



# Thinking, Reasoning, and Development

30 June – 2 July 2010

Uni Mail – Geneva

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## 19th Advanced Course

### Thinking, Reasoning, and Development

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Friday afternoon, July 2, 2010

14h 30

**R. Byrne**, Trinity College, Dublin

***The rational imagination: How people create alternatives to reality***

#### **Abstract:**

People often create alternatives to reality and imagine how events might have turned out "if only" something had been different. The "fault lines" of reality, that is, the aspects of reality that are more readily changed in imaginative thoughts, provide clues to the cognitive processes upon which the counterfactual imagination depends. The tendencies to imagine alternatives to exceptional events, actions, controllable events, socially unacceptable actions, causal and enabling relations, and events that come last in a temporal sequence can be explained by the idea that imaginative thought and rational thought have much in common. In this lecture, I will report results from experiments we have carried out with adults which show that the tendency to think about exceptional events in 'if only' thoughts is eliminated and reversed when an alternative less exceptional event leads to a better outcome. I will also report results from experiments we have carried out with 3-4 year old children which examine the role of imagery in their counterfactual thoughts about the presence and absence of entities. The experimental results from research on counterfactual 'if only' thoughts in both adults and children corroborate the view that imaginative thought is guided by the same processes that underlie rational thought, that is, principles that guide the possibilities that people think about.