

ΨΥΧΟΛΟΓΙΑ

*hoc est,*

DE HOMINIS

PERFECTIONE ANI  
MORUM ET IN PRIMIS OPTIMUM  
THEM  
THE RATIONAL(E) OF AN EMOTIONAL  
SOCIETY: A CARTESIAN REFLECTION

ius, commentationes ac disputationes quorun-  
dam Theologorum & Philosophorum no-  
stræ ætatis, quos vetta pagina

Marc De Kesel

*Surely if entrails have any prophetic force, neces-  
sarily that force either is in accord with the laws of  
nature, or is fashioned in some way by the will and  
power of the gods.*

*Cicero, De divinatione II, xii, 29*

*What is in a word?*

‘Emotions in a rational society’. It could have been the title of a publication ten or twenty years ago. In that time, civilization was considered to be ‘over-rationalized’ and our lives objectified down to the most precise detail. The general complaint, then, concerned the lack of room for feelings, emotions, and other kinds of human subjectivity. Things have changed radically since then; indeed, today we are told to live in an ‘emotional society’. The central problem, today, concerns how difficult it is to find *objective* coordinates. Visual culture unremittingly seduces us with a profusion of images, corporate culture opts for highly estimated emotional intelligence, and art requires an empathic

approach. Down with rationality's hegemony; down with the dictatorship of *hard* facts.

Has the tide radically turned? Has the authority of rationality and facts been replaced by one of feelings? Have we finally learned to live at the level of our emotional intelligence? One does not have to look far to see that the ostensive shift from rational culture to today's emotional society did not provoke an earthquake. Is the shift truly greater than one more superficial effect? And if this is indeed the case, what is the promotion of an emotional society really about? My thesis is that, behind this semblance of transformation, things remain essentially unchanged; moreover, the terms 'rational' or 'emotional society' are principally used in order to keep something unsaid, hidden, repressed. In what follows, I try to uncover the repressed, as well as the motives underlying this repression.

What, for instance, does a term like 'emotional society' tell us? And what does it keep untold? What does it say by not saying it? The term does not tell us that society *is* emotional. It tells us that society *says* to be emotional. 'Emotional society' is thus a *reflexive* term: it refers to the *discourse* people reproduce when talking about themselves and about what *they* consider to be their culture, society, and world. The 'emotionality' the term denotes concerns discourse: it is, thus, there, and not in society itself, that feelings and emotion are highly rated. The terminology of this emotional discourse stems from various sources, in which psychology takes a prominent place. As the discourse says, emotions have their rights, and society must respect these rights. Emotions, therefore, must be given an objective status. Henceforth, whilst they are difficult to fathom and often appear irrational, they are a fact, and as such, they must be accorded an objective place within today's society.

By characterising our society as emotional, we not only express our right to have feelings and to allow them in the public sphere, we, in fact, take for granted that feelings have *already* conquered that right— that this right *already* belongs to the objective reality—, and, as such, must be taken into account, even when they are not still fully able to defend themselves in the court of rationality. The emotional has a place of equal value, and the time has now come for the rational to be taken to emotionality's court.

So, the popular reference to 'emotional society' hides a subtle shift: 'emotions must be given room' has silently transformed into 'emotions are a fact'. And, once again, this is not a shift in the facts themselves, but; rather, in the discourse. It is a matter of saying or, more precisely, letting things be understood *without saying it in so many words*. It is included in the term's simple suggestion. Mainstream psychology is one of the disciplines to back this up: emotions, for which the rights are claimed, are presented as if no longer requiring such a claim. Or, phrased otherwise, they are 'facts' in the very claim they should be respected as facts.

The term 'emotional society' is thus underpinned by reason and a rationale— in addition to a *ratio* and, more specifically, a *modern ratio*—, for the latter has its rationale to

promote certain terms; for instance, the rationale to keep modernity's fragile condition in balance. 'Emotional society' is one of the tools that serve this purpose.

But, first, what is modernity? What characterizes modern rationality in such a way that emotions and passions can function as its symptoms?

### *Modernity ...*

Modernity names the paradigmatic discourse expressing the way West-Europeans have related to reality in the preceding four centuries. Although pioneered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this discourse has developed in such a way that it still supplies the 'grammar' of today's *common sense*.

