

REMEMBERING VITTORIO GIROTTO

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Vittorio Girotto (1957-2016) died in the early hours of Saturday, April 23rd. He will be remembered by the friends of the Italian publisher, Il Mulino (The Mill), as a supporter of the *Italian Journal of Psychology*, and as the author of three textbooks. He will be remembered in the psychology of thinking, a new field of research in Italy, which burgeoned since his graduation from the University of Padua. And he will be remembered by his friends as a kind, good, and passionate individual, with a rigorous and analytical mind.

After his doctorate in social psychology under the supervision of Luciano Arcuri, who was his friend throughout the ups and downs of his life, Vittorio lived for a long time in France, first as a fellow of the CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique, a French government agency) in Aix-en-Provence, next as a researcher at the CNRS, in the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris and then in Lyon. He also carried out research in other European centres: at the Open University in Milton Keynes in the UK, where he collaborated with Paul Light), in London, and in Geneva (where he worked with his friends there, Willem Doise and Fabrizio Butera). Since 2002, he had a Chair of the University Institute of Architecture in Venice (IUAV). But, his first permanent appointment in Italy was at the CNR (Consiglio Nazionale Delle Ricerche, an Italian government agency) in Rome, where he met again two old friends, Donatella Ferrante and Antonio Rizzo. They teased him about his failure to adapt to the ways of Southern Italy, and its lack of both efficiency and meritocracy – two fixed stars in his beliefs, along with his rejection of religion.

Vittorio was brilliant in creating experimental designs, which are crucial in psychology, perhaps more than elsewhere, because introspection and naive intuitions can be so misleading. For example, in Aix in 1987, he devised a short film about a beehive in order to test children's understanding of conditionals. The queen bee orders the other bees not to make any noise inside a "zone of silence". But, some bees made buzzing noises in this zone. Children readily understood that they contravened the conditional rule: "If you want to make a noise, then you must do so outside the zone of silence". Jean Piaget had assumed that children, unlike adults, were not able to refute conditionals. But, he was wrong on both counts: children could understand cases in which bees violated the conditional rule; other results showed that adults sometimes failed to envisage what refuted conditionals. Another long-standing line of Vittorio's research started in Aix when Philip Johnson-Laird and the present author visited him. It concerned the development of the theory of mental models to account for judgments of probability. Working with Maria Legrenzi and Jean-Paul Caverni, the director of the CNRS group in Aix, our experiments showed that adults inferred the probability of an event from the proportion of mental models in which it occurred. This research led on to Vittorio's study of infants' grasp of probability. In another of his ingenious experiments, they watched colored balls – four red and one black – bouncing around inside a

transparent sphere. Suddenly, one ball bounced out of the sphere. If it was the red ball, the children were not surprised; but if it was the black ball they were surprised – fixating it for longer. This result was an indirect demonstration that from infancy onwards everyone has an intuitive understanding of the relative probabilities of various events in a dynamic scenario.

Giroto accordingly contributed a major part in the building of a natural epistemology based on the innate architecture of the brain. At the start of his career, he collaborated in France with a great master of interdisciplinary studies, Dan Sperber. And then for the rest of his life he worked with Philip Johnson-Laird. Indeed, the theory of mental models inspired much of his research, even his studies of hitherto unexplored fields, such as his investigation of how we revise our beliefs when facts contradict them. Recently, he focused again on children's grasp of probability, see, e.g., his paper with Teglas and others, which was published in *Science* in 2011. In his final years, he published research on a striking variety of topics, including:

- people's understanding medical test results (with Pighin, Gonzalez, & Savadori).
- medical decisions (with Crupi & Gonzalez).
- decision making (with Heimann, Legrenzi, & Bonnefon).
- belief in the supernatural (with Pievani & Vallortigara).
- temporal asymmetry in hypothetical thinking (with Ferrante, Stragà & Walsh).
- argumentative reasoning (with Mercier and others).
- the probabilistic reasoning of non-numerate Maya (with Fontanari, Gonzalez, and Vallortigara).
- children's choices and their inability to take probabilities into account (with Fontanari, Gonzalez, Vallortigara, & Blaye).
- counterfactual thinking (with Pighin, Byrne, & Ferrante).

His list of publications is indeed rich in its variety, see the updated bibliography compiled by his great friend and colleague, David Rochesso:-

<http://www.iuav.it/Ateneo1/docenti/design-e-a/docenti-st/Giroto-Vi/-pubblica/index.htm>

Vittorio was special in many ways, as the philosopher Roberto Casati and I wrote in the May 1st Sunday Supplement of "Sole 24 Ore" (an Italian newspaper). Only two weeks earlier, Vittorio and Vallortigara had published in the same newspaper a long piece on the genesis and function of religious beliefs, a subject that had always interested him. As Casati and I wrote in our piece:

Vittorio Giroto had a secret gift that always amazed and impressed his friends - a prodigious memory of the chronological order of facts and episodes in his life. Where you and we would have to consult our diaries to know what had happened on a certain day in May 2005, he would close his eyes, put his hand to his forehead, with his fingers clutching the top of his nose between his eyebrows, and he would find in his mind an image of a lunch at the university cafeteria, in which he had talked about the referendum on the law of assisted reproduction. (Of course, we checked our diaries, and found that they contained the same events.) Likewise, to those colleagues and friends who asked him for advice on a text that they were writing, he would recall precise references to scientific papers published long ago.

Vittorio was tied to his birthplace in the province of Veneto, Annone Veneto, to Zenson di Piave, where he always had his holiday in a cottage by the river, and to the

many friends of his youth. Il Gazzettino, the most popular newspaper of the region, published a long obituary of him. In Trieste, where he and his family lived, his friends, co-workers, and colleagues, came from near and far to take part in a secular memorial to him on May 2nd. Near the rose garden of the former psychiatric hospital, St. John, his daughter Esther recalled him, his daughter Alma played the violin in his memory, and his wife Simonetta spoke movingly about his life. . . . Vittorio, we all miss you, and not just for your terrific memory.

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