled *The Churches and Modern Thought* by Vivian Phelips (*alias* Philip Vivian), first published in 1906, and reissued with corrections and additions by the Rationalist Press in their Thinker's Library in 1931. Needless to say, this was not a book which I found on the shelves of my school library. As the inscription on the flyleaf testifies, it was purchased at a bookstall on Leeds City Station on my way back home from school at the end of the summer term in July 1940. This book presents the case for thinking that all the principal doctrines of the Christian religion are either demonstrably false or, at best, unsupported by any convincing evidence of their truth. The case rests on scientific evidence, in particular the Darwinian evidence for the view that biological phenomena are the products of evolution by variation and natural selection rather than products of Divine Creation and Divine Purpose, the scientific improbability of miracles and such events as the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection and the Ascension, the higher criticism of the Biblical record, and evidence for the importation into primitive Christianity of ideas from other contemporary religious traditions. The effect of reading this book was to reinforce my conviction that religious beliefs and the magical rituals based upon them, however, attractive and emotionally moving are intellectually untenable, and that to base one's life on the supposed truth of historical claims which might easily turn out to be false in the light of newly discovered evidence was like building a house on shifting quicksand. But fortified by my reading of Underhill and Inge, I was not persuaded to abandon my faith in religion as such. For they had persuaded me to see it, not as a set of doctrines and rituals based upon them, but as a personality-transforming psychological process to whose reality the writings and lives of the mystics bear testimony.

Vivian Phelips considers the argument from the reality of mystical experience as a psychological process in his book (Phelips 1934, pp. 179-184). He deploys two counter arguments against it. The first questions the theistic interpretation of such experiences, on the grounds that there is no more reason to interpret them as a communion with God, than as a communion with the Devil or any other supernatural being. The second draws attention to the similarity of such experiences with those reported by persons of unsound mind. You will not be surprised to learn that I found neither of these arguments convincing, the first because I was already familiar through Evelyn Underhill's book with the idea that uniformities in the underlying psychological process transcend differences in the theological or non-theological language used to describe them, the second because it seemed possible to distinguish between the experiences of the mystic and those of the psychotic by their fruits, those of the mystic being morally and socially adaptive, those of the psychotic morally and socially maladaptive.

It was this book and this section of it 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 conceived 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 would need to study two basic 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.

Between January and March 1943, before joining the Friends' Ambulance Unit, I had the good fortune, thanks to a scholarship at Corpus Christi College, to spend a term up 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 very sympathetic to my proposal, but pointed out that psychology was not at that time available as an undergraduate degree at Oxford, and that, in any case, in order to go on to psychology at the postgraduate

level, I would need to have read philosophy. For reasons I shall explain in a moment, that news was very unwelcome. Nevertheless on examining the limited number of courses (known as 'sections') that were available in wartime Oxford, I decided that in addition to taking a section in English which I felt duty bound to do, since English had been the main subject offered in my scholarship examination, I decided to take a section in the Theory of Knowledge with Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* as the set book. I found the section in English which was on Shakespeare's *Othello* profoundly boring, but was entranced, contrary to my expectations, by the Theory of Knowledge. When I returned to Oxford in 1946 I found to my great delight 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 and consciousness in general, 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 in South Australia in April 1951, by now with a wife and a year-old son, although I took my collection of books on the subject with me, the mysticism project was effectively dead.

XI Puberty and the discovery of mysticism: (d) Philosophy and the mind-body problem

The somewhat jaundiced view which I had formed of philosophy as an academic discipline by the time I arrived in Oxford in January 1943 may seem surprising in view of the fact that the term 'philosophy' has been frequently used from the time of the earliest occurrences of the word in connection with the activities of the Pre-Socratics to describe the writings of an essentially mystical character. But this use of the term has little in common with what Gilbert Ryle used to call that "proprietary brand of haggling" that is

academic philosophy. The poor opinion which I had formed of academic philosophizing was derived from another book which I had purchased a year or two earlier (in October 1941 to be precise), Olaf Stapledon's (1939) *Philosophy and Living*, a two-volume paperback in the Penguin Books Pelican Series. 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.¹ 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 receded into an increasingly distant and uncertain future.