By 'paradigmatic discourse', I mean '*the set of misunderstandings through which we understand one another*'. It is the lexicon of 'big words' immediately understood by everyone on the simple basis that everyone supposes them understood by all others— whilst, in fact, no one has any full comprehension. Who we really are, what it all matters, why things are what they are: on such questions— as banal as they are abysmal— nobody really has the answer. However, everyone acts as if all the *others* have some answer; and even if each one of us personally has doubts about these supposed answers, they operate nonetheless as a common point of reference. They provide the coordinates of a discourse in which everyone can make themselves understandable. It is, thus, a misunderstanding on the basis of which we can understand one another. A misunderstanding crystallized in a little textile of big words: this is the ground on which a collective identity, a culture, a 'time', is based.

The big words that characterised the Middle Ages were 'creature', 'grace', '*natura*', '*supranature*', and the biggest and most central of all: 'God'. Nobody knew precisely whom or what God was— the cleverest philosophers of the period were acutely aware of that—, but, at the same time, nobody doubted that the very foundations of our reality were buttressed by the very term itself. At that period, the basic sensitivity was one of servitude and dependence; you understood yourself as wholly dependent upon what the surrounding creature— subordinates, your equals, your lord, and, finally, God— was giving you. During the wars of religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this scenario of big words became the site of social, political, and cultural struggle. Within only a few generations, that scenario lost a significant amount of public support, which, in turn, led to the emergence of a new consensus, one based around the axiom that people should no longer militarily fight one another in the name of a God, or for any other religious reason. Henceforth, people should be free to believe in whichever God or Non-God they prefer; social and cultural order, then, would no longer be subverted by religion or faith— or so it was commonly assumed.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the inception of the idea that man does not live off of his dependence on the surrounding creature— a dependence which, ultimately, refers to the godly Creator. From now on, man understands himself as *independent* and free. Not in the sense that he claims to be himself the creator of all that is; but in the sense that it is from that perspective that he now relates to reality, including God. He is himself the starting point of that relation, and for that he needs but himself. He is free to doubt whatever he can. It is precisely in that doubt, that man discovers his true ‘self’, i.e. that which, in the very moment of radical doubt, reveals itself as mere certainty: his thinking and doubting ‘self’. This is the ‘method’ through which René Descartes proceeded to conceive of the ‘free self’ as the new ‘ground’ of certainty founding our relation to reality; it became the new ‘episteme’, a new ‘misunderstanding through which people understood— and still understand— one another’.<sup>1</sup>

This episteme was a rational one. Rationality made modern man sure, not only about the foundation of his knowledge lying within his own thinking— his subject—, but also about what that knowledge says about the outside reality— its object. It allowed him to prove that his free perspective was sufficiently consistent so as to have a reliable grip on reality. This made the difference with respect to passions and emotions. ‘Passion’ derived from the Greek word ‘παθειν’ — ‘pathein’: meaning to be moved, touched, affected; which is also the meaning of the Latin word from which ‘emotion’ derives. Collectively these terms thus refer to a semantic field of words meaning ‘being touched or affected from outside’— a meaning contrary to the free independence of the modern inner ‘self’.

The modern, Cartesian subject cannot understand itself as dependent on such affection. It owes to itself a methodical doubt about it, and, on that basis, must submit all affection to its regime of self-assured certainty. Within Cartesian logic, there is no space for an *original* affection, i.e. for an affection that moves the free subject on the very level of its foundation.

Nonetheless, Descartes’s oeuvre simultaneously testifies to an interminable struggle with the issues of passions and emotions; it is no mere accident that the last of his writings is precisely about the affections and passions of the ‘soul’: *Les passions de l’âme* (1649).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘episteme’ is used in a Foucauldian sense; see for instance Michel Foucault (1966), *Les mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> René Descartes (1988), *Les passions de l’âme*, précédé de *La pathétique cartésienne* par Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, Paris : Gallimard; (1990), *Passions of the soul*, translated by Stephen Voss, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. Descartes developed the ideas for his theory of the passions in an intense exchange of letters with the Elisabeth van de Palts, a German princess living in the same Dutch region as he did. For the edition of the original text, see: René Descartes & Elisabeth van de Palts (2000), *Briefwisseling*, ingeleid door René Gude en vertaald door Jeanne Holierhoek, Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek.

From a Cartesian perspective, the title is rather provocative, and even contradictory. For Descartes defines the 'soul' (*l'âme*) as the agency which does not obey any affection or passion: it is a doubting, thinking agency, and, therefore, an autonomous, and free one. Resultantly, anything that tries to touch or affect it is always already touched by the doubting act of that soul, by its thinking. The affection is, thus, either rejected or incorporated within the realm of the soul's 'clear and distinguished ideas', illustrating its untouchability and freedom. Even in the case of rejection, there has never been any real affection or touch.

