Place, U. T.

David Armstrong

W. G. Lycan said, 'In my considered opinion, "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" [by U. T. Place] is the most important philosophy of mind article published in the 20th century' (taken from the jacket of George Graham and Elizabeth Valentine's very useful collection, *Identifying the Mind*: *Selected Papers of U. T. Place*). This article launched among philosophers the so-called **identity theory** (not mere correlation of mental and brain processes, but identity).

Ullin Thomas Place was born on 24 October 1924 in Northallerton, North Yorkshire and died in Thirsk, North Yorkshire, on 3 January 2000. In a very interesting intellectual autobiography he tells us of a Quaker heritage, leading to an early interest in mysticism and to conscientious objection in wartime (Graham

and Valentine 2004). After an earlier year at Oxford devoted to social anthropology, he enrolled in 1947 for the new PPP degree, psychology combined with philosophy or physiology, his choice being philosophy. Place always remained both a psychologist and a philosopher, and a genuinely interdisciplinary one at that. An important influence was Brian Farrell, Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy, who, incidentally, first raised the question what it was like to be a bat.

In 1951 the newly appointed young professor of philosophy at the **University of Adelaide**, **J. J. C. Smart**, needed a psychologist because his department was also responsible for that subject. Smart had known Place at Oxford and appointed him to fill the needed position. Place must be credited with introducing scientific psychology to the University of Adelaide, rats in mazes and all, and after his time psychology became a department in its own right.

But Place also continued with his philosophical thinking. Like Smart, Place had been greatly influenced at Oxford by Gilbert Ryle's behaviourism or quasi-behaviourism, with its emphasis upon dispositions to behave in certain ways as the key to the mental. Place, however, was increasingly unwilling to allow that *consciousness* could be treated in the Rylean way. At the same time he was unwilling to accept a dualist position. Materialism about the mental seemed the only scientifically plausible position. Perhaps, then, consciousness could be *identified* with purely physical processes in the brain? Over time he converted Smart from his Ryleanism, and Smart always emphasised that it was Place that was there first. Place's paper was rejected by *Mind* (personal communication of Place to Elizabeth Valentine) but then accepted by the *British Journal of Psychology*, appearing in 1956 (and reprinted in Graham and Valentine 2004). Even as a second-best, this was not a very happy outcome. Psychologists were, one supposes, not very interested, and philosophers did not even read the journal. (Smart, by contrast, signalled his own later conversion in *The Philosophical Review*, at that time read by most analytical philosophers.)

But there was a much more serious obstacle to the view's gaining a degree of acceptance. This was that Place argued that the identification was a *contingent* matter. His model was 'lightning is [is identical with] an electric discharge', which was once a scientific hypothesis, though now established. In the same spirit, he was putting forward a hypothesis about the mental. (A few years later, under the influence of Kripke, many would come to think that the proposition about the nature of lightning was a necessary one, though one known only *a posteriori*.) But at the time Place was writing, analytical philosophers were treating contingency and knowability *a posteriori* as pretty much extensionally equivalent. Philosophers at that time, furthermore, tended to think that *philosophical* truths were established *a priori* or not at all, a tendency only strengthened by the widespread conviction that philosophy could not advance beyond linguistic or conceptual analysis. (Recall that the title of Ryle's book was *The* ***Concept*** *of Mind*.)

In addition, many thought that Place's contention could be refuted by the consideration that one could be aware of one's own consciousness while totally unaware of one's own brain processes. Taken by itself this is a patently invalid

argument, but taken along with the submerged, and so largely unexamined, Cartesian doctrine of self-intimation (nothing in the mental is hidden from us) the brain process hypothesis could seem to be refutable *a priori*.

At any rate, Place's hypothesis was met with widespread incredulity and incomprehension, not to mention rather indifferent jokes. He never resiled from his view, but he became for a number of years rather detached from the ongoing discussion of it. In part this was personal—he resigned his lectureship at the University of Adelaide in December 1954 to return to England largely for family reasons—and so did not participate in the vigorous debate going on in Australia, a country to which he returned only once for a brief visit. (He did, however, maintain a connection with Smart both as philosopher and friend. When Smart was in England they would walk on the North Yorkshire moors.) But the more important reason was that he was out of sympathy with the way that the identity theory subsequently developed.

The theory that Place put forward was a limited one, a mixture of central-state theory and a Rylean view. In his article he said:

> In the case of cognitive concepts like 'knowing', 'believing', 'understanding', and 'remembering', and volitional concepts like 'wanting' and 'intending', there can be little doubt, I think, that an analysis in terms of dispositions to behave … is fundamentally sound. On the other hand, there would seem to be an intractable residue of concepts clustering around the notions of consciousness, experience, sensation, and mental imagery, where some sort of inner process story is unavoidable. (Place 1956: 44)

Smart went along with this in his 1959 paper, not adding very much to Place's position. He did contribute a very important clarifying piece of terminology. Ordinary statements about the mental, he argued, were *topic neutral* between **dualism** and materialism. (The phrase came from Ryle, although Ryle used it to describe logical terms.) The having of an orangey after-image, for instance, was analysed as (roughly) the having of something going on in one like what went on when in good light an actual ripe orange acted on one's eyes. If this style of analysis was correct, then it sets up a level playing field where dualist and material theories of what the actual nature of the 'something going on' was could be decided on empirical grounds, grounds which favoured materialism. Place accepted this idea, indeed he considered it was already present in his own paper (see Graham and Valentine 2004: 110–11).

Later work, however, by **David Lewis** (1966), **D. M. Armstrong** (1966, 1968) and Brian Medlin (1967) sought an identity or central-state theory for *all* mental states, events and processes. Furthermore, Smart quickly came to accept this widening of the scope of the theory. Place never did; see for instance his 1988 paper, 'Thirty Years on—Is Consciousness Still a Brain Process?' (reprinted in Graham and Valentine 2004). Place's identity theory was always and only an identity with consciousness.

On his return to England Place worked for six years in the midlands as a clinical psychologist, touring in a caravan that doubled as a consulting-room. In January 1968 he joined the psychology department at Leeds University working on operant responses in manic-depressive psychosis, but in October 1969 he transferred to philosophy. Retiring in 1982 he came back as senior fellow in 1983.

He married twice, first to Anna Wessel, and in 1964 to Peggy Kay. He and Peggy drove in a camper-van all over Europe to philosophy conferences. When he knew he was dying he went on working steadily at his intellectual projects while he could, until the last two weeks. He left his brain to the University of Adelaide- where it may be seen in the Anatomy Museum with his own caption: 'Did this Brain Contain the Consciousness of U. T. Place?'

Because his identity theory was an identity with consciousness only, he remained sympathetic to behaviourism, particularly the work of B. F. Skinner. Since mental dispositions were so important for his theory, his **metaphysics** of dispositions kept developing. He took from **C. B. Martin** the view that the marks generally given of mental intentionality may also be found in dispositions. This suggested that intentionality with its direction upon objects that need not exist (as in, say, false belief) can be explained as being no more than a certain sort of physical disposition (Martin and Pfeifer 1986). (Martin was a member of the philosophy department at the University of Adelaide during the period that Place was teaching there.) He retained to the end the view that philosophy was conceptual or linguistic analysis, but he thought that this analysis was an empirical matter. Blind-sight and other evidence convinced him of the existence of a second mental system within us, inaccessible to consciousness, which he felicitously called 'the zombie within'. The sweep of his work may be surveyed in the Graham and Valentine collection.

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