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Magdalen College, Oxford in 1935 and a DSc in 1947, and held a number of academic positions: Mason Professor of Zoology at the University of Birmingham (1947-51); Jordell Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy at University College London (1951-62); Director of the National Institute for Medical Research (1962-71) and Head of the Transplantation Section of the Medical Research Council's Clinical Research Centre (1971-86). In 1960 he was jointly awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine for his discovery of immunological tolerance. He was elected FRS in 1949, awarded a CBE in 1958, a knighthood in 1965, a CH in 1972 and an OM in 1981.

Medawar's scientific studies not only encompassed immunology, but also the fields of growth, morphogenesis and embryonic induction. A number of his early papers examined D'Arcy THOMPSON'S analyses of growth and applied them to human problems. As Mitchison (1990) notes, 'Medawar's contribution was one of critically assimilating an extensive literature, clarifying its mathematics, and summarizing it on various occasions in a form which is readily accessible to biologists, or treated at greater depth' (p. 286). In addition, he was one of the few who attempted to utilize - albeit unsuccessfully - Thompson's method of transformed coordinates, though he rejected Thompson's anti-evolutionary underpinnings.

While clearly a distinguished scientist, Medawar also spent a significant amount of time communicating his views on scientific method to fellow scientists and the public, and in all published ten books and about two hundred reviews and articles. A significant portion of these writings are collected in *The Hope of Progress* (1972), *Plato's Republic* (1982) and *The Threat and the Glory* (1990). Influenced by T.D. WELDON, A.J. AYER and K. POPPER, Medawar was particularly interested in seeing science as a deductive enterprise which was not restricted to the examination of scientific problems. While experiment and testing were important, Medawar saw the true mark of

For Meager, the assumption of much primary education since the 1960s, that children can spontaneously be imaginative and creative without learning anything of the techniques and traditions of the artistic disciplines, rests on a mistake. In order to flourish, the imagination needs to be disciplined by a child's critical ability, which can develop only through traditional learning.

In her several articles, Meager was obviously sympathetic to the Kantian approach to aesthetics, which she took and developed. She also made a contribution to the ontology of art, an issue which is still of major importance, and all of her articles were written with lucidity and elegance.

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Kathryn L. Plant

MEDAWAR, Peter Brian (1915-87)

Peter Medawar was born in Rio de Janeiro on 28 February 1915 and died in London on 2 October 1987 after the last of a series of strokes that began in 1969. The son of a Lebanese/Brazilian father and a British mother, he received a first class degree in zoology from

MEAGER, Ruby Lilian (1916-92)

Ruby Meager was born in the Marylebone district of London on 23 September 1916 and died in Wandsworth. She read PPE at Somerville College, Oxford, where she graduated in 1950, after a shortened course for war service candidates, and where she took the BPhil in 1953. She spent most of her career teaching at Birkbeck College, London, where she became a reader of the university until her retirement in 1981. She was a visiting professor at Carleton College, Minnesota, in 1968. The Birkbeck Philosophy Department honoured her memory by naming its Philosophy Library the Ruby Meager Library.

Although Ruby Meager was not a prolific publisher, she was highly regarded in the contemporary philosophical world, and was an imposing figure both as a teacher and as a researcher in the University of London. Her main interest was aesthetics, and she contributed to debates about such topics as aesthetic expertise, the development of creativity and the imagination in young children, and the ontological status of works of art.

With regard to the plastic arts, Meager holds that an original painting or sculpture is both a particular spatio-temporal object and a model-universal of which faithful copies or reproductions can be made. By contrast, any work from the performance arts is not and cannot be a model-universal, but functions as a set of specifications or a framework which allows multiple actual or possible interpretations. Each work of art must be appraised individually in order to determine whether it has positive aesthetic qualities: it is not the case that there are any universal rules for judging works of art.

Meager contended that the case for there being 'connoisseurs' of art was mistaken. She observed that alleged 'connoisseurship' is limited to the plastic arts, and that it is claimed that superior knowledge of such works of art is knowledge by acquaintance, like our knowledge of other people. Such 'knowledge' is impressionistic, subjective and untestable, and therefore not real knowledge at all.

helped establish the British Society for Phenomenology in 1967 and its journal, *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, in 1970 with Mays as its editor.

Wolfe Mays was also interested in seeing if the gap between analytical philosophy and continental philosophy could be closed. In collaboration with The Royal Institute of Philosophy, this question was explored through a volume of essays.