However, Descartes's oeuvre nevertheless ends up telling us that the soul *is* affected and moved, and that the soul, for its part, moves and causes affects. The idea that the body is moved by the soul is a real problem for the Cartesian system. For if body and soul are truly two different kinds of reality—two radically separate substances, as Descartes 'proved'—, how can they relate to one another on a fundamental level? How, for example, can the cause of action in one substance lay in the other one? In contradistinction to Aristotle, who defines the soul as the animating force of the body, and the body as that which is animated by the soul, for Descartes, body and soul are two radically separated ontological entities. Even the most quotidian human activity participates in two worlds. This appears to contradict even our most trivial experience. For example, *wanting* to drink a glass of water and *deciding* to reach my hand in the direction of that glass, has nothing to do with that mechanical body of mine being thirsty, moving my hand in that direction, taking the glass and bringing the water into my mouth.

Within the Cartesian system, God is supposed to act as a bridge between soul and body, between the logically free world of the *res cogitans*, and the logically determined one of the *res extensa*. Without saying it with so many words, Descartes's investigation of the "passions of the soul" is in pursuit of a better conceptualization of how the two radically different worlds can go together. Yet, any sound solution for that problem failed to come. How could it? Once I start thinking (read: *doubting*), the mere fact of my thinking already proves that it is free and beyond any determination, and, thus, has nothing in common with the outside reality I think about, and which obeys laws of strict determination. This fact doesn't prevent this dualistic vision of man and world, however, from being utterly indefensible. Descartes himself felt that, but was simply unable to find a valid alternative.

Many after Descartes have tried. One of them made history, proffering a paradigm today's sciences still respect. In 1748, Julien Offray de La Mettrie published a philosophical essay entitled *Man a Machine (L'homme machine)*<sup>3</sup>. It conclusively resolves the problem

---

<sup>3</sup> Julien Offray de Lamettrie (1996), *Man a Machine and Other Writings*, translated by Ann Thomson, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

of Cartesian dualism by denying the status ‘*res*’ or ‘substance’ to one of the two elements, more precisely, the *res cogitans* (the soul). Anything Descartes ascribes to the freely thinking and willing subject is to be considered as genuinely characteristic of the *res extensa*, La Mettrie argues. Man’s subjective dimension is but a dimension, not a proper and independent reality. It is to be reduced entirely to his objective dimension, which is more than just a dimension: it is its sole, ontological substance. Thinking and willing, much like passions and emotions, are but *bodily* reactions. Erroneously, they are taken for capacities of a supposedly independent soul. Eventually, science will have progressed to such a degree that they will become analyzable as ‘reaction formations’ of the brain or the neurological system.

The arguments of La Mettrie’s thesis, however, are untenable, if only because all evidence is situated in the future. *Once* science *has* progressed, we *will* notice that all we have attributed to the free human mind can in fact be ascribed to the body. Although a purely hypothetical— and invalid— argument, it nonetheless has become universally accepted, becoming, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the paradigm of modern ‘positive’ sciences, and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, of the human and social sciences as well. Indeed, they, too, pretend to be *objective* and to operate exclusively within the one and only substance of the *res extensa*: the word of material objectivity.

Contrary to what— with La Mettrie— we would like to believe, the problem of Cartesian dualism is far from being resolved. Although the ‘objective’ sciences declared the subject to be non-existent, the latter was only reduced to a kind of zero-degree; it may have been deprived of all content, but its place remained intact.

The blind-spot of a science reduced to objectivity is, in fact, the place of its subject— a place, moreover, that is indispensable for its scientific character. Objective science presupposes a pure and empty point situated unambiguously *outside* its object. Only from such point can the object be empirically observed in a ‘neutral and impartial’ manner. The objective gaze, that has become the scientific paradigm, is supposed to be neutral and value-free; it is a point of view emptied of all ‘subjective’ interests. But it is not itself an ‘objective’ point, i.e. a point belonging to the realm of science’s object. It is precisely in this ‘point’ (of view) that the Cartesian subject survives, a subject that still implies an unbridgeable gap separating it from its object— from the world outside.

If, within the Cartesian system, God was the bridge between soul and body, the task to bridge the gap between an emptied subject and the world outside can be said to have been taken up by the psy-sciences. Resultantly, it is especially within psychological research that the new ‘episteme’ can be clearly discerned. For if one wants to conduct psychological research on a group of people, one does not ask each of its members what makes them a group. Science requires an objective approach. Yet the point from where such objective research operates is to be located *outside* the object of investigation. The behavioral scientist occupies a position behind a mirror that, from behind, can be looked through. This

way, he can observe without being observed himself. The place he occupies does not thus belong to the domain of his object. This place is that of the Cartesian subject reduced to its zero-degree. The 'partition' or 'wall', behind which he observes his scientific object, inevitably installs the dualistic separation introduced by Descartes.<sup>4</sup>

