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The emotional body. The expression of emotions.

My research aims to focus on the subject of the expressions of emotions as they are visible in the body and its movements, historically starting from the works of some authors of the seventeenth century. I am interested in deepening my focus on the different approaches in the Cartesian age to the expression of emotions in the works of some scholars who consider the theme from different perspectives, and who also give graphic representation of it.

As it is well known, René Descartes not only proposed a revolutionary philosophical method, but also developed a completely innovative approach to the study of emotions, which he considered essentially “*en physicien*”. Furthermore the works of two other figures of that period are to be considered as important points of reference: the painter Charles Le Brun and the physician-philosopher Marin Cureau de la Chambre respectively proposed a visual interpretation of the expressions of different passions and a medical-optical explanation of their importance. The three authors, from the different perspectives, elaborated their theories of passions, grounding them on the centrality of the body, considered as a text where it is possible to read the emotions, which is worthy of further research. In addition: visibility is a central issue not only for the famous painter, but also for Descartes and Cureau de la Chambre. Both philosophers developed a theory of light, which turned out to be strictly connected to the domain of passions.

The conceptual contribution of these historical works is relevant in view of a more specific definition of a sequence of ideas that are a matter of lively scientific debate today, in analogy to the reappraisal of the Spinozian “conatus” proposed by Antonio Damasio, or the revival of the taxonomy of Aristotle and the Stoics (De Sousa 1987, Nussbaum 2001).

One of the topical subject areas of the current debate on the emotions is whether they are to be considered as feelings or as appraisals; furthermore the opportunity for a new classification and its criteria is being discussed. Within this context, a deeper knowledge of some works of early modernity can bring a useful contribution on the conceptual level, but also from the point of view of a semiotic of emotions.

For instance, maintaining the centrality of feeling implies a set of problems, whose roots date back to ancient and also to modern philosophy. Feeling can be regarded essentially as receptivity, or simply as passivity. The passive dimension of emotion (traditionally called "passion") has always been considered to be in need of control, of supervision, or even, as in the case of the Stoics, of total detachment. Reason was placed on a higher level of value, functioning as a guiding principle (*hegemonikon*), whose leadership could not be questioned. The contemporary debate has definitely changed the relationship between passion and reason, since many scholars nowadays argue that emotion can be regarded as a useful tool to orient ourselves within the world and to define priorities linked to values. Emotion, understood both as a judgment or as a feeling does not mean passivity, but it refers to an activity of the mind, which is based on interactions at the neural level, in which the different regions of the brain are involved in a complex system of reciprocal connections (Damasio 1994, 2003). My thesis is that one of the most important starting point for the contemporary scientific approach to emotion is the seventeenth-century philosophy and science: in that age the conceptual and linguistic transition from "passion" to "emotion", from a humanistic to a scientific point of view, takes place. Reason and passion are not contradictory ways to understand the world: they actively interact to interpret it in an effective way.

Another question examined in lively contemporary debates on the nature of emotions is particularly relevant for my historical approach and concerns how we learn and identify them. Should we regard emotions as natural kinds, i.e. universally recognizable phenomena, or should we conceive them as cultural constructs and, therefore, analyze them only within the context in which they take place?

Emotions can be regarded as natural kinds, i.e. objects of the world that we can classify following the same methodology we use for any other kind of natural object. The “basic emotion approach”, rests on the belief that certain kinds of emotions are the result of universal biological states. Faces display emotional information for everybody to read, just like a word on a page. Accordingly, classifications are based on a precise set of fundamental (discrete) emotions – such as fear, anger, surprise, disgust, happiness, and sadness – which are shared by humans and animals and are usually distinguished by the following features: quick onset, automatic response, low awareness, brief duration, physiological changes, specific and classifiable expressions (Ekman, Cordaro 2011). These contemporary debates produced a wide interest and are in progress: a universalistic approach seems to have good arguments on its side, however objections against it are well founded as well. In my view, however, some of the main issues of this innovative debate find their roots in seventeenth-century philosophy and science and, as I will show, a re-examination of these historical precedents can enrich significantly our own approach.