In 1981 Mays was awarded an Emeritus Leverhulme Fellowship to continue with his Piaget researches. Later he became Director of the Intellectual Skills project based at Manchester Polytechnic and funded by the EEC Social Fund. He continues his studies in genetic epistemology and phenomenology.

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 Wolfe Mays has published numerous journal articles.

Elizabeth McCardell

science to be the creative act in which a new idea was generated. Following on from Popper, he held that these ideas could never formally be proven true.

Medawar's interest in the theory of biology and the hierarchical nature of scientific enquiry is nicely illustrated in his 1974 paper presenting 'A Geometric Model of Reduction and Emergence'. In this short piece he notes that biology contains 'contextually distinctive notions' at the level of the organism that are 'peculiar to and distinctive of' that level and are thus 'not obviously reducible to the notions of the level immediately above [ecology] or higher still [chemistry and physics]' (p. 57). These notions include 'heredity', 'infection', 'immunity', 'sexuality' and 'fear'. He goes on to provide a thought-provoking discussion of 'the sense of diminishment' that results from 'analytical reduction' (*ibid.*, p. 62).

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John M. Lynch

#### MELLONE, Sydney Herbert (1869-1956)

Sydney Herbert Mellone was born of British parents in Toldedo, Ohio, USA in May 1869 and died in Woodford Green, Essex on 18 July 1956. Educated at London University (BA, 1890) and Manchester College, Oxford (1890-93), Mellone proceeded, with a Hibbert Trust Scholarship, to Edinburgh University, where in 1897 he was awarded a DSc for a thesis published as *Studies in Philosophical Criticism and Construction: A Summary of the Problems of Philosophy* (1897). Mellone's calling was that of a scholar-minister in the Unitarian tradition, first at Holywood, County Down, from 1898 to 1909, and then as assistant to his father-in-law, Robert Drummond, at Edinburgh (1909-11). He was also a prolific writer. Early on, in 1905, Blackwood's published his *Introductory Textbook on Logic with Numerous Examples and Exercises* which reached its twentieth edition in 1945, by which time Aristotelian logic had largely given way to the symbolic logic of RUSSELL and WHITEHEAD. Then, while in Edinburgh, Mellone collaborated with his sister-in-law, Margaret Drummond, a Morav House education lecturer, in writing *Elements of Psychology* (1907), a textbook for teachers.

He pursued his academic career alongside his ministry. In 1900 he had returned to the USA and lectured on J.H. Newman, Comte, James Martineau, Spencer and Robert Browning at Meadville Theological School in Pennsylvania. These lectures were published in 1902 as *Leaders of Religious Thought in the 19th Century*. In addition, from 1899 and for almost sixty years, Mellone was, at different times, external examiner in either philosophy or psychology for the universities of St Andrews, Edinburgh and London.

He also wrote articles in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th edn), for which he was a philosophic adviser, and for Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, to which he contributed articles on scholasticism and immortality. His 'scholasticism' article was

expanded in *The Message of the Middle Ages. To the Modern World* (1929) and *Western Christian Thought in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Interpretation* (1935). The article on immortality, in which Mellone contends that God as love could not permit the destruction of unused human potential at the time of physical death, he expanded in *The Immortal Hope: Present Aspects of the Problem of Immortality* (1910) and *Eternal Life Here and Hereafter* (1916).

From 1911 to 1921 Mellone was Principal of the Unitarian College, Manchester and Lecturer in Christian Doctrine at Manchester University. This career move took him into other areas of scholarship, as is shown by his books *The New Testament and Modern Life* (1921), *The Apocalypse: Its Story and its Messages* (1927) and *Leaders of Early Christian Thought* (1954). In this post he was also able to recover his earlier interest in psychology, writing *Bearings of Psychology on Religion* (1939). From 1920 to 1921 he lectured in the psychology of religion at his Oxford alma mater.

In 1921 Mellone became Secretary of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, a post he held until the formation of the Unitarian General Assembly in 1928. In this post Mellone's writings were largely apologetic for liberal and modernist interpretations of Christianity: *Modern Churchmen and Unitarians* (1922); *Liberty and Religion* (1925); *Back to Realities: A Way Out of the Present Chaos* (1928); and, with J. Estlin Carpenter, the comparative religionist, he edited *Freedom and Truth: Modern Views of Unitarian Christianity* (1925).