XII Logical positivism

Despite owing my academic reputation, such as it is, entirely to the philosophical community and despite having spent the final twelve years of my working life as a professional philosopher, the jaundiced view of academic philosophy which I acquired from Stapledon has remained with me ever since. I am still as impatient as I ever was with the endless logic-chopping and the persistent obfuscation of issues simply in order to keep the debate alive. Nevertheless, as I have already mentioned, I began to take a more favourable view of academic philosophy as a result of my encounter with the Theory of Knowledge during

¹ He also discusses emergentism; but as that does not lend itself to diagrammatic representation, this section left no lasting impression. I rediscovered it only on re-reading Chapter II of the book from a copy of Volume I kindly supplied to me by Mr. Clive Hicks in response to my having mentioned that I had mislaid my copy of that volume when I presented a version of this paper at a conference on 'Mystical Experience' organised by Dr. Peter Fenwick at the Institute of Psychiatry in London in November 1996, see the appendix at the end of this chapter.

my one term at Oxford in 1943. 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 Friedrich Waismann, one of the founding members of the Vienna Circle who had taken refuge in Oxford after the *Anschluss* of 1938. I was attracted to logical positivism by two things. In the first place it 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. Secondly, by insisting that religious statements, since they cannot be verified, are literally nonsense, it 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.

XIII 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 the man who was later to be my own tutor in philosophy, Paul Grice. At first, the differences between logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy were not apparent, at least not to me, and it appealed for exactly the same reasons. Traditional philosophical debates were dismissed as conceptually confused. Their total liquidation within twenty years was confidently forecast. The same distinction was drawn between empirical and conceptual issues. The philosopher's expertise was again restricted to issues of language.

It was only gradually that I became aware of the differences. Chief among these was the replacement of mistakes in formal logic by deviations from ordinary usage as the source of conceptual confusion in philosophy. Another difference which I did not appreciate until I heard Austin's 'Sense and sensibilia' lectures (Austin 1962) when they were first presented in Trinity Term 1947 was the refutation of phenomenalism and with it the subjectivism that had dominated epistemology since the time of Descartes. This made sense of another innovation of which I had been made aware earlier in the same academic year when I heard Ryle give the lectures which were later published as *The Concept of Mind*

(Ryle, 1949), the behaviourist analysis of our ordinary psychological language. All these developments, once I became aware of them, were grist to my mill. Never much of a formal logician, I was much more at home with ordinary language. 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). Strange as it may seem, this too I found congenial to my interests 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.

XIV Behaviourism

One consequence of studying psychology alongside philosophy at a time when Ryle, Austin, Grice and Strawson were creating Oxford ordinary language philosophy was that the acknowledged behaviourism of Ryle and the unacknowledged behaviourism of Wittgenstein which I learned about from the then newly appointed Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy at Oxford, Brian Farrell, was to awaken an interest, also fostered by Brian, in the neo-behaviorism of Tolman, Hull and Skinner whose different formulations were then the focus of theoretical debate within psychology, not so much in Britain, as in the United States. It was through this that I became, as I remain to this day, a behaviourist.

To say that I became and remain a behaviourist is not to say that I deny or was even ever tempted to deny either the existence of conscious experience or the possibility of studying it scientifically. To do that would have been to abandon everything I have ever stood for. To say that I am a behaviourist means that I subscribe to the following principles:

1. Since linguistic communication is possible only in so far as words are anchored to what is publicly observable, it follows that, as things stand, the only way to study the private experiences of the individual is through objective records of what subjects have said when asked to describe them.

2. Since linguistic communication is possible only in so far as words are anchored to what is publicly observable, it follows that the primary function of our ordinary psychological language is to enable us to describe and explain the publicly observable behaviour of others. Describing our own private experience is a secondary function which it does not do very well.
3. Although the primary function of ordinary language is to enable us to describe and explain the public behaviour of others, this way of talking contains many features which make it unsuitable as a theoretical language for scientific psychology. Consequently, I endorse the attempt by the behaviorists to construct an alternative to it for scientific purposes.
4. However, I also believe that our ordinary psychological language is the source of important insights into the nature of the states and processes involved in the control of behaviour both human and animal. But these insights, I maintain, can only be extracted by the use of the technique of conceptual analysis as developed by Wittgenstein and the ordinary language philosophers.
5. The phenomenon of conscious experience which appears in the self-reports of human subjects and for whose existence those reports are the objective evidence is an integral and vital 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. Its peculiar properties can be understood only in the light of the distinctive function it performs in that process of input to output transformation.

XV Postscript

As you will see from this, behaviourism, as I construe it, brings us full circle back to where we started, to the thesis of my 1956 paper. But where does that leave the original project to examine the nature and function of mystical experience from a biological perspective. I have already remarked that by the time I left for Australia in 1951, I had for a variety of reasons both personal and intellectual, effectively abandoned the project. Three years ago², realising that I was never going to get round to studying them again, I decided to make more room on my bookshelves for other things by presenting my collection of

² [Because this paper was finished in 1996, “three years ago” must be 1993.]