This Cartesian caesura is still the central problem of our modern episteme, unable as we are to find a valid alternative to it. It is the hidden demarcation line crossing our world, which, concomitantly, binds us to, *and* separate us from, the world. Hidden *behind* that line, we are able to relate to the world in full freedom and do with it as we like. It is this invisible limit that makes modern technical power so limitless. Unbound to the world, we are able to behave as if we are its sovereign master. The toll of that position, however, is that the world is now entirely at our disposition, regardless of whether our intentions are good or bad. The global nuclear threat strikingly illustrates how far our bad intentions can go. Able to manipulate the world in such a way that, in a few moments, it can be bombarded back to the Stone Age, man has to realise that, in the development of his modern power, he has left himself outside. His modern subject position has given him an infinite power over the world, but not without radically alienating himself from it. It is, both, modern man's euphoria *and* his trauma: it makes him immune to a forever doubtful world without foundations nor limits, and, therefore, gives him a quasi omnipotent power over the world; but since, in his quality of subject, he is located *outside* the world, 'subject' is also the name of what escapes this omnipotence, and becomes the latter's victim.

### ... & emotions/passions

The Cartesian caesura thus names the trauma modernity rests— *and* shakes— on; it is what forms *and* deforms, constructs *and* deconstructs it. The discourse about passions and emotions, that accompanied modernity from the outset, must be considered from within that perspective. From Descartes to Spinoza, and then Damasio; from Bossuet's sermons *against*, to Saint-Just's exaltations *pro*, and the intimidating fascination controlling today's media: each generation has been characterised by its own discourse about passion and emotion. For each generation, in its own specific manner, had to avert and repress the traumatic caesura upon which modernity rests upon. And since no repression is ever perfect, in some way or another, any form of repression inevitably lets out its trauma; resul-

---

<sup>4</sup> Psychologisation, then, can be said to be the process of the modern subject adopting, not only the terminology of the psy-sciences, but, also this observatory position behind the screen; the point from where one's gaze looks upon reality, including his/her reality as subject.

tantly, new tricks and ruses must be perennially invented in order to reinforce or reinstall repression.

Initially, it was only God who, in the Cartesian system, bridged the two worlds that methodical doubt had separated. Things changed when Descartes focused his philosophical reflection on passions and emotions. Within this affective realm, it was obvious that the two worlds were deeply interconnected with one another, and that the caesura splitting body from soul was, thus, far less radical than hitherto believed. Did the passions not make it abundantly clear, therefore, that the soul moves and feels the body, and the body moves and feels the soul? That is what Descartes had sought to approve, but he did not succeed in discovering a valid solution for the problems raised by his dualistic paradigm.

In La Mettrie's thought, too, the passions delivered the first genuine arguments for the solution to the problematic Cartesian split. For what else could they do other than demonstrate that *everything* is a matter of bodily affection, including the free act of thinking and willing? La Mettrie presaged that one day this would be proven scientifically. La Mettrie's use of *future* tense unintentionally reveals the point from which his 'scientific' gaze operates— that it is situated *outside* that which his science is talking about. It represses— whilst simultaneously hinting at— the traumatic caesura separating the subject from the object it deals with.

La Mettrie's solution has set the tone up till now. If we want to talk scientifically about emotions, then we should reduce them to objectively measurable processes. Indeed, over the preceding decades, this discourse has only become stronger. Feelings have become visible— and, thus, observable—, we are told, as evinced in brain imaging technology which produces colorful images of brain lobes operating. In such images, you are supposed to see what happens when you feel, want, or think. And without realizing it, you understand: I see myself feeling, wanting, and thinking. Feelings have therefore become explicable: 'look' at 'ancestral facts', so goes the sermon of the evolutionary psychologist, and you see that it is your genetic material, in its search for an optimal way to guarantee the self-preservation of the human species, which guides you in your passion for your lover.

Are these the feelings that an 'emotional society' defends and promotes? Are they to be recognized in their quality of 'objective' values and facts? In actual fact, the 'emotional society' defends and promotes the opposite as well— i.e. that emotions and passions do not need any rational legitimization to be recognized as 'objective facts'. Emotions and passions, so the argument goes, owe their right to exist to the fact that they speak for themselves, and give a more direct expression to what people really think in all freedom. Their 'objective' quality is not due to the fact that they are scientifically or rationally declared, as such. Emotions are what they are, whatever science may think of them; they must be taken for granted without any scientific legitimization.

