

ULLIN T. PLACE: A LIFE IN VERBAL BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT: Ullin T. Place died on 2 January 2000. His contributions to philosophy and to behavior analysis have earned him an enduring place in our new century. This memorial uses text from his correspondence to illustrate the scope of his life's work and the dignity, perseverance, and courage with which he faced its end.

Key words: Ullin T. Place, verbal behavior, the tact, behavior analysis, philosophy, mortality, death

It is difficult to find words when friends and colleagues die. Not least among the many reasons this is so is that they are no longer part of our audience. However much we may wish to address them, they will not respond. Ullin T. Place can no longer be part of our audience, but at least he is not completely lost to us as a speaker and writer. We can still reproduce and disseminate some of what he had to say.

This memorial makes the point by presenting some of his verbal behavior from his last months, not only on his philosophical and behavior analytic work but also on his own mortality. We do not speak easily of death, but it is becoming more acceptable to do so (cf. Catania, 2002b, p. 334, on Skinner's reaction to the 1961 death of his Harvard colleague, Bridgman). Ullin Place made an important contribution to this societal change through the candor with which he shared information about his condition with a number of colleagues. By talking about his terminal illness in explicit detail and with complete frankness, he tore down a barrier that would otherwise have separated him prematurely from those he left behind. His messages below may be as close as we can come to what he might have wanted taken as his last words.

Although I probably had already met Ullin Place briefly at one or more meetings in Europe, my first substantial contact with him was when he undertook an extensive trip around the world to visit laboratories and scholars concerned with behavior analysis. He spent some time with me as he came through Maryland, and we met on many subsequent occasions at international meetings concerned with behavior analysis and related disciplines. In these later travels he was typically accompanied by his wife, Peggy Place. During a sabbatical year that I spent in North Wales, not long after his visit (1986-1987), I saw him more frequently. He

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article is based on a paper presented in a Memorial Symposium for Ullin T. Place at the Fourth European Experimental Analysis of Behaviour meeting, Amiens, France, July 2000. It is revised from a version that appeared in the *European Journal of Behavior Analysis* (Catania, 2002a). The author is in the Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250, USA. Email: catania@umbc.edu.

was a marvelous tour guide for me and my wife during a trip to his native Yorkshire, where his wit and his breadth of interests ranged from neolithic sites, to medieval cathedrals, to contemporary highlights like the veterinary practice of Alf Whyte (vet to the sheep that Ullin Place had once owned, and more likely to be recognized by his pseudonym, James Herriot of “All Creatures Great and Small”).

But behavior analysts knew Ullin Place best, of course, through his abiding interest in the functions and origins of verbal behavior, as informed by his solid grounding in philosophy and psychology. At numerous conferences he addressed such issues with enthusiasm and erudition, educating behavior analysts on philosophical distinctions such as that between intensional and intentional concepts or bringing philosophical criteria to bear on fundamental behavior analytic concepts such as contingency. It was a disappointment either to miss a conference that he had attended or to attend one that he had not.

I had not seen Ullin Place for some time when, in October 1998, I was asked to review a paper on language origins that he had submitted to the electronic journal, *Psychology* (Place, 2000). My review was critical, especially on the grounds of differences between Place’s treatment of verbal terms such as *mand* and *tact*, and B. F. Skinner’s (1957) own treatments of those terms. Some other issues of contention involved the role of equivalence classes in language, the gestural versus the vocal origins of language, and individual versus group selection in evolution. I did know, however, that Ullin Place was thoroughly familiar with Skinner’s book, at one time having produced what was virtually a concordance of Skinner’s technical terminology, and noting, for example, that not a single sentence in “Verbal behavior” that included the term *tact* involved a verbal response to a past but now absent stimulus or event.

At issue, I believe, was the way in which features of verbal behavior could capture features of the environment, not at the level of individual responses such as tacts but rather at the level of entire sentences and other higher-order structures. Skinner treated sentences as built up from tact relations in combination with other verbal units and elaborated through autoclitic processes, whereas Ullin Place seemed to argue that entire sentences could entail tact functions through correspondences of their structural features and structural features of environments. It remains to be seen whether these are mainly issues of vocabulary and usage or involve major substantive differences. Papers throughout this symposium are relevant to these and related issues.

In any case, the editor of *Psychology*, Stevan Harnad, accepted the manuscript conditional upon revision. Four reviews accompanied the correspondence, and I was identified as the author of mine. I wrote an email note to Ullin Place in December 1998, in which I included a few comments about his manuscript that I hoped would be helpful, but many months elapsed without a reply and with no sign of revision of his manuscript. I had become concerned that he had taken my comments personally, but I should have known better. During 1999, Harnad had received other submissions concerned with language origins for *Psychology*, and began to plan to have them all appear at about the same time. He had attempted to contact Ullin Place about his manuscript, and had learned that he had been ill, but

also that he had managed some recent travel, which gave the appearance that his health was improving. Upon receiving that information (and a new email address), I sent another message to Ullin Place, and got his reply in early November 1999. He also circulated copies of his reply to a number of other colleagues, and I have excerpted it here especially because that distribution made it clear that he was addressing what he had to say to a broad audience. It began as follows:

Dear Charlie:

. . . I'm afraid the information relayed by Stevan about my state of health is both out of date and much more sanguine than is justified by the facts. These are as follows:

1. Last December on my return from the International Congress of Behaviorism and the Sciences of Behavior in Seville I was diagnosed as suffering from small cell fast-growing carcinoma of the lung which as you probably know is incurable. Without treatment it has a life-expectancy of 6 to 9 months. With treatment 12 to 18 months.