some 140 books on mysticism to the Alistair Hardy Trust, Religious Experience Research Centre, at Westminster College, Oxford. Curiously enough, at around the same time I had begun to take an interest in the work that my old friend, Emeritus Professor Larry Weiskrantz of the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford, has been doing on the phenomenon of blindsight which develops as a consequence of lesions of the striate cortex, both in man (Weiskrantz 1986) and, as we now know from a brilliant experimental study by Alan Cowey and Petra Stoerig published in *Nature* last year (Cowey & Stoerig 1995), in the monkey. This has enabled me to elaborate my account of the biological functions of consciousness in general and conscious experience in particular in ways which have some interesting implications for our understanding of the nature of mystical experience. To expound that theory and its implications at all adequately would need another paper and this one is already much too long. Suffice it to say that what the evidence suggests is that the behaviour of mammals and probably that of other vertebrates is controlled by two distinct but closely interlocked and interacting systems in the brain which we may call 'consciousness' and the 'sub-conscious automatic pilot' respectively. The function of *consciousness* is threefold:

- (a) to categorize any input that is problematic in that it is either unexpected or significant relative to the individual's current or perennial motivational concerns,
- (b) to select a response appropriate both to the presence of a thing of that kind and to the individual's motivational concerns, and
- (c) to monitor the execution of that response.

Conscious experience, on this view, is the first stage in the process whereby problematic inputs are processed by consciousness. Its function is to modify the figure-ground relations within the central representation of a problematic input until an appropriate categorization is achieved. The function of the *sub-conscious automatic pilot* is to continuously scan the total current input so that it can alert consciousness to any input it identifies as problematic, while protecting it from overload either by ignoring those non-problematic inputs which require no response or by responding appropriately but automatically to those for which there already exists a well practised skill or habitual response.

In terms of this model the *practice of contemplation* described by the mystics would appear to consist in the switching on of conscious experience, but without allowing it to proceed to the next stage, that of categorizing the input. Since there is no categorization there is no response-selection and no response-execution. The individual remains keenly conscious, but totally impassive and in so far as the state can be maintained, unmoved by anything happening in the environment. Clearly since it prevents consciousness from exercising its biological functions, such a state cannot be adaptive, if it is maintained indefinitely. But it may well have special virtues as a form of recuperation over and above those provided by sleep.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962) *Sense and sensibilia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ayer, A. J. (1936) *Language, Truth and Logic*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Boring, E. G. (1933) *The Physical Dimension of Consciousness*. New York: Century.
- Cowey, A. and Stoerig, P. (1995) Blindsight in monkeys. *Nature* 373, 6511: 247-9.
- Grensted, L. W. (1930) *God. A Study of the Implications of Recent Psychology for Religious Belief and Practice: The Bampton Lectures for 1930*. London: Longmans.
- Inge, W. R. (1899) *Christian Mysticism. Considered in Eight Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford: The Bampton Lectures for 1899*. London: Methuen.
- Inge, W. R. (1918) *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews 1917-1918*, 2 Vols. London: Longmans, Green.
- Inge, W. R. (1927/1935) *Protestantism*, Revised Edition. London: Nelson.
- Patmore, C. K. D. (1877) *The Unknown Eros and Other Odes*. London: George Bell.
- Patmore, C. K. D. (1895) *The Rod, the Root and the Flower*. London: George Bell.
- Phelips, V. (Philip Vivian) (1906/1934) *The Churches and Modern Thought: An Inquiry into the Grounds of Unbelief and an Appeal for Candour*. Second Edition in the Thinker's Library. London: Watts.
- Place, U. T. (1954) [The concept of heed](#). *British Journal of Psychology* 45:234-255.
- Place, U. T. (1956) [Is consciousness a brain process?](#) *British Journal of Psychology* 47: 44-50.

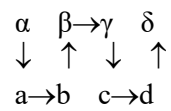
- Place, U.T. (1989) [Low claim assertions](#). In J. Heil (ed.) *Cause, Mind and Reality: Essays Honoring C. B. Martin*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, pp. 121-135.
- Ryle, G. 1949 *The Concept of Mind*. London: Hutchinson.
- Smart, J. J. C. 1959. Sensations and brain processes. *The Philosophical Review* 68: 141-156.
- Stapledon, O. (1939) *Philosophy and Living*, 2 Vols. London: Penguin.
- Underhill, E. (1911/1930) *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th Edition. London: Methuen.
- Von Hügel, Baron F. (1908) *The Mystical Element in Religion: As Studied in St. Catherine of Genoa and her Friends*. London: Dent.
- Weiskrantz, L. (1986) *Blindsight*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.

Appendix [added after the formal publication of this paper]

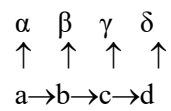
Diagrams representing different theories of the relation between mental events in the mind and physical events in the body from Olaf Stapledon (1939)

[In all these diagrams mental events are represented by the Greek letters α , β , γ , δ , physical events by the Roman letters a, b, c, d]

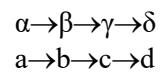
INTERACTIONISM



EPIPHENOMENALISM



PSYCHO-PHYSICAL PARALLELISM



THE DOUBLE ASPECT THEORY