Only now does the place, and function, of emotions within late-modern ideology become clearer. Our current episteme concomitantly produces two contradictory axioms; the ideological aspect concerns the fact that the simultaneity of the contradictory axioms escapes our attention. On the one hand, we talk of emotions as things about which objective knowledge is guaranteed, and whose objective foundations can be scientifically known. This is the La Mettrie-side of our epochal discourse on emotions; they illustrate that all is objective, and that the subject, as such, is merely 'subjective'— which is to say that it is a kind of 'ghost' in the machine, and thus unreliable to build solid knowledge upon. On the other hand, however, we find the same scientific discourse coexisting with that other omnipresent discourse which promotes the freedom and independence of that very subject, proffering it as lord and master of himself, and as 'free entrepreneur' vis-à-vis the entire universe. Psychologisation, as the process through which the modern subject adopts both the terminology and the discursive position of the psy-sciences, testifies in an exemplary manner of this double bind. Here, emotions allow the subject to speak and behave as if it is not at all reducible to objective facts; or, phrased otherwise, as if it sovereignly determines, by itself, who it is and what it wants to do with the surrounding world. Here, emotions are supposed to express freedom: primarily, because they express 'themselves' and, in turn, express the subject's 'self' in a much better way than the rational spinning, in which it so often gets lost.

'Emotions', on the one hand, are symptoms of the determined, objective base upon which the human being is founded. On the other hand, they are promoters of man's free subjective foundation. Within our epochal discourse, by means of which the 'emotional society' conquers today's world, both axioms coexist unproblematically; the contradiction between the two remains simply unnoticed. It is with this 'unheard-of' that we meet the core of today's *episteme*, the hidden kernel of the 'misunderstanding through which we understand one another'. Our discourse on emotions, paradoxically, presents two opposing viewpoints: it acknowledges that, as subjects, we are free and independent— that, in what we feel, we really know who we are and what we want—, whilst, at other moments, the same discourse acknowledges our freedom to be the product of an objective, determinant logic, thus, denying a proper status to subjectivity.

The signifier 'emotions', therefore, simultaneously promotes a denial *and* an acknowledgment of a fully free subject; or, in Cartesian parlance, it keeps on promoting both *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. It, thus, still performs the old Cartesian caesura; albeit, by explicitly not showing nor telling it, but, rather, by repressing both, by leaving both unsaid. Consequently, it reproduces the untenable, and never resolved, dualism to which we owe both our limitless technical power and tragic impotence to master that omnipotence.

Through listening to our 'emotions', so the pop-psychology credo goes, we hear our true 'self' speak. On occasion, it tells us that the world is an open project offered to our unlimited freedom; on other occasions, the same freedom is subjected to rigorous dissec-

tion in which we read its determinants— as, in a way, the Roman augurs did when they read the vicissitudes of the empire and its emperor in the uncovered intestines of birds plucked from heaven. Between the freedom from whence we speak, and the freedom whose determinants we lay bare— i.e. between the brain enabling us to submit the world to our freedom and the brain laid bare by brain images— there is an unbridgeable gap. The focus upon emotions that has perpetually accompanied modern discourse— regardless of whether they were used pro or contra determination— renders that gap unnoticed and, thus, functioning. The ‘affective’ discourse is the central axis in psychologisation and runs rampant in an ‘emotional society’. It covers its bets and so keeps hidden that it must bet at all. Since La Mettrie, the Cartesian gap separating us from reality has become invisible and, therefore, functions all the more efficiently. The veil obfuscating that gap is woven by our discourse on emotions: emotions which we either let prevail over the rational discourse, or make it obey that discourse; both procedures are at the service of the same repression.

Watching television, one is acutely aware that in the course of one hour we can go from watching a certain Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, employ unbridled freedom for merely emotional reasons to go straight for his goal, to enjoying a rational dissection of that very freedom, bringing it back to necessary determinations. For every talk show that provides a platform for ‘irrational’ emotions, there is a documentary stunning us with a hyper-rational discourse about the same emotions. Both go hand in hand in order to repress the same traumatic caesura. Yesterday’s ‘rational’ society and today’s ‘emotional’ one are thus hand in glove.

## About the author

Marc De Kesel teaches philosophy at *Artevelde University College Gent* (Belgium), and is senior researcher at the *Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen* (The Netherlands). The field of his research contains: continental philosophy, Lacanian theory, Shoah studies, and theories of religion. In 2009, ‘Eros & Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire VII*’ appeared with SUNY Press. In September 2010 appears (in Dutch): *Goden breken. Essays over monotheïsme*, Amsterdam: Boom) (translation of the title: ‘Destroying Gods: Essays on Monotheism’).

Contact: marc.dekesel@arteveldehs.be