Mellone's final ministry was at Lincoln between 1930 and 1939, before a long retirement. In retirement he returned to his first love, philosophy. *The Dawn of Modern Thought* appeared in 1930, and he was a contributor to the *Hibbert Journal*, for which he wrote a regular review of philosophical literature, and to *Faith and Freedom*.

Mellone was a philosophical idealist for whom religious faith was an experience of the

absolute worth and reality of our ideals, together with an intellectual interpretation of that experience.

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Andrew M. Hill

MIDGLEY, Mary Beatrice (née Scrutton: 1919-)

Mary Scrutton was born in London on 13 September 1919, the daughter of Tom Burton (a canon) and Evelyn Lesley Scrutton (née Hay). As an undergraduate from 1938 to 1942, she studied philosophy and classics at Somerville

residing in 'ourselves' not in 'God's providence' ('Certain Hope', p. 454), and that the possibility of the sort of conflict between religion and ethics postulated by Kierkegaard represents 'a quite wrong-headed notion of ethics' ('Religion and Ethics', p. 145).

Phillips Griffiths's indirect influence on philosophy was primarily through his founding and nurturing of a major philosophy department and his Directorship of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, in the course of which he facilitated many lectures, conferences, symposia (the ten volumes of papers he edited for it massively understate his contribution) and even videos, extended the work of the Institute into schools, and encouraged the extramural lecturing and public outreach for philosophy that has been his passion from at least his Birkbeck days. Beyond this he has also contributed to the wider discussion of the role of the university, understood as an institution centrally concerned with the disinterested pursuit of universal objects which possess reciprocity in the sense that they present new challenges to the agent; such learning is an end in itself – thus, though pursuing such subjects as philosophy may be useful, 'their use does not determine the way they are studied' ('A Deduction of Universities', p. 200); such a radical vision has important and controversial implications for a range of matters from the role of university teaching, through the grounds for university funding, to academic freedom.

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active in the Association of Scientific Workers, various anti-war movements and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – associations which led to travel restrictions during the Cold War.

In 1940 Pirie moved to the Rothamsted Experimental Station in Hertfordshire, where he remained until his nominal retirement in 1972. While his early work in Cambridge was on the nature of plant viruses (with Frederick Bawden he demonstrated that the genetic material found in viruses is RNA), his Rothamsted work concentrated on leaf protein, and, beginning in 1942, he wrote approximately 190 papers, reviews, lectures and popular articles advocating its use as a food source. His popular writings on world population, contraception and nuclear arms reflected his concerns for the use of science for the betterment of all. This concern was also reflected in his contributions to the 'Two Cultures' debates of the 1950s and 1960s, wherein Pirie argued that the creative activities of writers and scientists have much in common, with the real difference being between responsive, communicative individuals and those who are not.

While working with Bawden, Pirie developed a concern for the accuracy of scientific words and concepts. In 1937 he articulated his concern that non-scientific words were often appropriated to scientific issues, and that qualities associated with 'living' matter, for example growth and reproduction, clearly applied to non-living situations. He also realized that the development of a more useful terminology would require a fuller understanding of the philosophical and scientific dimensions of life. This paper was the first of over forty articles discussing the nature, origin and distribution of life. In subsequent work he emphasized the possibility of life-like forms occurring in organic tars and gums coating the surface of metal-containing minerals in the prebiotic Earth (in opposition to the 'probiotic soup' hypothesis favoured by the likes of A.I. Oparin). This would eventually lead to support for A.G. Cairns-Smith, and L.S. and R. Penrose, who all developed theories of information flow using replicating materials.

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Marjunn Warner

## PIRIE, Norman Wingate (1907–97)

Norman Wingate Pirie was born in Midhurst, Sussex on 1 July 1907 and died in Harpenden, Hertfordshire on 29 March 1997. The youngest child of the painter Sir George and his wife Jean, he was raised in the family home at Wardend, Surlingham and entered Emmanuel College (Cambridge), graduating BA in biochemistry (1929). While at Cambridge Pirie made the acquaintance of such luminaries as J.D. BERNAL and J.B.S. HALDANE, and, like many of his colleagues, became involved with socialist groups concerned with national and international causes. He subsequently became

Pirie received recognition from the Royal Society for his work: he was elected FRS (1949), invited to give the Leeuwenhoek Lecture (1963) and awarded its prestigious Copley Medal (1971).

