***Affects and Passions of Our Times.***

***A Conversation with Lewis A. Kirshner***

***By: Donna E. Bentolila***

One morning in April of 2013, I spoke with Dr. Kirshner about affects and passions, a topic that investigators and psychoanalysts are re-thinking in light of recent research findings.

Lewis A. Kirshner is a psychiatrist as well as a Training and Supervising Analyst at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute. He is a long time practicing clinician who is also interested in research. Dr. Kirshner is a former Director of an inpatient Unit of Mt. Auburn’s Hospital and has also worked in the outpatient unit at Harvard Community Health Plan and the Community Mental Health Center at Metropolitan–Beaverbrook. He is the author of *Havinga Life, Self-Pathology after Lacan,* edited by Routledge University Press in 2004. He is also the editor of *Between Winnicott and Lacan, A Clinical Engagement,* a book he published in 2011 (Routledge Press). Dr. Kirshner has published numerous articles in the field of psychoanalysis and is a member of both the American and International Psychoanalytic Associations. He has taught and lectured in the United States and in France.

**In your book *Having a Life, Self-Pathology after Lacan*, you dedicate an entire chapter to the subject of affect. Can you tell us how you understand and conceive of affects?**

I think that in that chapter I tried to offer a partial view of affect underlying its symbolic construction. I see this subject as a form of communication, based on the inter-subjective dimension of affect. This is a highly complex topic. What I am most interested in with regards to affect is its function as part of an inter-subjective relationship, as an experience that is framed in a social community structured by symbolic patterns. I believe that this is the central idea in my thinking and what I attempted to transmit in that book.

**The current advances in the neurosciences offer various answers for many psychological processes which emphasize the predominant role that the brain plays. Do you think that the brain plays the most important role in the constitution of affects in human beings?**

I find myself much more in this path now than when I wrote my book. I believe that I have somewhat surpassed my resistances to the advancements of neurosciences and now believe that there is much to learn from this field. The new developments no longer view the brain as a solitary or isolated organ but instead emphasize that the brains many parts and areas all work together and in conjunction. One needs to understand which parts are active in relationship to certain functions.

Today there is a new field within the neurosciences which underscores what they call the “social brain.” That is a central idea today in the cognitive and social neurosciences. These sciences understand the brain as an organ that basically develops as an instrument towards subjectivity, which for me is the same as “intersubjectivity.” I think that this model is transforming into something really important; there is therefore more interest today in the affective tools which infants have at their disposals, which at the onset are manifestations of a discharge of energy.

At the beginning of life these “tools” are very primitive with regards to the level of the functioning of the brain; they are, however, an important base for what we call affects. Whether one refers to these primitive phenomena as emotions or as early signs of either emotional or affective states, or even as a type of phenomena of discharge, we can notice that they are different. One wonders how many types of affects are at our disposal, some believe in the existence of up to nine: fear, pleasure, joy, fury, disgust, repulsion, etc. These types of signs are very primitive and can be recognized from very early on. Affect, however, requires that they be subjectified, so that one can recognize it oneself and be able to be enter and participate in a human system of exchange.

**Then we need the recognition of a human other who is meaningful to us…**

Yes of course. The recognition of the other is crucial and the other is also absolutely necessary for our developmental growth.

**In this cultural understanding of affect that you propose, what relationship do you find between the body and affect, indeed between affect and language?**

Well, like we were just saying all these phenomena refer to very early types of interactions, where certain affects receive a certain type of specific responses that produce an internalization of certain sequences. For example, there are certain affects that may or may not be accepted by the mother, or that she ignores or fails to respond to; this leads to very early distortions in human development. Therefore, from a strictly developmental perspective, where important research and experimentation is currently taking place, the question for us as psychoanalysts, which also coincides with the development that is taking place in the neurosciences, is that development does not occur simply from the “inside to the outside.”

It is also not the case of an unfolding of a genetic “potential”; rather, it is the case, and this we need to realize since it is of utmost importance, that development is the result of a process of interaction, where the role of the other is crucial. What most counts in all this, to be sure, is the role of the mother, as well as an entire set of small others who belong to her environment.

