

The Twelfth Bartlett Memorial Lecture: The Role of Single Neurons in the Psychology of Perception

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I feel deeply honoured by your invitation to give the Bartlett lecture, and am especially glad to do so in Holland, the home of so many distinguished psychologists of sensation and perception. And there is a third reason why it has given me much pleasure, for Sir Frederick Bartlett was one of those who had an important influence on the direction of my career some 40 years ago. I had to decide whether to spend my last year at Cambridge reading psychology or physiology, so I attended a short course of introductory lectures he gave in July. About half a dozen of us sat on upright wooden chairs circled around him as he sat in an armchair, smiling benignly. The first thing he did was to tell us to close our notebooks, for he was not going to say anything that would help us to pass any exams. And I believe the very last words of his last lecture were, "So you see it is all very difficult". I was very glad he said that, for I had in fact found it all very heavy going: my brain seemed always to be lost in clouds of uncertainty when "remembering", "thinking", or "perceiving" were mentioned, because there was no conceptual framework for these processes except the words themselves and others spun around them. What I was looking for were the definable quantities of physics, chemistry and even physiology; these I could handle conceptually in their geometric and functional interactions, whereas I always find a purely verbal argument about abstractions difficult to follow and impossible to believe. So this lack of any nonverbal conceptual framework was very painful.

There was one phrase I think I recall him using that particularly aroused my interest—"the effort after meaning"; intuitively this seemed to be very important, but however much effort I made the meaning

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