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John M. Lynch

## PIVČEVIĆ, Edo (1931-)

Edo Pivčević was born in Omis, Croatia on 11 August 1931. He has been a resident in the United Kingdom since 1958, and a naturalized British subject since 1966. He was educated in Croatia, attending the University of Zagreb, where he attained the equivalent of first class

honours in 1954. He went to the universities of Erlangen and Münster, Westfalia (Germany); obtained a PhD at the University of Münster (1958); and another PhD at the University of London (1962).

Pivčević taught philosophy at the University of Bristol, first as lecturer then as reader, from 1964 to 1997. He was the founder and first President of the Cogito Society (established 1986). He was also the founder and first editor of *Cogito*, an international philosophical journal, established in 1986 with the aim of promoting a study of philosophy, especially though not exclusively - among A-level students and undergraduates, as a means of furthering critical thinking, development of analytical skills and use of rational argument. The Cogito Society organized regular conferences for teachers of philosophy, among the first of their kind in Britain, as well as funding and running research fellowships both at Bristol and New College, Oxford.

Pivčević has also taught as visiting professor at a number of foreign universities: the University of Hebei at Baoding and the People's University of China, Beijing; the University of Oldenburg in Germany; the University of Zagreb (Croatia); Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts; the International Centre of Post-Graduate Studies Dubrovnik; and so on. He was also a visiting fellow at New College, Oxford in 1998.

His main philosophical interests revolve around key metaphysical issues: existence, reality, truth. His central thesis, as sketched out in his main work *The Concept of Reality* (1986), is that in making existential claims, indeed any truth-claims, we are by implication saying something about the world as a whole. The world, however, is not an entity, or a collection of entities and their attributes, but a configuration of interlocking strands, in which entities appear as part of the structure of which the epistemic activity of thinking agents is another constituent element. The thesis he defends here and in his subsequent books is that of ontological structuralism.

psychology until 1970, before becoming lecturer in philosophy, as well as associated lecturer in psychology, at the University of Leeds from 1970 until his retirement in 1982. After retirement, he did work in experimental psychology at the University of Wales, Bangor, where he was honorary lecturer, and began publishing more extensively in philosophy. Ullin Place, the pioneer of the mind/brain identity theory, left his brain to the University of Adelaide where it has been preserved.

U.T. Place will always be remembered as one of the three philosophers who developed the identity theory of mind in the late 1950s. The advent of the identity theory, and more generally of physicalism, was the most significant event in twentieth-century analytic philosophy of mind, for it literally transformed the subject: from that point onwards, physicalism was in the foreground or at least background of almost all theorizing about the nature of mind. Place was the first to make it into print, with his succinct (seven pages) 'Is Consciousness a Brain Process?' appearing in *The British Journal of Psychology* in 1956 (received by the journal in 1954). Two years later American philosopher Herbert Feigl published his considerably longer (128 pages) article 'The "Mental" and the "Physical"' in 1958, and a year after that J.J.C. SMART made what was to become the definitive statement of the new theory with his 'Sensations and Brain Processes' published in the 1959 *Philosophical Review*.

Though his 1956 paper is well known, the extent of Place's personal responsibility for the identity theory is not, and so is in danger of being seriously underestimated. The fact that Place's paper appeared in a psychology journal led to it being overlooked by philosophers: it only started to be reprinted and widely read later on as a result of interest in Smart's paper. Yet it was Place who converted Smart to the identity theory. J.J.C. Smart took the Chair of Philosophy in Adelaide University in 1950, and appointed both U.T. Place and C.B. Martin. Place developed the identity theory at Adelaide

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Pivčević has published numerous articles and book reviews in a variety of international journals, as well as a volume of autobiography.

Elizabeth McCardell

## PLACE, Ullin Thomas (1924-2000)

U.T. Place was born in Northallerton, Yorkshire on 24 October 1924 and died in Thirsk on 2 January 2000. He was educated at Rugby School, spending a term at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, before registering as a conscientious objector in 1943 and working with a Quaker ambulance unit until the end of the war. He returned to Oxford in 1946 and took a degree in philosophy and psychology, studying under H.P. GRICE and B.A. FARRELL.

