

Philosopher UT Place donates brain to University of Adelaide after dedicating his life to studying the mind

ABC Radio Adelaide / By Daniel Keane

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The brain of philosopher UT Place now sits in a glass container at the University of Adelaide. *(Supplied: Denis Smith)*

Ullin Thomas Place was an unusual kind of organ donor; he donated his brain not to science, but to philosophy.

A philosopher himself, the English-born Place spent his life thinking about brains — what they are, how they work, and how they produce conscious experience.

In his will, Place bequeathed his brain to the University of Adelaide, where he had once taught, requesting that it be placed on display with a mischievous caption: "Did this brain contain the consciousness of UT Place?"

After Place died in 2000, the university honoured his wish in equally impish fashion, advising visitors that his cerebral organ [can be viewed "by appointment only"](#).



Place lectured at the University of Adelaide from 1951 to 1954, before returning to England, where he died in 2000. (*Supplied: Thomas Place / utplace.uk*)

In the early 1950s, Adelaide University was the nerve centre of an intellectual revolution, and Place and his aptly-named colleague JJC Smart were in the vanguard.

They became leading figures in a movement called Australian materialism, which sought to tackle the question of how conscious experience arises from brain processes — of how mind relates to matter.

Place argued that there was a strict identity between the two realms, writing in one of his many papers that "mental processes, mental events or mental states are nothing more or less than physical processes, events or states of the brain".

"[Place] believed that you should explain everything — thought and perception and introspection and perceived colours — just as the workings of the brain," said James Franklin, a University of NSW professor who wrote a book about the history of philosophy in Australia.

Such a claim might seem a mere truism, but anyone who follows that argument to certain conclusions is bound to butt heads with a thorny problem: how does a 1.3-kilogram chunk of bio-matter produce consciousness and sensation?

If all of this is making your head spin, rest assured that some of the best and brightest brains — or minds — in philosophy have failed to find a universally accepted and satisfying solution.

"It's fun, but you're chasing your tail. That's philosophy for you," Professor Franklin said.

Visiting his father's brain

When UT Place moved to Adelaide to take up his university job in 1951, he was accompanied by his young family, including son Thomas.

More than 60 years later Thomas, who has spent most of his life in the Netherlands, returned to Adelaide and visited his father's brain.



Thomas Place paid a visit to his father's brain at the University of Adelaide in 2016.

(Supplied: Thomas Place / utplace.uk)

He remembers discussing his father's decision to donate the organ.

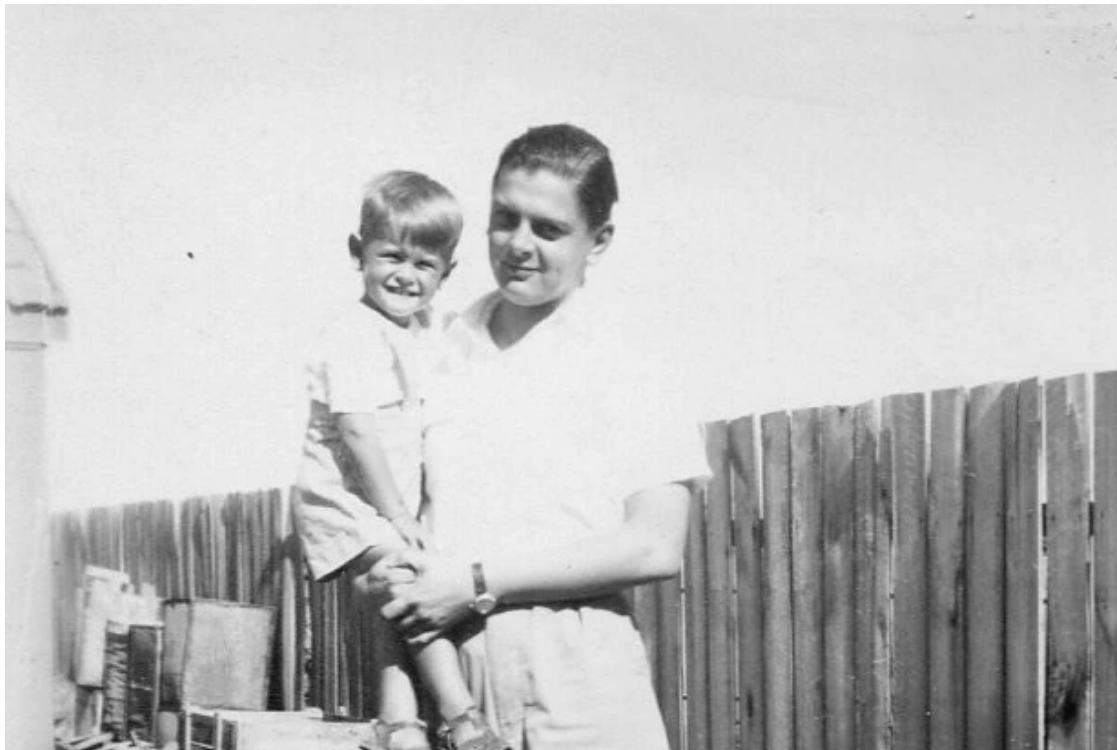
"He told me that this was his intention," Thomas recalled.

"I had no problems with it, I could understand why he did it – that was how he was.

"Was this a kind of joke, or more serious? I think it was both."

Thomas has created a website honouring his father's work, which he said influenced his own decision to study psychology.

"People always said 'He's following his father's footsteps'," Thomas said.



Place with his son Thomas in Adelaide in 1953. (*Supplied: Thomas Place / utplace.uk*)

He said his father's view of the human brain was complicated — he didn't want to reduce everything about human life to "what's happening in the brain".

But on the question of mental life he was a materialist, who argued the mind was not separate from the body.

"He refused to accept the dualist position — that there are two kinds of things, mental things and material things," Thomas explained.

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Counterargument suggests the mind's a myth

One of philosophy's most enduring brainteasers is the problem of brains themselves.

If brains are made of matter, and matter is all there is, then how can something as intangible as seeing the colour red be explained in purely mechanical terms?

"The perception of red doesn't seem to be something you could find by examining a brain," Professor Franklin said.

This problem is considered by some to be so intractable that they have rejected materialism and sought other explanations entirely.

Australian philosopher David Chalmers has promoted the view that, like space and time, consciousness is a basic property of reality.

"We're not going to reduce consciousness to something physical," [he has said](#).

"It's a primitive component of the universe."

The most radical counterargument to this view is called eliminative materialism; its adherents believe the mind is a myth, and consciousness an illusion — a kind of elaborate trick that the brain plays on itself.



Place's decision to have his brain put on display was partly a joke, partly serious, his son said. (*Supplied: Thomas Place / utplace.uk*)

Unfortunately, Place's brain — serenely enclosed in its glass container — doesn't offer many clues.

Indeed, it's hard to believe that something so abjectly inanimate was ever associated with a living, feeling and thinking entity called UT Place.

"It was weird," Thomas said of his encounter with his father's brain.

"I didn't have the feeling of 'Now I'm in contact with my father'."



Place's son Thomas and daughter-in-law Margo alongside the philosopher's brain.
(Supplied: Thomas Place / utplace.uk)