Neil Melkot

Professor King

Minds, Machines, and Persons

2/17/2025

Phantom in the Neural Network: Rethinking the Inner Life Through Place's Vision

Over the past century, the philosophical landscape has seen a marked shift away from the dualistic view that mind and body are entirely separate substances. One of the central figures in this shift is U. T. Place, whose essay "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" questions and responds to traditional dualist approaches. Place's approach, often dubbed the "identity theory", argues that conscious mental events should be identified with processes occurring in the brain. Although he borrows insights from behaviorism, Place insists that, unlike certain cognitive or dispositional states, conscious states cannot be understood purely in terms of behavior. In what follows, I will explain what Place means by "consciousness" and what characterizes mental states that involve consciousness, discuss why he thinks that many mental states can be captured by a behavioristic framework whereas conscious ones cannot, show what Place thinks conscious mental states are identical to while also contrasting it briefly with Descartes's classical picture, explore what Place believes is required to prove this identity, and finally assess whether Place succeeds in doing so and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his view.

To begin, Place's use of the term "consciousness" in "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" refers to those mental occurrences that inherently feel like "something going on inside" the subject. He thus distinguishes conscious mental states, such as having a vivid visual experience, feeling a sharp pain, or hearing a distinctive tone, from states that can be more readily captured in dispositional or behavioral terms. For instance, Place agrees with the behaviorist (like Carnap)

that certain “cognitive” or “emotional” concepts, such as believing, wanting, or intending, can be analyzed primarily through the dispositional effects they have on one’s behavior. However, when it comes to genuine conscious episodes (like a throbbing pain, a visual afterimage, or the experience of color), Place notes that these states are not exhausted by outward behaviors. Something occurs within the subject that cannot be re-described purely as a disposition to act or speak. Thus, for Place, consciousness indicates a genuinely “inner” goings-on, an event that is private and accessible through introspection.

This same perspective explains why Place diverges from strict behaviorists for a certain range of mental phenomena. Place grants that many so-called “mental states” are indeed susceptible to a behavioral or dispositional analysis. A person’s beliefs about arithmetic, for instance, or a tendency to become angry, can often be rephrased in statements about how the individual would behave under various circumstances. Yet for episodes involving immediate subjective awareness, a headache or flash of color, he finds it counterintuitive to reduce these phenomena solely to publicly observable tendencies. When you experience a bright light, you do not merely display certain behaviors such as squinting; rather, you have a direct subjective occurrence that seems, in your own awareness, irreducibly experiential. Place’s aim is to show that we need an “inner process story” to accommodate this more personal, immediate dimension of mind. Thus, although behaviorism might fit certain beliefs or dispositions, Place insists it cannot fully capture states that come with a “what-it’s-like” aspect, the hallmark of consciousness.

Having identified that conscious mental states need an inner process account, Place’s bold move is to argue that these states are identical to processes in the brain. He does not claim we discover this identity through mere definitions (he rejects what he calls the “is of definition”).

Rather, he holds that claims like “consciousness is a brain process” use what he terms the “is of composition,” akin to statements such as “lightning is a motion of electrical charges” or “clouds are masses of water droplets in suspension.” In each case, one expression (“lightning,” “cloud,” “consciousness”) picks out a phenomenon as it appears to ordinary observation or introspection, whereas the other term (“motion of electrical charges,” “mass of water droplets,” “brain process”) describes the same phenomenon in the language of science. If these two sets of descriptions converge on the very same underlying entity or event, then, for Place, we can conclude we are speaking of a single state of affairs described in two different ways.

From Descartes’s perspective, this is a radical reinterpretation. Descartes maintained that mental states are “modifications” or configurations of a distinct mental substance, intrinsically independent from the physical domain. Accordingly, a Cartesian would say that when you feel a pain or have a vivid mental image, that is literally a state of a non-physical mind, something with no extension in space. The brain, by contrast, is wholly physical. So whereas Place sees the mental as something identical to brain processes, Descartes regards mental states as modifications of a non-physical substance that could in principle exist without the body. The difference is stark: Descartes severs mind and body as two ontologically distinct kinds of “stuff,” whereas Place maintains that the mind is just the brain in action.

