



# Philosophy Collection

## The Brain of Ullin T Place

Ullin T Place (1924–2000) was a lecturer in Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Adelaide from 1951–1954. Together with Adelaide professor JJC Smart, he was responsible for a revolutionary change in how philosophers view the nature of mind and consciousness.

Place's famous 1956 *British Journal of Psychology* paper 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?' argued against the major theories of the time, behaviourism and dualism, and contended that consciousness should be seen as a brain process and nothing more. In defending this position Place and Smart entirely changed the methodology of the philosophy of mind. Their position is known internationally as 'The Identity Theory of Mind' or 'Australian Materialism'.

Place died on 2 January 2000, bequeathing his brain to the University of Adelaide to be displayed with the message:

**Did this Brain Contain the Consciousness of U.T. Place?**



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The Brain of U T Place is on display in the Abbie Museum of Anatomy, Ground Floor, Helen Mayo Building South and can be viewed by appointment only.

For more information and viewing please contact +61 (0)8 8313 3086  
[unicollections@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:unicollections@adelaide.edu.au) [adelaide.edu.au/uni-collections](http://adelaide.edu.au/uni-collections)

**image** The Brain of Ullin T Place  
Gift of Ullin T Place, 2000  
photograph by Denis Smith

With thanks to the School of Medicine, in particular the Abbie Museum of Anatomy as custodians of Places' brain, the Division of Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Adelaide, and Emeritus Professor Chris Mortensen for their continued support.

## UT Place and JJC Smart

First, some important context: the state of play in the philosophy of mind in 1950. There were two popular theories:

### 1. **Dualism: the mind transcends the brain, it goes beyond physical laws.**

(Descartes and many others, indeed anyone who thinks that the personality transcends physical death)

### 2. **Behaviourism: the mind is behaviour.** (Skinner, Ryle)

To give a sense of the plausibility of dualism, here are three arguments for **dualism**:

- i. A thought experiment: close your eyes, open them, close them, then back to normal. Note that in that small period in the middle when your eyes were open, something came into existence that went out of existence afterwards. That thing, a visual experience, a type of mental state, had colour and shape properties that cannot be found in your brain. So your mental states have properties that your brain does not have.
- ii. Descartes argument: I can imagine myself without a brain, I can doubt that I have a brain, but I cannot doubt that I have a mind (*cogito ergo sum*), hence my mind cannot be my brain (or my body).
- iii. Your religious position teaches that the mind transcends physical death, hence the mind is not physical.

**Behaviourism** was a long-standing position in C20 psychology. Here is the main argument in favour of behaviourism: inner mental states, private to the individual, are unverifiable, hence unscientific. The only publicly verifiable scientific aspects of the mind are behaviour.

I don't propose to settle these arguments, only show that dualism and behaviourism have an initial plausibility (though of course they cannot both be correct).

Now, some Adelaide history. JJC (Jack) Smart arrived in Adelaide in 1950 as Hughes Professor of Philosophy, aged 30. There were a couple of philosophers in the department. By 1951 he had appointed UT (Ullin) Place as the first psychologist at the University.

Place believed neither dualism nor behaviourism. He couldn't believe that the mind was immaterial independent of the brain, and he couldn't believe that pains, visual experiences and the like are behaviour: surely my headache is private, going on behind my behaviour. He wrote a famous paper 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?' 1956, defending what came to be called The Identity Theory of Mind, according to which the mind is the brain.

Smart followed up with an equally famous paper 'Sensations and Brain Processes' 1959, then in 1963 with a book *Philosophy and Scientific Realism* which integrated the Identity Theory into a more general scientific position.

Place and Smart aimed to answer Descartes' argument by saying that the identity statement that the mind is identical with the brain is not a definition, but rather a contingent fact or scientific discovery.

Example 1: I cannot doubt that the author of *Waverley* wrote *Waverley*, though I can doubt that Sir Walter Scott wrote *Waverley*, but this does not show that Scott is not the author of *Waverley*.

Example 2: I might know that the Morning Star rises in the morning, and fail to know that planet Venus rises in the morning, yet this doesn't prevent the Morning Star from being the same thing as Venus.

Example 3 (against Descartes): I might know that I think, but fail to know that Mortensen thinks because I have forgotten my name: this doesn't prevent me from being Mortensen!

The general point is that there can be an asymmetry of knowledge in that I can know that a thing X has a certain property, while being ignorant that a thing Y has that property; but this does not debar X from being Y.

The Identity Theory of Mind started a revolution in the philosophy of mind in the second half of the 20th century. Not everyone agreed with it, there were many subtle alternatives; but it was the Identity Theory, Adelaide's contribution to world philosophy, that was the seed that started this revolution.

Ullin Place died on 2 January 2000. He bequeathed his brain to the University of Adelaide, to be displayed with the motto *Did this Brain Contain the Consciousness of UT Place?*

This is an appropriate comment on the title of his famous paper, and a fine piece of dark humour. Various noted overseas philosophers have come to see the brain since then.

Jack Smart was awarded an AC for his contributions to world philosophy. He died in 2013, Australia's most famous philosopher.

### **Emeritus Professor Chris Mortensen**

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Adelaide 22 September 2015

[arts.adelaide.edu.au/philosophy/resources/place](https://arts.adelaide.edu.au/philosophy/resources/place)

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