

[Obituary written by professor J. J. C. (“Jack”) Smart in November 1999 at the request of Ullin Place; to be read at the latter’s funeral. Because he lived in Australia, it was impossible for Jack to attend the funeral. This obituary was likely used as input by Harry Lewis, a former Leeds colleague in the Department of Philosophy, in his contribution “An account of Ullin’s academic career” to the funeral in January 2000.]

ULLIN THOMAS PLACE

Ullin Place has been one of my oldest and most valued friends. I have memory of him which goes back about fifty years when he was an undergraduate at Corpus Christi College, Oxford and I was a Junior Research Fellow in the College. The college allowed me to do a limited amount of tutoring, and I have an idea that I did indeed have the honour of tutoring him in philosophy for about one term, but my memory is not to be relied upon in this instance. As Ullin's subsequent career has shown, he had an absolutely original mind, well informed, but not at all overawed by prevailing fashion.

Like me at the time, Ullin was much influenced by Gilbert Ryle who was rightly the most influential philosopher in Oxford, but Ullin had his reservations. Ryle's book *The Concept of Mind* argued against Cartesian dualism of mind and body and for a form of behaviourism which was most plausible when dealing with states of mind such as beliefs, desires and emotions, but which had difficulty in dealing with immediate experiences, sensations and mental images of which we seem to have an immediate internal acquaintance, though not an infallible one. Ullin seized on this problem and in his papers ‘The Concept of Heed’ (1954) and most notably ‘Is Consciousness a Brain Process?’ propounded what has come to be called ‘The Identity Theory of Mind’, the then heretical view that experiences are identical with brain processes. (Unimportantly Ullin preferred to talk of constitution rather than of identity).

These papers were written when Ullin was a Lecturer in Psychology, within the Philosophy Department of which I was head, at the University of Adelaide. He had come with a strong recommendation of B. A. Farrell, the Wilde Reader in

Mental Philosophy at Oxford. There had been no scientific psychology when I went there in 1950. Psychology had been regarded as the foundation of philosophy. Ullin remedied that. He started a laboratory and I remember him acquiring electrical relays from military surplus stores to open and shut gates in mazes for rats. Though he was technically in my department I made sure that he was *de facto* independent, and when, to my regret, he returned to England he left the psychology laboratory in good shape. Psychology became a properly independent department, and when Malcolm Jeeves became Professor it became very big and also first rate. Jeeves had a neurophysiological bent, and I am sure that was congenial to Ullin's philosophical outlook. Ullin deserves much credit for starting scientific psychology at Adelaide in the first place.

However, Ullin's main fame has come from his philosophical work, and especially from his paper 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?' (1956). His answer to the question here was in the affirmative, and he wanted his arguments to give reassurance to psychologists and neurophysiologists who wanted to say the same but were unable to disentangle themselves from Cartesian ideas. Ullin therefore sent his paper (as also his earlier 'The Concept of Heed') to *The British Journal of Psychology*. The paper was in part the outcome of a three cornered discussion at the University of Adelaide between Ullin, myself and C. B. Martin, a deep and subtle philosopher in my department. We sent each other little typewritten notes. I now wish that we had preserved these. I was sympathetic to Ullin's arguments, even though I was still too much imbued with Oxonian orthodoxy, so that I kept trying to refute Ullin's bold thesis. A year or so after the publication of Ullin's great paper I became converted to Ullin's point of view and published a paper in *The Philosophical Review* defending the Identity Theory. In the meantime a form of the Identity Theory had been proposed by Herbert Feigl in the USA. Feigl's paper was long and covered much ground, and it was like Place's in pointing out that identity

statements such as that the Morning Star is identical to the Evening Star, could be contingent. Feigl therefore was an important, as well as genial, ally, even though he was at heart not a full-blooded identity theorist, in as much as he had qualms about the *properties* of experiences and tended to hold that though experiences were brain processes they had non-physical properties. (If I remember rightly Martin tended to this position). I have always regretted that Ullin sent his great paper to a psychological journal and not to a philosophical one as it delayed the recognition of his achievement.

Place's materialist thesis was taken up by others, with certain modifications, notably by David Armstrong in Australia and David Lewis in the USA. Brian Medlin and David Armstrong had independently introduced the term 'Central State Materialism', identifying not only experiences with brain processes, but beliefs and desires with brain states. Ullin has remained Rylean in the analysis of such states. He rightly stressed, as the others would indeed agree, that we do not have privileged (though fallible) access to our beliefs and desires as we do to our experiences. The theory has often been said to have been superseded by a type of theory called 'Functionalism' and I would argue that functionalists have greatly exaggerated the difference between identity theory and functionalism. I think that if there is a difference the identity theory better handles the fact of our direct awareness of immediate experience. Still, these 'ism' words are vague and need to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Since his time in Australia Ullin has worked tirelessly not only on refinements of the identity theory but also on other matters, including philosophy of language, connectionism in the philosophy and psychology of mind, conversational analysis and the metaphysics of dispositions. His views on this last emerge in an important book on the subject, consisting in a three way dialogue with C. B. Martin and David Armstrong. These all show his independence of mind,

but in assessing his work as a whole I would most stress his early pioneering of the materialist theory of mind. In an article (so far unpublished) 'From Mystical Experience to Biological Consciousness: A Pilgrim's Progress' he says about his paper 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?' that it makes a watershed in the philosophical discussion of the mind-body problem comparable in its effect (though confined to the community of professional philosophers in the English speaking world) to Descartes *Meditation* three hundred years earlier. If this claim may seem a trifle grandiose, I would nevertheless urge that something can be said to defend it.

The just mentioned so far unpublished article by Ullin provides many biographical insights. He describes how he became fascinated by religion as a result of being sent to a strongly Anglican preparatory school. After that, at the age of fifteen, when he was at Rugby School, he discovered mysticism by reading books by Evelyn Underhill and Dean Inge which were in the school library. This mysticism was one which did not call for a unitary soul which survives death, but which sought for a personality transformation that enables one to accept pain and the prospect of one's personal annihilation. Ullin proposed a theory of consciousness which consists of three levels. He conjectured that mystical experience consists of the lowest level in which problematic inputs are modified before the second stage in which categorization of the inputs is achieved. Mysticism is, as he puts it, 'the switching on of conscious-experience, without allowing it to proceed to the second stage of categorizing the input'. There is no response selection or response execution. This state thus has no adaptive biological functions except for 'providing for recuperation over and above those provided by sleep'. I am reminded of a book by an Australian psychiatrist, Ainslie Mears, who visited witch doctors in Africa and yogis in India, whose relaxation techniques are similar to his. However, where they regard them as yielding a higher state of consciousness, Mears regarded them in fact as yielding regression to a more

primitive state. Ullin's later views on mysticism show his admirable intellectual strength, and his resistance to seek comfort from romantic ideas. His own strength of character required no such diversions. I regard him as a great man, not only intellectually, but also morally. Part of his ancestry is direct from Margaret Fell, the so-called 'mother of Quakerism', who married George Fox, the founder of Quakerism. Appropriately Ullin's service in the second world war was with the Friends Ambulance Unit.

Jack Smart