In his last work *The passions of the soul* (1649), Descartes analyzes passions from a scientific point of view, as a natural philosopher, a very significant transition from the traditional purely ‘humanistic’ horizon towards a ‘naturalistic’ perspective. It is well known that in Descartes’ philosophy the relation between body and mind is considered on the basis of the most up-to-date medical theories of his time, which gave a mechanical explanation of its powers, against their traditional association with the sensitive and nutritive, i.e. the ‘lowest’, parts of the soul. At the same time, the powers of the mind (intellect, imagination, perception, will and passions) are unified as conscious *thoughts* and, as a consequence, are mutually accessible to each other, regardless of any hierarchy. As contents of the mind, passions and reason are considered as operating on the same level and interact with each other directly.

Passions are types of perceptions, feelings or emotions caused by the body. Their function is the preservation of the body and its increasing improvement. In this sense they are at the same time feelings and appraisals, evaluative perceptions related to the well-being of the body and of the unity

that we are. This close interaction of mind and body seems to weaken significantly his typical dualism, paving the way for Spinoza's monism.

Descartes provides a new classification on the basis of his new method. Six primitive passions replace the traditional list of eleven, starting with the newest one: wonder, followed by the couples love-hatred, joy-sorrow, and desire. Their universality is taken for granted: according to his analytical method, they are identified as primitive because they are the simplest ones - not the most relevant ones - and their order follows a very precise genealogy.

Descartes' general philosophical leading idea rests on the idea that all perceptions (including passions) do not resemble nature or show the internal organization of the world, but are useful in order to act meaningfully in it. My hypothesis is that the end of the resemblance paradigm finds its origin in a new conception of vision, grounded in Kepler's innovative work and in his new theory of light and vision. Descartes understands this perspective as decisive for his own research. Generalizing Kepler's scientific results (Lindberg 1976, Schuster 2013), Descartes realizes that the image formed in the eye is never understandable as a faithful representation of the object: consequently a different explanation is needed for the object of the senses and for the feeling of the mind, such as passions. This new conception of vision constitutes the basis of his new philosophical paradigm in general, and of his new theory of passions in particular. Using the nowadays language, it can be said that the brain provides a sort of "information" (Mackenzie 1990, Cimino 1990, Yolton 1996) to be elaborated by the mind. The relevance of the point is highlighted today by many scholars: the effort of Descartes is to explain in neurophysiologic terms the psychological phenomena, creating the right conditions to compel researcher to identify physical causes for nervous and mental events. It can paradoxical be said that in Descartes' works the mental phenomena are analyzed as embodied in human corporality (Kirkebøen 2001). As a consequence, Cartesian science can no longer be considered "outdated"; on the contrary it can be approached as one of the sources of the current theories of mind, consistent with cognitive and neurophysiological contemporary research (Yolton 1996, Cimino 1990, Schuster 2013).

Reading some other seventeenth century texts on this background can be of relevance (Courtine, Haroce, 1994, Magli 1996). For Cureau de la Chambre the process originating passions starts within the soul in a non-metaphorical but effective sense. Passion consists in real movement of the soul's impulses, producing both the internal feeling and the external action which follows, marking the body at the same time with a largely stable and universal set of recognizable signs: «*les characters des passions*», their «*air*». Cureau was the physician of Louis XIV and from this perspective he presents a very interesting semiotic of emotion, based on the vasodilation and vasoconstriction caused by the animal spirits, which produce an effective translation of the emotions into an impressively readable body language.

Cureau regards these spirits not only as subtle parts of matter, but also as elements that move between soul and body, creating an exchange between the two. The work as support for the images, which again are parts of light, whose function is to represent the subjective emotional experience. The theory of images is consistent with this perspective since light is created by optical images, which are at the same time representations (Cureau 1657). Consequently we can understand passions by means of images: they share the same nature. We can experience the action of spirits through the images they correspond to.

Not many researchers have focused on the importance of the influence of Cureau on the Conference of Le Brun at the Academy of painting in 1667. I have already tried to demonstrate in a previous paper, at least for the case of anger, the strong presence of Cureau's conceptual framework in the *Conference* on the conception of the soul. The distinction within the sensitive soul between the spirited and appetitive part had been totally rejected by Descartes, but this was central in the *Conference*, in order to classify the passions. The external signs, such as the role of the eyebrows or the movement of the muscles in the different passions, as represented in the famous series of planches which accompany the Conference, find their origin in Cureau's semiotic.

A new classification of emotions, which many scholars are working towards, should take into account today the evidence coming from the neurosciences. Nevertheless an elaboration on a

conceptual level is essential in order to interpret this not unambiguous evidence. Alongside the great figures of Descartes and Spinoza, a deeper knowledge of the historical debate would be precious in order to enrich contemporary philosophical and scientific research in the field.

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