

"THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EMOTIONS: FROM THE ENLIGHTENMENT TO THE 21ST CENTURY"

Although all social interactions (from clinical practice to international decision-making) are modulated by emotions, little is known about their structure, function, and governance. This lack of knowledge is due less to their intrinsic opacity than to the sterility of the current reductionist approach which envisages the emotions as behavioural 'expressions', cognitions, neurobiological addresses or evolutionary relics. The hypothesis will be explored in this lecture that such reductionistic approach has been encouraged by the faulty manner in which the concept of emotion was constructed during the 18th century.

Both the current term and concept of 'emotion' are new. They were a by-product of the refashioning of the notion of man that took place in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries; and were meant to replace the older and nobler concept of 'passion' which had served Western culture so well since the time of Homer. Towards the end of the 17th century, and to provide European expansionism, the industrial revolution, and capitalism with an appropriate definition of man, John Locke introduced a new form of 'individualism' (ontological, epistemological, psychological, political, religious, economic, and moral). Modelled upon Newtonian ideas, this new definition conceived of man as an autonomous, indivisible atom, governed by self-interest and carrying a (lay and inaccessible) subjectivity. Society, in turn, was redefined as a collection of men interacting in terms of utilitarian and associationistic principles. The concept of 'passion', central to the classic definition of man as a member of a syncytium presided over by God found no place in this scheme of things and was soon got rid of.

The 18th century definition of emotion was constructed out of the less desirable (e.g. mechanistic) components of passion; and in accordance with the ontological mood of the time, it was conceived of as a *natural kind* (like stones, dogs or orchids). By the end of the 19th century emotions had become stereotyped (and semantically empty) evolutionary relics hard-wired into the brain.

Little has changed since. The psychoanalytical movement failed in its attempts to reconceptualize emotions as forms of communication different from, and irreducible to, drives, instincts, judgements, cognitions. By the 1950s, the tragedy of two World Wars led to a renewed interest in the emotions and models were proposed that might overcome the sterility of the James-Lange and Darwinian approaches. This interest was soon killed by the 'cognitivist revolution' and by the predominance of the computational model of the mind that characterized the neurosciences of the end of the 20th century. During the last few years the emotions are returning as a topic of research. Unfortunately, no effort is being made to study them in their own right: instead, they are once again being reduced to forms of cognition, evolutionary relics, or neurobiological entities.

Knowledge that the concept of emotion is a construct and not a natural kind may help researchers to move away from mechanistic definitions and to endeavour to redefine emotions as *semantic acts*, as autonomous and irreducible forms of communication between human beings. This in turn will lead to the creation of a new language for their description and of a metalanguage for their analysis.

G.E. Berrios
Department of Psychiatry
University of Cambridge, UK