

Undercutting Descartes

Book review

Jáuregui, J A (1995) **The emotional computer**. Oxford: Blackwell.
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José Antonio Jáuregui, a social anthropologist by training, profession and inclination, has made an important discovery: the brain is a computer that tells us what to do. Lest this sound overly supercilious, let me add that it is, in context, no trivial point. Until relatively recently, social anthropologists - not all, but some - argued vigorously for the primacy of culture as the domain in which to analyze human behaviour and, implicitly or explicitly, that humans are rational, freed in some mysterious way from the constraints of biology. As a stance, this attained its polemical height in response, during the 1970s, to the appearance of sociobiology with its reductive claims for human sociality. Since then, of course, to the detriment of neither, human sociobiology has matured and anthropology has softened, so that we now see the emergence of robust evolutionary approaches within both psychology and anthropology.

Jáuregui's book is his contribution to this rapprochement and his stated aim is to undercut Descartes by arguing that the emotions are a fundamental informative system used by the brain to get us to do things; hence the title of the book. In essence, Jáuregui proposes that:

"The brain is an extremely complex computer that is programmed to inform the individual, with both the precision of a Swiss watch and the speed of a lightning bolt, about what he must do to preserve his body and his society. It does so through the postal service of feelings ... The neural computer will [for example] inform the subject, if he is male, about when he ought to sow his seed, and about how, and with what degree of mathematically precise urgency he must perform this social task ." (p5)

Leaving aside, as Jáuregui himself does, such awkward conceptual issues as who is actually informing who about what and how the relationship between gene and culture might actually be constructed, this extract tells you much of what you need to know about this curious book. Having made the claim that the emotions function by compelling us to do things (sow our seed, tote our barge) the book is a slow plod through the ways that emotions control the body (see, for example, the section dealing with the emotional control of entries through the anus) as well as society (e.g.

Emotional laws of the religious system). Though it is not devoid of learning - Jáuregui, by his own admission, was the beneficiary of a frighteningly classical education - it is disturbingly free of information about modern work in cognitive neuropsychology, for example, not to mention evolutionary analyses of culture and mind. In this way it stands outside of both current evolutionary and anthropological thinking; the product of the author's own realisation that "consciousness is something which is imposed which is controlled by a biological machine, a programmed computer" (p276), and that "to feel is to be informed and pressured by our neural computers to co-operate, as conscious pilots, in the maintenance of both our bodies and our society" (p277). In this sense, then, the book is a working out of issues from first principles and might be enjoyed precisely for this if it weren't for the ponderously pseudo-scientific language and metaphors (eyes are organic cameras, ears are antennae, breasts are bionatural milk bottles).

Of course, it could be argued that the style is a consequence of poor translation from the original Spanish, were it not for the fact that this was accomplished by two of Jáuregui's sons, both of whom were educated at Oxford. Oxford looms large in the author's life ("Sir Edward, my Oxford tutor"; "An Oxford professor and a good friend of mine"; "Sir Edward Evans-Prichard once remarked to me in Oxford"). This, together with formidable name-dropping ("In a private dinner with their Majesties the King and Queen of Spain", and some truly awesome plugging of his other books ("the preface written by the distinguished Spanish psychologist José Luis Pinillos for the paperback edition of my book **The rules of the game: The tribes.**")) suggests that Professor Jáuregui might be sufficiently confident of both his stylistic and inductive powers not to fret too much about what has been happening around him.

This is a pity. The issues *are* important. Understanding how emotions intersect with cognition, biologically and psychologically, and how this might relate to our analysis of mind and culture is central to a more modern, synthetic human science. Although **The emotional computer** might make the reader stop to ponder the regulatory power of emotion it will tell you very little how this has been built into the human brain, thereby making the basis of its exegesis very soft, metaphoric if fact. If, therefore, you would like to know more about contemporary work and thinking in this area I can do no more than recommend that you read A R Damasio's (1996) **Descartes' error** (Papermac. ISBN 0 333 65656 3). Damasio is a clear writer and thinker, in addition to being a neuroscientist who actually has done pioneering work.