

A NOTE ON SUSAN JAMES*

Il n'y a rien en quoy paroisse mieux combien les sciences
que nous avons des Anciens sont defectueuses, qu'en ce
qu'ils on escrit des Passions.

— René Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme* §1

Susan James, in her recent work *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon 1997), prefaces her investigation of emotions in the seventeenth century with a series of remarks about the earlier career of the emotions, in particular their treatment in the Middle Ages. In brief, she takes the 'new' analyses of the passions put forward in the seventeenth century to be a philosophical sideshow to the main event: the dethronement of Aristotelian natural philosophy and metaphysics (22). She describes the consequences for psychology as follows (66):

Seventeenth-century critics of the Aristotelian theory of the passions base their opposition on a set of interconnected, stock objections, all of which question its ability to provide satisfactory explanations. . . [namely]: The rejection of substantial forms, the repudiation of the tripartite soul with its sets of separate powers, and a conviction that the language of Scholastic philosophy concealed a host of errors. . .

James is pretty well wrong from top to bottom. These 'stock objections' miss the target, the first and last by a wide margin; they are little better than "slapstick sallies against caricature Schoolmen" (71), as a moment's reflection on each will show.

First, the deployment of substantial forms as explanatory entities may have lost its appeal in physics, where their replacement by vector combinations of simple forces acting on bodies was far more useful, in psychology the name of the game was to explore the psychophysiological mechanisms characteristic of living bodies, and no appeal to substantial forms was made.¹

Second, mediæval and modern psychologists, Descartes excepted, held that humans and animals are fundamentally the same although humans had additional ('higher') psychological capacities that require further analysis; whether in humans these powers (and the associated soul) be really distinct, formally distinct, or just conceptually distinct, was a vexed question in the High Middle Ages, hardly the simple matter James suggests.

* Part of a lecture given at Uppsala, 06 November 1998.

¹ In James's discussion this objection somehow turns into a criticism of so-called 'faculty psychology' (68–69), which is closer to a legitimate psychological question.

Finally, the “conviction that the language of Scholastic philosophy concealed a host of errors” is contentious rather than telling, deciding in advance what needs to be discovered through inquiry. It may perhaps tell us that philosophers of the seventeenth century were unreasonably prejudiced about ‘scholasticism’ and impressed with their own originality, but it is no part of the historian’s business to repeat such self-serving claims as though they were fact.

So much for the stock objections, better suited to physics than psychology. Their failure should make us skeptical about James’s general thesis, namely that accounts of the passions were tarred with the same brush as other branches of mediæval science and metaphysics. That just isn’t so. Aristotelian psychology had to be overcome in its own right. James gets the earlier history badly wrong here: each part of mediæval science owed its dominant intellectual position (where it retained it) to the sophistication and depth of the theory it provided for its proper subject-matter. Mediæval science was better *as scientific theory* than its competitors, which is why it was firmly entrenched until replaced by better non-aristotelian scientific theories. Furthermore, the branches of aristotelian science were largely independent. The collapse of mediæval kinematics had no effect on anatomy and physiology, for example, and likewise for affective psychology.

Of course, James doesn’t really care about the earlier history. Her focus is the seventeenth century; she only recounts the downfall of aristotelian psychology so she can start in on developments in the seventeenth century with a relatively clean slate.

I don’t think we should let her get away with it. It’s worth getting the history right, not just for its own sake (although that matters too), but because in affective psychology the New Science was *not* a new beginning: it was built on the foundations laid by mediæval and renaissance work on the passions. The little we know of this largely unexplored history suggests that Descartes is no more an originator in psychology than Galileo was in physics—and, just as in physics, the way was prepared for seventeenth-century developments in affective psychology by aristotelians rather than by their critics. It seems the least we can do to not import old prejudices into new areas of research. But that’s what James has done, and done gratuitously. It is no model for the rest of us.