

GASTVORTRAG

Mittwoch, 14. Juni 2017, 18 Uhr c.t.

Raum: VG 2.45

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The Ghost and the Machine. J. C. Eccles, the Fate of Physiology and the Dawn of Brain Science in Post-WWII Britain (and Commonwealth)

The history of the Neurosciences is usually cast as a cumulative process of discovery and theoretical innovation, leading to a veritable (but still prospective) cultural revolution. The latter is accounted for in terms of an unstoppable growth of the brain, at the expense of the mind (or the soul), and in general as a progressive obliteration of old and fuzzy problems and entities (free will; mind; soul), traditionally associated with the explanation of human action. As a consequence, the Neurosciences have been widely marketed not simply as the new model of scientific rationality (incorporating and integrating the bio- and psycho-disciplines), but also as the most suitable candidate to the title of "next science of Man". Such an interpretation is based on the conflation between the growth of specialised knowledge and its interpretation in a wholly materialistic, brain-centric framework.

This paper points at a different possible interpretation of the Neurosciences as a cultural programme, based not on scientific revolution, interdisciplinarity and brain-centrism, but rather on tradition, harmonic co-operation between distinct disciplines (physiology, philosophy, introspective psychology), and a strong, reductionistic focus on the neurone as the basic level of interpretation.

Through an analysis of the scientific and cultural endeavours of the physiologist and Nobelist J.C. Eccles, FRS (1903-1997), his 1952 Waynflete Lectures at Magdalen College, Oxford (later published under the title *The Neurophysiological Bases of the Mind: the Principles of Neurophysiology*).

These lectures were Eccles' first attempt at defining Physiology as a Science of Man, and at establishing its place in the system of knowledge.

Through a fine-grained exploration of the making of these lectures, between the end of World War II and 1952, I will try to show how the New Science of the Brain was criticized by Eccles as a materialistic heresy, rooted in wicked and dangerous cultural prejudice, rather than on sound experimentation and proper scientific method. In parallel, I will show how the special brand of Neurosciences heralded by Eccles was almost universally ignored or downplayed by its critics. It also led to paradoxical results, when it came to posthumously assess Eccles' (undeniable) contribution to the making of the Neurosciences. Finally, I wish to point at a whole network of neuroscience-related specialists (physiologists, psychiatrists, psychologists) and engaged intellectuals, who took Eccles' programme seriously, and tried to consolidate, in the following decades, an alternative science of the mind/brain.

Fabio de Sio is wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter at the Institut für Geschichte, Theorie und Ethik der Medizin at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf (HHU). After graduating in philosophy at Università degli studi „Federico II“ in Naples and a PhD in philosophy at Università degli Studi di Bari, he was Wellcome Trust Research Fellow at the Wellcome Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL in London. Since 2012 he worked at the Institut für Geschichte, Theorie und Ethik der Medizin at HHU in different project on the history of the neurosciences and on the papers of Sir John Eccles in particular. At the moment, he is principle investigator in the BMBF project „Von den Neurowissenschaften zur Neurokultur: Eine Fallstudie zu Entwicklung und Einfluss einer 'erfolgreichen' Disziplin“.

Zum Gastvortrag ergeht herzliche Einladung