He graduated in 1949, and obtained a Diploma in Anthropology in 1950. In 1951 he was appointed lecturer in psychology in the Department of Philosophy, University of Adelaide. He returned to England in 1954, where he went to work at the Institute of Experimental Psychology, Oxford. He worked as a clinical psychologist from 1960 to 1966, and then lectured in psychology and clinical

remained immense. Influenced by the work of Gilbert RYLE and J.L. AUSTIN, he was a major figure in the revival of English-language analytical aesthetics during the late 1950s and 1960s, and active in the establishment of the British Society for Aesthetics. His reputation was achieved despite the relatively small number of his publications, in part a consequence of chronic ill health during his time at Lancaster, in part due to his habit of incessant rethinking and rewriting. In common with the Oxford school of ordinary language philosophy from which he emerged, the main interest in his work lies perhaps less in any overall strategy or direction, but rather in the careful, piecemeal attention which he devoted to a number of topics in aesthetics, sometimes returning to them over and over again in the course of his career. As Sharpe says at the end of his review of the posthumously published collection of Sibley's essays, having read his work, 'it is hard to resist the feeling that philosophy has lost something in subtlety and refinement over recent years' (Sharpe, p. 316).

Sibley's interest in aesthetics developed from an original concern with the wider problems of perception. In an early paper, 'Seeking, Scrutinizing and Seeing' (1955), he takes issue with Ryle in his analysis in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) of perception verbs as primarily to be understood as achievement verbs: according to Ryle, 'see' is primarily to be understood as a successful achievement of a task. Sibley, on the other hand, argues that perception verbs such as 'see' have 'many other functions besides indicating achievements' ('Seeking, Scrutinizing and Seeing', p. 47). Most important among these various uses is that which Sibley styles the 'occurrence use', where the verb signifies the exercise of an ability over a period of time. Thus, the occurrence use, 'I can see now' is argued to be more fundamental to our understanding of perception than the achievement use, 'I see the blackboard.' It follows from this that Ryle's claim that seeing is not an activity – and a fortiori not a mental activity – if it is to be retained, needs to be supported by argu-

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John M. Lynch

## SIBLEY, Frank Noel (1923–96)

Frank Sibley was born in London on 28 February 1923 and died on 18 February 1996. After education at University College, Oxford he began his teaching career in the USA. He was assistant professor at Yale University (1949–53), assistant professor at the University of Iowa (1953–5), visiting lecturer in philosophy, University of Michigan (1955–6) and assistant professor and associate professor, Cornell University (1956–64). In 1964 he returned to England on being appointed to the first Chair of Philosophy at the University of Lancaster, where he remained for the rest of his career. He was made emeritus professor in 1985.

Sibley's main work was in the field of aesthetics, where his reputation was and has

1920–25; and Copley Medal, 1927) as well as a number of civilian honours (CBE, 1922; OM, 1924). In 1932 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology.

Soon after he retired from Oxford, Sherrington gave the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, a series which were subsequently published as *Man on his Nature*. It is in this work that the reader experiences Sherrington's philosophy of nature and mind (although he had expressed much of this in earlier works, for example in his 1934 Introduction to *The Grand Design*). For Sherrington, nature itself was amoral, such that it was only after the emergence of mind in higher organisms that morality came into being, and indeed until the arrival of humans, mind had done little but add to the competitive evolutionary process. As he stated, 'Man is Nature's beginning to be self-conscious' (*Man on his Nature*, p. 387), and as such we can judge nature and alter its impact on us. Sherrington advocated looking to (and praising) nature for its beauty but not for any moral message. Any moral progress for humanity would come from within, not from any outside source (be it divine or natural).

Sherrington's philosophy of mind and body was a strict form of Cartesian dualism – there existed a body which was constructed of matter, which functioned like a machine and which could be studied using observation, and a mind which modified and directed the behaviour of the body. To understand the relationship between these two entities would, in his view, require philosophical analysis. As Cohen points out, for Sherrington

the mind however is immaterial, incorporeal, and not energy; it is not in space and not subject to mechanical laws, its career is private; it can only be known introspectively by the organism itself but its workings in others can be inferred from behavior. It is responsible for consciousness, for thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, for remembering and imagining, for willing and for directing purposive and intelligent actions.  
 (Cohen of Birkenhead, p. 58)

## SHARPE

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Stephen Watt

## SHERRINGTON, Charles Scott (1857–1952)

Charles Scott Sherrington was born in Islington on 27 November 1857 and died in Eastbourne on 4 March 1952. He was educated at St Thomas's Hospital, London and Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge – from the latter he obtained his MB (1885), MD (1892) and ScD (1904). In 1895 he became Holt Professor of Physiology at Liverpool, and subsequently Waynflete Chair of Physiology at Oxford (1913–35). He received many honours from the Royal Society (FRS, 1893; Croonian Lecture, 1897; Royal Medal, 1905; President,

