

Readings Tutorial 8

'Is consciousness a brain process?'

UT Place

I found this article to be a bit difficult to read, mainly because Place was being precise in what he was talking about, and so had to qualify everything with additional circumstances. The tricky part was unraveling nested sentences in some cases.

That aside, Place's thesis seemed to be that consciousness is a brain process. The reason there are arguments about this is that people overgeneralise rules about the independence of expressions. So, 'consciousness' and 'brain process' appear to describe two completely different things, and thus the argument goes that they must be different. Place argues, however, that this rule about logically independent expressions does not generalise to the consciousness and brain process case. Instead, he argues, this statement is more akin to 'a cloud is a mass of particles or droplets in suspension'. The meaning of the word 'cloud' is not necessarily associated with 'a mass of droplets in suspension', but with the experience of seeing the cloud from a distance. In Place's words 'we can observe the micro-structure of the cloud only when we are enveloped by it'. That is, it is not possible to observe the cloud in both senses at the same time.

The words 'consciousness' and 'brain process' are similar. 'Consciousness' does not necessarily imply that it consists of brain processes. However, if it does, then this is not self-contradictory, in the same way that a cloud being both a cloud and a mass of droplets in suspension is not self-contradictory.

'Sensations and Brain processes'

JJC Smart

Smart says that 'the object of this paper [is] to show that there are no philosophical arguments which compel us to be dualists.' While I find that all of his arguments are reasonably successful in arguing against objections to the materialistic hypotheses, I disagree that allowing the 'nomological danglers', as Smart puts it, is as objectionable as Smart seems to feel. Smart says that allowing these would 'involve a large number of irreducible psychophysical laws, ... of a queer sort, that just have to be taken on trust.' In other words, Smart doesn't like the axioms of dualism. Personally, though, I find the ideas of these 'nomological danglers' rather interesting. I think that these ideas should be investigated further, by giving them some initial assumptions and letting people who like thinking in a dualistic fashion run with the idea. Let dualists create some sort of scheme where non-physical things can exist, and see what they can do with it. If their arguments can be demolished without arguing against their first principles, then they have lost and they will have to admit it...