

### Douwe Draaisma and the Mysteries of Autobiographical Memory

In the opening lines of the blurb on the back cover of his first book *De geest in getal (Mind in Numbers, 1988)* Douwe Draaisma (1953) listed the questions with which the founders of psychology wrestled. “Why does time seem to speed up as we get older? What causes déjà vu experiences? Can you think without images? How do the memories of mathematical prodigies function?” It is fascinating to revisit that list, since they are precisely the problems into which the Groningen professor in the history of psychology has sunk his teeth in the past quarter of a century. In his discerning, sometimes slightly melancholy publications, he explores the mysteries of autobiographical memory, always returning to the original questions that the founding fathers asked themselves back in the nineteenth century.

A fundamental notion in Draaisma’s historical approach to psychology is that scientific views are always embedded in a time, a culture and a mentality. In his doctoral thesis *De metaforenmachine. Een geschiedenis van het geheugen (Metaphors of Memory. A History of Ideas about the Mind, 1995)* he shows how our thinking about memory is influenced by the metaphors in which we try to capture it. Those metaphors in turn are a reflection of the spirit of the age and the available technology – from wax tablet to computer. “The history of memory is slightly reminiscent of a tour through the storage areas of a museum of technology”, he notes tellingly.

In *Ontregelde geesten (Disturbances of the Mind, 2006)*, too, he demonstrates convincingly how ideas about mental illnesses are leavened by zeitgeist and ideology. At present it is fashionable to see mental afflictions as neurological diseases and to assign psychological and environmental factors a minimal role. But whereas people like the neurologist Dick Swaab act as if we have already precisely located the causes of conditions such as schizophrenia and autism, Draaisma stresses the imperfect and provisional

nature of our knowledge and refutes claims that we know the causes of mental illnesses and can locate them in the brain.

One unceasing fascination for this psychologist and philosopher is the vulnerability of memory and the ubiquity of forgetting. The full story of the beginning of our lives has been wiped at the outset from our autobiographical memory. The opening chapter of his best-known book *Waarom het leven sneller gaat als je ouder wordt (Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older, 2001)* has the title: ‘Flashes in the dark: first memories’. Almost ten years later *Vergeetboek (Oblivion, 2010)* contains an essay on the same theme entitled ‘Surrounded by a sea of oblivion: the first memory’. Is Draaisma himself perhaps forgetting what he has written? Are these exercises in



Douwe Draaisma.

repetition? Of course, some insights remain valid. In both books he shows that our first memories are almost always described as visual representations. The statements about why forgetting dominates our first years of life also run parallel. It has something to do with language: being able to talk about what you experience has a repetitive effect and increases the chances of your remembering it. And something to do with self-awareness. "As long as there is no 'I' or 'self' experiences cannot be stored as personal memories," explains Draaisma in *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older*. "What we call 'forgetting' is the loss of memories unclaimed by anyone," he adds in *Oblivion*. Fortunately, however, this is not just a case of old wine in new bottles, illustrated with different examples. Recent psychological research has deepened his understanding. American researchers gave children a "Magic Shrinking Machine" to play with. If you put toys in it and turned the handle, it produced cheerful sounds and a miniature version of the same toys came out. The researchers visited the toddlers at intervals to hear what they remembered about it, but especially to hear the kind of language they used. They discovered that the children never used words that they did not know at the time of the experiment, but had since learned. That brings Draaisma the following elegant explanation for the scale of forgetting: "In growing up child brains obviously don't bother to give old memories a new code and thus to keep them accessible. As obsolete files they disappear from sight and eventually can no longer be consulted."

In his search for explanations for phenomena that intrigue him, Draaisma does not limit himself to contemporary psychological research. He combs all conceivable forms of knowledge, from literature to philosophy and from psychology to neurology. He confronts the insights of many disciplines and areas of thought with each other. Often the various theories clash and he has to give the verdict 'not proven'. But sometimes insights from different disciplines embrace and the miracle of cross-fertilisation takes place. Draaisma

rebels against the present imperialism of neurology. His scientific ideal is not the world hegemony of one's own favourite scientific field, but the open and non-power based dialogue between the United Nations of Science.

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Books by Douwe Draaisma available in English translation:

- *The Nostalgia Factory* (Original title: *De heimweefabriek*), Yale University Press, in preparation since 2011.
- *Disturbances of the mind* (Original title: *Ontregelde geesten*), translated by Barbara Fasting, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older* (Original title: *Waarom het leven sneller gaat als je ouder wordt*), translated by Erica Pomerans - Arnold J. Pomerans, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- *Metaphors of memory* (Original title: *De metaforenmaschine. Een geschiedenis van het geheugen*), translated by Paul Vincent, Cambridge University Press, 2000.