2. Between December and March I underwent 4 chemotherapy treatments. The first of these showed some improvement. The second and third showed no further improvement, while after the fourth there was a deterioration. Consequently chemotherapy on the primary tumour was abandoned in favor of radiotherapy. This proved remarkably successful. Within a month of the completion of the course, by the end of June, all trace of the primary tumour on X-ray had virtually disappeared, my state of health as subjectively assessed appeared to be steadily improving and I was led to believe that, provided I could avoid the development of metastases, I might yet prove to be one of those very rare cases in which remission from the disease becomes relatively permanent.

3. But it was not to be. By early September I began to develop chest pains which were making sleeping difficult. I went to my GP only to discover while waiting in his surgery that I had developed a swollen gland at the base of the neck. I was rapidly sent off to the South Cleveland Hospital in Middlesbrough for a further course of radiotherapy to deal with this. I was hoping that curing it would also deal with the chest pains; but in this I was again disappointed. It appears that they were caused by a recurrence of the original tumour and a spread of the disease to the inside wall of the chest—a much more intractable problem.

4. Within a week of completing the second course of radiotherapy in Middlesbrough, I was back in hospital, this time the Friarage in Northallerton, with a diagnosis of pneumonia, fluid on the lung (pleurisy?) and an irregular heartbeat. This was treated by antibiotics, draining the left

lung and thereafter sealing the left lung cavity by sticking it to the inside chest wall with talcum powder of all things!

5. This seems to have done the trick, at least for the time being and I was allowed home from hospital this Wednesday afternoon the third of November. The pneumonia, pleurisy and presumably the irregular heartbeat are now under control and my consultant thinks that I should now survive for another six months or so; but almost certainly no longer than that. I still get pains in the chest, hiccoughing, and occasional attacks of vomiting and, as a side effect of the drugs aimed at controlling these other symptoms, severe constipation. The drugs I am having to take to control these symptoms, principally morphine to control the pain, leave me rather more drowsy than I would wish; but all in all I still seem capable of productive intellectual work during my more lucid intervals.

Following this description of his medical status and prospects, he turned to an outline of the status of his work. As a summary of the range of issues with which he had been concerned throughout his career, it could hardly be improved upon. But we can only guess at what we have missed when we contemplate what he would have done had more time remained to him.

As you can imagine, this leaves me in the situation of having a large backlog of academic work, most of it written since I finally retired in 1986, which is either unpublished, published in obscure locations where it is unlikely to reach target audiences, in need of revision in the light of subsequent work both by others and by myself and, above all, lacking the coordination within the corpus that only publication in book form can achieve. The range of topics covered is very large, ranging as it does from the mind-body problem in both its philosophical and neuropsychological aspects, conceptual analysis as the empirical investigation of contingency-shaped linguistic conventions, connectionism and the conceptualist theory of universals, the picture theory of meaning and the correspondence theory of truth, argument structure and sense- and truth-preserving sentence transformations, the causal counterfactual, dispositions and their role in causation, T-intenTionality, as the mark of the dispositional, S-intenSionality as the mark of the quotational, three levels of contingency-shaped learning, the neuro-synaptic, the conditioned reflex and the molar/operant, language learning and the win-shift/fail-stay contingency (the contingency analysis of conversation and other pragmatic interaction), contingency analysis as applied to the semantics of both narrative texts and conversational utterances, and all this before getting on to the problem of language evolution.

In each of these areas I am planning a little book in conjunction with one or two collaborators setting out as briefly and succinctly as possible my

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position on the issue in question, based wherever possible on existing published and unpublished articles. To give you an idea of the kind of thing that is envisaged, let me quote the bookplan of the first of these, that on the mind-body problem, the one closest to completion as things stand at present.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ZOMBIE-WITHIN

The Metaphysical Foundations, Conceptual Status and Empirical Elaboration of a Scientific Hypothesis

by

ULLIN THOMAS PLACE

with editorial assistance from

MARCO NANI and LUCA MALATESTI

BOOK PLAN

- Chapter 1. Conceptual Analysis and the Concept of Mind
- Chapter 2. "From mystical experience to biological consciousness: a pilgrim's progress?" (1997)*
- Chapter 3. "The concept of heed" (1954)
- Chapter 4. "Is consciousness a brain process?" (1956)
- Chapter 5. "Two concepts of consciousness: the biological/private and the linguistic/social" (1992)
- Chapter 6. "We needed the analytic-synthetic distinction to formulate mind-brain identity then: we still do" (1997)*
- Chapter 7. "The two-factor theory of the mind-brain relation" (2000)
- Chapter 8. "Consciousness and the zombie-within: a functional analysis of the blindsight evidence" (2000)
- Chapter 9. "The causal potency of qualia: its nature and its source" (1999)*

* Date of completion. Otherwise dates are dates of original publication.

