

“DESCARTES’ ERROR: EMOTION, REASON, AND THE HUMAN BRAIN”**João Marcos da Silva Dantas¹, Fernando Augusto Pacífico²**

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António Rosa Damásio was born in Lisbon (Portugal) and has been based in the United States since 1975. He is a neurologist who serves as director of the Department of Behavioral Neurology and Cognitive Neuroscience and researches in the Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center at the University of Iowa. He also teaches neuroscience at the University of California. From his writing and research, Damásio became known as one of the great names in world medicine. His research concerning the decision-making process, from which humanity is forced many times, establishes him as a great thinker within the intersection of social psychology with active and investigative medicine.

Among the exponents of his work, “Descartes’ error” stands out, alluding to the well-known Cartesian dualism that postulates the mind, the sublime reason that resides in the soul, as independent of the body and emotions, and ceasing to occupy a physical space. This idea strongly influenced scientific research and Western philosophical thought (like Kant) and is opposed by Damásio’s writing, which is still unfavorable to the French Enlightenment philosopher’s mechanistic method of analysis, proposing the union of neuropsychological investigation with neurobiological study.

The beginning of the work highlights the case of Phineas Gage, known worldwide in medicine, in which a young adult had his skull transfixed by an iron bar. The chapter narrates in a fluid language how the case had repercussions. Although the functional motor and language impairment was minimal, the character and personality of the victim changed abruptly, as in the consolidated sentence: “Gage stopped being Gage.”

Therefore, this case encouraged several debates at the time, as some scientists argued that psychological functions could not be at-

tributed to a specific brain region, while others focused on the specialization of certain parts for generating different mental functions. The text continues to attribute a role to the knowledge tools of that time, such as “organology”, which gave rise to the field of phrenology.

The book continues to present the case of the devastating accident using a neuroanatomy approach, which was also incorporated to reveal Broca’s discoveries in Gage’s time, a challenging aspect for the attempt to understand John Harlow, the doctor responsible for the case. The chapters denote the relationship between the limbic system and the frontal cortex.

Making this relationship, it is clear that an interruption in the judgment of future actions, as occurred with Phineas Gage after the injury, demonstrates that individuals with an impairment in integrating functions from the frontal cortex to the limbic system are unable to contain secondary emotions, reducing emotional learning.

Following the proposed ideas, the author introduces the somatic marker hypothesis, a focus that also plays a central role in the theme. Defined by a neuropsychological elaboration of the theory of emotion by the American psychologist William James, Damásio states the occurrence of primary and secondary emotions, as well as the feelings associated with them, showing how these elements interact to create mental images.

In this way, Damásio’s elegant work delves into the intention of elevating the reader’s understanding by countering an established philosophical impression that emotion hampers the development of the rational process, being essential to it. The historical survey of a landmark case, neurobiological research, the explanation of the intuitive mechanism, the proposition of somatic markers, as well as the unraveling

of reasoning with emotional input and decision-making capacity in a personal and social context remove the idealization of the immaterial soul of its apotheosis and practically force us to change this fundamental point that Descartes left, going from “Cogito, ergo sum”, from the Latin, “I think, therefore I am” to “I exist, I have emotions, therefore I think”.