If Place is right that consciousness is a process in the brain, then we must ask what one would need to do to prove this claim. By Place’s own analysis, proving an identity claim of this sort means showing that two seemingly different observations (one from the “inside,” describing subjective events, and one from the “outside,” describing the brain) are in fact observations of the same phenomenon. He compares this to how we scientifically established that what people call “lightning” is the same thing scientists describe as “motion of electrical charges.” Because it

is impossible for an ordinary sky-gazer to examine the electrical charges in a thundercloud with the naked eye, specialized instruments must confirm that under the conditions we label "lightning," these physical processes reliably occur. Over time, we stitch both sets of observations into a single theoretical story, concluding that the bright flash in the sky is exactly a discharge of electricity.

Analogously, Place argues we would need to show that special neuroscientific observations of the brain in action can explain and predict our introspective reports of conscious episodes. If we track a subject's brain processes during a specific type of vivid experience and demonstrate that those processes, under a suitably mature neuroscience, directly account for what the subject introspectively claims to see or feel, we would thereby unify the "inner" and "outer" observations. Only under such conditions, says Place, can we genuinely affirm the identity "consciousness is a brain process." He is insistent that logical concerns, such as the fact that "consciousness" and "brain process" mean different things or that one can conceive of a pain without thinking of neurons, do not on their own refute the identity. Instead, the verdict should be a matter of empirical discovery, much like discovering that water is H_2O.

Yet one may ask whether Place himself accomplishes this final step of explaining introspection in terms of brain processes. On close reading, the answer is that he does not really provide the neurophysiological evidence or a fully elaborated theory that demonstrates how conscious episodes arise from specific neuronal events. Place sets the logical groundwork for why an identity theory is not self-contradictory and how it might be established empirically, but he never offers the detailed neuroscience showing how, for instance, a particular firing pattern in a cortical region yields the subjective experience of a color or a pain. Moreover, he acknowledges that observing one's own experience (via introspection) and observing one's

neural processes (via specialized instruments) cannot be done in exactly the same way we might walk closer to a cloud and see the water droplets. The analogy with lightning and electrical charges tells us identity is possible, not that it is fully proven.

Thus, we reach both the strength and the weakness of Place's account. On the one hand, he aptly shows that one cannot dismiss "consciousness is a brain process" merely by appealing to the different meanings of "consciousness" and "brain activity," or the possibility of imagining the one without the other. In so doing, he dismantles an older style of argument that used purely logical or definitional grounds to reject physicalism. Place's argument clarifies that identity claims in science are often found to be true even when the descriptions are initially quite distinct. On the other hand, Place's account reveals a gap: he calls for "some appropriate scientific theory" that would demonstrate how introspective reports are caused and explained by processes in the brain, yet he does not deliver such a theory in his essay. While he insists that it is not incoherent to hope for such an explanation, he provides little beyond an optimistic pointer toward future neuroscientific research. In that sense, Place's overall position contains a core insight and a shortfall. The insight is that consciousness may be "nothing over and above" a physical event in the brain, a possibility that remains entirely open and that cannot be refuted by mere linguistic differences or appeals to "logical possibility." The shortfall is that he does not show the rigorous evidence or theoretical model needed to decisively confirm that identity, a task he claims must be done through empirical science. For many readers and subsequent philosophers, it appears that Place's greatest contribution is opening the conceptual space for the identity theory and explaining why the old objections to mind-brain identity do not succeed. At the same time, the heavier burden, articulating precisely how subjective experience or qualia align with specific neuronal activity, remains largely unaddressed.

Place's discussion of consciousness as a brain process lays the logical foundation for a physicalist account of the mind. He uses the "is of composition" to show how one might treat statements about consciousness in the same vein as statements about lightning or clouds, thus undercutting purely logical or definitional refutations of materialism. At the same time, his insistence that conscious processes are, in principle, identical to neural processes indicates a sharp break from Descartes's dualism, offering an alternative that ascribes no ontological uniqueness to mind. If we follow Place's reasoning, proving that identity would require scientific explanation linking introspective reports to observable brain events. He himself does not provide that proof, so he leaves the question open for further empirical investigation. In that respect, Place's theory is compelling in showing how identity is possible, but it lacks the final, detailed evidence that would make the identity of consciousness and brain processes secure. Whether we ultimately endorse or reject Place's view, his essay remains pivotal: it reminds us that differences in the way we talk about mind and body do not alone prove they are distinct, and that unraveling the mystery of consciousness will likely require both philosophical clarity and cutting-edge neuroscience.