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Mental Images in Human Cognition

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Preface

"... When I produce an image of Peter, it is Peter who is the object of my actual consciousness. As long as that consciousness remains unaltered, I could give a description of the object as it appears to me in the form of an image but not of the image as such. To determine the properties of the image as image I must turn to a new act of consciousness: I must reflect... It is this reflective act which permits the judgment 'I have an image'" (Sartre, 1950).

This book represents the research efforts of individuals whose scientific expertise lies in reflection on what Sartre described as reflective acts. Theory in the cognitive psychology of mental imagery endeavours not only to describe the contents and nature of mental imagery, but also to understand the underlying functional cognition. Psychologists need not rely solely on the techniques of introspection, and the last two decades have seen highly creative developments in techniques for eliciting behavioural data to be complemented by introspective reports.

This level of sophistication has provided singular insights into the relationship between imagery and other consequential and universal aspects of human cognition: perception, memory, verbal processes and problem solving. A significant additional benefit of such developments has been the recognition that imagery, despite its ubiquitous nature, differs between individuals both in prevalence and in kind. Moreover the dramatic rise in cognitive science (to include cognitive neuroscience and computational modelling as well as cognitive psychology) over the last decade has spread the sources of converging evidence to neuroscience. These exciting developments in techniques provide the additional potential for integrating our understanding of cognitive function with our understanding of neuroanatomy and of computer science.

All of these relationships, developments and issues are embraced by the included chapters, not least by some of the most distinguished authors in imagery research. This represents a truly international effort. It highlights an era of progressive collaboration among European cognitive psychologists, while recognising the substantial influence of North American theorists and researchers.

This book arose from the Third European Workshop on Imagery and Cognition held at the University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom, in August 1990. The chapters represent the topics covered at that meeting, but this book was undertaken as a separate enterprise not necessarily restricted by the oral presentations at the conference. To ensure a high level of academic quality, all the chapters were subjected to peer review. Our intention was not for the book to act as a set of conference proceedings, but rather to form a source text for imagery researchers. The list of contributors displays the diversity of countries in which this research is based, and builds on the seminal efforts of two previous workshops, the first in 1986 at the Université de Paris-Sud, France, and the second in 1988 at the Università di Padova, Italy. We are grateful to the organisers and participants of those meetings for stimulating what continues to be a Zeitgeist of international academic dialogue and exchange.

Reference

Sartre, J.-P. (1950). *The psychology of the imagination*. New York: Rider (in English translation).

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