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J. Dybikowski

THOMAS, John Heywood, see Heywood Thomas

THOMPSON, D'Arcy Wentworth (1860-1948)

D'Arcy Thompson was born in Edinburgh on 2 May 1860, the son of the similarly named classics master at Edinburgh Academy, and died in St Andrews on 21 June 1948. Thompson attended Edinburgh Academy - where he received prizes in classics, Greek Testament, mathematics and modern languages - and subsequently studied medicine at Edinburgh University before switching to zoology at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated in 1883, after falling under the influence of Michael Foster and F.M. Balfour. The following year he was appointed Professor of Biology at Dundee, and in 1917 he was appointed Chair of Natural History at St Andrews, where he died. During his life, he

received numerous honours: fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1885; President, 1934-9), Commander of the Bath (1898), FRS (1916; Vice-President, 1931-3; Darwin Medal 1946), President of the Classical Association (1929), knighthood (1937) and the Linnean Gold Medal (1938).

Throughout his life Thompson published extensively within the fields of classical studies, mathematics and natural history. He authored a number of works on the natural history of ancient writers, including *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (1895), a translation of Aristotle's *Historia animalium* (1910) and *A Glossary of Greek Fishes* (1945). At a time when British biology was beginning to use form to trace lineages, Thompson appealed to Aristotle, Plato and Pythagoras to deprecate such work and offer a distinctly ahistorical, anti-Darwinian, saltationist view of life. This is particularly evident in *On Growth and Form* (1917), a work that Peter MEDAWAR described as 'beyond comparison the finest work of literature in all the annals of science that have been recorded in the English tongue' (p. 241).

In *Growth and Form* Thompson advocated a form of structuralism (or formalism) that viewed the features of organisms as being constrained by their growth pattern and shape, which were in turn constrained by the laws of physics, and processes such as crystallization, adsorption and diffusion. In short, physical forces impose optimal form upon plastic organic material. In many ways, this was a development of German *Naturphilosophie*, in proposing that there are deep laws of change that determine some or all of the features of organisms, with the set of possible transformations being highly constrained such that particular transformations may be predictably linked to specific environmental stimuli.

While Thompson founded no research school, his ideas have remained somewhat influential. His views have been recently advocated within theoretical biology by the likes of Soren Lovtrup, Brian Goodwin, Mae-Wan Ho and Peter Saunders, often under the banner of

'process, structuralism' which proposes a natural system of classification based on the dynamics of the processes that generate the forms. Among organismal biologists, Thompson is best remembered for his iconographic 'method of transformations' - a method to consider differences in form in a holistic manner, seeking single, comprehensive transformations which result in shape difference. His unwieldy methodology resisted replication until the 1980s when analytical breakthroughs by Fred L. Bookstein resulted in a paradigm shift in the analysis of biological form under the banner of 'geometric morphometrics'.

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John M. Lynch

THOMSON, James Frederick (1921-84)

James Frederick Thomson was born in London on 22 June 1921 and died on 15 February 1984. He was the first son of Frederick James Saunders Thomson and Nera Marion (Hussey) of Thame, Oxfordshire. Thomson was educated at Lord William's School, Thame (1932-8). He saw military service in the RAF (1940-46), was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, and in 1946 entered University College, London (UCL) in philosophy, graduating BA in 1949.

He won a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship at Harvard and Princeton (1950-51), Thomson returned to UCL as an assistant lecturer (1951-3), becoming lecturer in moral science, Cambridge University (1953-6). He was fellow and tutor in philosophy at Christ's College, Cambridge (1956-63), and was then tutor and fellow at Corpus Christi, Oxford and lecturer in philosophy at Lincoln College, Oxford. A visiting professor at Columbia University (1961-2), Thomson became Professor of Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1963, having married Judith Jarvis, also a Professor of Philosophy at MIT, the previous year. After his death, prizes in his name were established at both MIT and Corpus Christi.

Thomson published a number of lucid and incisive papers on such major problems as the assignment of truth to propositions; the interpretation of the implication sign ... in logic for the phrase 'if-then'; the question whether the notion of existence has the character of a predicate; and, with his wife, whether purely descriptive statements can entail evaluative conclusions, that is whether 'ought' can be derived from 'is'. Against the view that the derivation is possible if another premise is introduced, namely that 'other things are equal', the Thomsons argue that any plausible and useful interpretation of the new premise will show it to be evaluative; and thus not the purely descriptive premise required by the claim that descriptive premises can entail evaluative conclusions.