

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

THOMAS DIXON, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, x + 287 p.

We have more and more social scientific writings on emotions, yet what the concept “emotions” connotes remains obscure. Conceptual haziness marks the sociology of emotions, and the same goes for psychological, philosophical and other academic work on the subject. Dixon’s *From Passions to Emotions* interrogates emotions as a psychological category and historicizes its invention through a genealogy of various English terms used to refer to the enormous range of passionate, affectionate, sentimental, felt and committed mental states of human beings.

“Emotions,” unlike “passions,” “desires” and “lusts,” did not appear in any English translation of the Bible. Dixon contends that the term emotions and its meaning emerged from secular understandings of human beings and their capacities from St. Augustine’s classical Christian psychology to William James’ modern science of mind. Like the category “emotions,” “passions” and “affections” have enjoyed different connotations in the last two millennia, though none of these categories are synonymous. “Emotions” tended to replace “passions” and “affections” around the mid-19th century, Dixon argues, but was used as early as Descartes in his writings on the passions of the soul. The problem with this secularized and scientific viewpoint is that it omits theological dimensions of mental life and suffers from an acute presentism that to some extent purges historical constitutions from conceptions of the mind. Though he shows that a focus on emotions recently replaced a more differentiated typology, Dixon’s project is not to oppose the concept of emotions. His goal is to problematize the concept in order to advance our understanding of it.

Augustine and Aquinas introduced a distinction between potentially troubling appetites and passions (Dionysian rebellions against rational thought) and more virtuous movements of the soul called affections (Apollonian, rational acts of will). Dixon finds that more mechanist conceptions of mental life emerged with 18th century revivalists and moralists. These writers owed less and less to Christian tradition. During the Age of Reason a mind versus body dualism (originating with Descartes) became the basis of a strict binary concept of intellect versus emotions in psychological theories of emotions. This dualism distanced conceptions of passions, affections, and then emotions from realist talk of the will and moral responsibility found in classical Christian psychology.

According to Dixon, the concept of emotions replaced affections and passions with the development of mental science following Bacon, Locke and Newton. Thomas Brown, who used phrases such as “mental chemistry” and “intellectual physics,” is the inventor of the modern concept of emotions. Brown was deeply influenced by the application of scientific method to social issues, lectured extensively on his model of the human mind, and was significant for a whole generation of scholars. Yet Brown failed to present an adequate definition of emotions, probably because emotions have no essence that can be neatly defined. Emotions, as we conceive them today, thus come from “de-Christianized texts and university lectures produced by mental and moral philosophers in Scotland from the 1730s onward...” (133). Positivist writings by Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin intensify this secularization of the concept as does William James. James argues that emotions are constituted by bodily changes involved in responses to events, and devoted large parts of his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) as well as several papers to the question of emotions. Summarizing James’ critics, Dixon (214-216) counter-argues that James fails to distinguish between different emotions, fails to distinguish emotions from non-emotions, reduces emotions to bodily expressions, denies the role played by cognitive factors, and forwards a cause and effect relationship between bodily and mental aspects of emotions. Depicting James as a Cartesian essentialist, Dixon (229) states that the Jamesian approach merged the various affections, sentiments and passions into the “single non-cognitive bodily category of emotions.”

Problematization of categories through historicization is important because categories become political in their applications as techniques of cataloging, grouping, including and excluding groups of people. It is imperative that academics be careful with concepts. The dilemma with this genealogy of emotion (and this is perhaps a critique of genealogy more broadly) is that Dixon’s apprehension about positing normative statements makes it difficult to use any particular term as an analytical category. Dixon is a philosopher and historian of religious thought, writing principally for this readership. However, sociologists concerned with mental life and symbolic interaction need technical terms to use in analysis. My position is not that Dixon’s critique of the category of emotions is unimportant, but that something involving experience, expression and action (and its cross-articulations with different knowledges), sometimes called emotion, has always been involved in self and group formation. If social scientists are interested in conducting primary research on any aspect of these topics, they need to employ analytical categories rather than simply deconstruct them.

Since Dixon’s work is concerned with Anglophone writings, he does not discuss the work of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406). Although Khaldun is often recognized as the first sociologist, we could also herald him as the first sociologist of emotions. Khaldun conceptualizes history as a struggle between tribes and towns, the Bedouin and the sedentary. It is not their individual character that differentiates people in towns from those living in tribes, but their *al ‘assabiyya*, which is usually translated as “group feeling” or “spirit of kinship.” In Arabic, the word *assab* means “to bind,” and

denotes the emotional binding together of group members in tribes. The feeling of togetherness comes first from strategies to prevent collective annihilation in which the self sacrifices for the group. Residents of towns lack the personal fortitude which contributes to the group feeling among tribal peoples. Khaldun is interested in what emotions do as they pertain to social formations (see his *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Princeton University Press, 1981). Not only should the concept of al 'assabiyya be indispensable to an analysis of the enormous range of passionate, affectionate, sentimental, felt and committed mental states which humans are capable of, but Khaldun's work is also evidence of the need for those committed to social scientific inquiry to find apposite concepts for analysis.

Dixon's reading of James is overly dismissive. In his *Emotion, Social Theory and Social Structure*, Barbalet (1998) utilizes James' writings to promote a theory of action stressing the emotional basis of action and the orientation of action towards the future. Barbalet addresses the critiques of James and makes something useful of his work, offering a more analytically precise concept of emotions. Worthy of note is that neither Dixon nor Barbalet deal at all with Sartre's critique of James in *The Emotions* (1949). Sartre critically argues that just as psychological theories of emotions are (1) reductionist in separating the analysis of emotions from a larger gestalt of the self and (2) linear in their understanding of how emotions have effectivity, psychoanalysts are (1) reductionist in pre-constituting the signifying chain giving meaning to emotions and (2) linear in assuming a stable relationship between signifier and signified. Researchers interested in clarifying what the concept of emotions could/should mean, or perhaps concluding that it is entirely problematic, would benefit from exploring the Sartrean critique of James.

Despite my criticisms, *From Passions to Emotions* is an impressive piece of scholarship. The book offers a compelling argument with solid evidence, meticulous in its detail and expansive in its scope. Dixon's work makes it evident that social scientists should never adopt analytical categories without first attempting to trace their development and usages. This book is essential reading for anyone even mildly interested in theories of the subject and the history of ideas. It will appeal to anyone in any discipline concerned with passion, affect, and emotions.

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