In view of this it is not surprising that my *Psychology* article has landed up at the back of a long line. I am getting rather worried about this, particularly as my life expectancy on the most sanguine forecast does not allow me, even working full time on this alone, the time to complete the text of my paper on "The role of the hand," submit to *Psychology*, read the commentaries and reply to them. . . .

He proposed that he and I collaborate on revising his *Psychology* manuscript, but he had already done some revision. In his most recent draft of his manuscript, he had resolved my misgivings about the differences between his and Skinner's treatments of the technical vocabulary of verbal behavior with just the two words I have italicized here:

I rely on a *somewhat deviant* version of Skinner's (1938; 1953) behaviour analysis in which behaviour in general and linguistic/verbal behaviour in particular is construed as a part learned, part unlearned adaptation to what Skinner calls the three-term contingency. . . .Language behaviour is unique in that, when fully developed, it involves two different levels of adaptation to the three-term contingency.

My role in the revision of his manuscript consisted, mainly, of converting it into an appropriate format for electronic publication in *Psychology*. Ullin Place did not live to see it appear.

At the end of November 1999, I received two other extensive messages from Ullin Place. Both were copies to me and to a number of other colleagues of his e-mail correspondence with Marco Nani. One message consisted of a draft of a substantial manuscript on mind-brain identity theory that he was coauthoring with Nani. The other was a reply to Nani's suggestions about other collaborative work. It included the following (cf. the list of topics in the earlier email correspondence above):

Your idea sounds most exciting and should undoubtedly be pursued. On the other hand, as far as I am concerned, it has been overtaken by events. Since I last wrote, I have abandoned my original idea which was to have three collections of my published and unpublished papers published after my death. Instead I am now proposing to write a series of 17 little paperbacks under the title "U. T. Place: Essays in Radical Empiricism" which I will try to complete as far as possible myself in the months that are left to me. This series would not compete with your proposal, since it would focus exclusively on setting out my current thinking on all the major topics I have been engaged in from the mind-body problem, causation and dispositions, intentionality, connectionism and the conceptualist theory of universals, learning theory, conceptual analysis, the picture theory of meaning and various aspects of language. The 17 titles are as follows:

SERIES

U.T. PLACE: ESSAYS IN RADICAL EMPIRICISM

VOLUMES

1. CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE ZOMBIE-WITHIN
2. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS: THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF LINGUISTIC CONVENTION
3. CONNECTIONISM AND THE CONCEPTUALIST THEORY OF UNIVERSALS

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4. THE PICTURE THEORY OF MEANING AND THE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH
5. ARGUMENT STRUCTURE: SENTENCE TRANSFORMATIONS THAT PRESERVE SENSE REFERENCE AND TRUTH VALUE
6. THE CAUSAL COUNTERFACTUAL: METAPHYSICAL AND NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS
7. DISPOSITIONS AND CAUSATION
8. T-INTENTIONALITY AS THE MARK OF THE DISPOSITIONAL
9. S-INTENSIONALITY AS THE MARK OF THE QUOTATIONAL: THE CASE FOR BEHAVIORISM
10. THE TOWER OF BABEL: A SPECULATIVE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ORIGINS OF PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE
11. PROBLEM SOLVING AND CONTINGENCY-SHAPING: CONSCIOUSNESS AND LANGUAGE
12. THREE LEVELS OF CONTINGENCY-SHAPED LEARNING: THE NEUROSYNAPTIC, THE REFLEX AND THE MOLAR/OPERANT
13. LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE WIN-SHIFT/FAIL-STAY CONTINGENCY IN THE ANALYSIS OF PRAGMATIC INTERACTION
14. CONTINGENCY ANALYSIS IN THE SEMANTICS OF NARRATIVE TEXTS AND CONVERSATIONAL SEQUENCES
15. EMOTION, MOOD AND MOTIVATION
16. ETHICS AS A METHOD OF BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION
17. THE ROLE OF THE HAND IN THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE (PSYCOLOQUY PAPER)

Since this series will focus exclusively on presenting my current thinking on these topics with little or no reference to its antecedents and

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background in my own work or that of others, it shouldn't conflict with your proposals in any way. . .

Ullin Place then included the contents for the first volume, essentially as it had appeared in the earlier email message quoted above. He added:

But that's not all. Because all the constituent chapters except the first are reproduced from existing published and unpublished work all of which is on my hard disk as a computer file, it has been a simple matter to actually put the book together as a manuscript ready for submission to a publisher. Apart from the index which will take a little longer, I should have reached this stage by the middle of this coming week. My first book under my own sole name in 75 years! . . .

That was the last message I received from Ullin Place. Early in the new year I received the following from his wife, copied to me and to a number of other colleagues:

I very much regret to inform you that Ullin Place died on Sunday 2nd January 2000.

He wished that you should be informed.

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