**The human other, the others who are meaningful, are all crucial in the constitution of affect. But going back to the relationship affect- body, you were telling us that you located it in those very early signs that are expressed in a bodily experience (joy, fear, disgust, etc.) which must become part of a process of subjectification so that they can be recognized and receive a name that allows them to be represented in our consciousness.**

Yes, Freud himself had already referred to these very primitive affects in “An Outline of Psychoanalysis.” This is Freud’s great and final last paper. Andre Green refers to this in some part of his work. Both authors suggest that hysterical attacks involve the discharges of affects related to the precocious sexual experiences of the child. Hysterical attacks are understood in this way, that is to say, as a memory that lives in the body and is acted-out and re-lived. In that paper, Freud states that affects are memories of early experiences, of phylogenetic experiences.

When Freud speaks of phylogenetic experiences he may mean that these types of affective responses, prior to birth, are like residues that we carry in ourselves of generations and ancestors who have come before us. This is a use which Freud makes of Lamarckian theory. Green also addresses this issue. He claims that the child’s very early experiences in relationship to his mother concern the body and that these experiences are the most powerful affective reactions. The baby experiences an affective excitation, whether in the form of fear, pleasure, or anger.

Lacan, for his part, refers to the experience of jubilation which the baby experiences in regards to his own image in the mirror, and for sure he takes into account anxiety. We can find in Lacan’s work references to this theory of affect, as in Freud, but in my view Green is the author who most develops this topic. He does so when he makes reference to these primitive affects as not yet mentalized, as not yet symbolized or represented, as if they are still in a certain animal level or state.

The other author who has worked on this topic and whom I quote in my book is Sylvan Tomkins. He is a pioneer with regards to these primitive affects and made this topic the center of his theory around human development. The group of analysts from Boston has been very interested in the topic of affect and they have taken it as an example of how we acquire relational knowledge and implicit knowledge. Personally, I don’t follow that direction so much.

**Could you describe for us the affects that you distinguish in human beings? And how do you understand the process by which each subject receives the affective traits with which he or she responds and navigates the world?**

I believe that this was the central point in my chapter on affect in my book. There are cultural scenarios that offer patterns regarding the appropriate affective responses in relationship to certain situations, and how these must be interpreted. I focused more on an anthropological perspective. I could think of a myriad of examples where there are obvious cultural differences regarding how one must feel or how one should express one’s affects. The simple fact of maintaining a conversation with someone from another culture, even if it is very similar to ours, leads one to feel a bit outside and to lose some codes, including the way of saying hello to someone.

The example I use in my book is that of an anthropologist who converses with a community that is very different from hers and uses the personal pronoun “I” instead of “us”; her doing so ends up hurting the feelings of the group. That is something that is really taboo in that community. The members of the group felt that she was self-centered but what happened was that she had simply used the wrong pronoun.

Not long ago I was talking with a colleague who supervises with me in a research study that we are doing on psychosis and we were reflecting about the elements that must be present so that a normal social interaction can occur. It is as if there was a script to follow and when it fails one becomes aware that there is something one is not doing correctly.

This reminds me of a term from the neurosciences: “prediction error.” These are two nouns in the neurosciences. Some are saying that consciousness is related to a “prediction error”. We start an action, and we are not necessarily conscious about it until something doesn’t work right, until something fails. And it is at this point that we become conscious. This is a theory where one suddenly becomes conscious of what one was trying to do and leads one to make a conscious effort to monitor the process of what one was doing.

I think we can say the same about affect. We become conscious of what we feel when something fails in the process of affective exchange. I think that this idea from the neurosciences is very interesting.

**Some people experience intense anxiety or they are very impulsive. Could you explain to us how you understand the relationship between affect, the urgency of the drive, and the satisfaction of the drive?**

This subject is probably the weakest part of what I have to say. At least in the way I understand what Lacan says about the drives, is that in the last instance the object of all these drives is the mother, they attempt to reach the mother, but fail. The subject simply receives something of her, a piece or a partial object. This seems to me to be Lacan’s original idea regarding the drives, namely, that they attempt to re-create a part of some original experience with the mother.

This would also be compatible with Green’s ideas, as a sort of motivational force, but for him Lacan leaves out the affect that associates with the drive and that is what Green underscores and highlights. I believe that in Seminar XVII Lacan mentions that someone is about to publish on the question of affect and that this person misunderstood him, that he doesn’t know anything. I think he was referring to Green. It would have helped if both ideas ( Lacan’s and Green’s ) about affect could have been clarified.

You know, Green was very sensitive to the ways in which these primitive affects were excitable and pleasurable, but also about the fact that they are excessive or overly painful. And I think that Lacan also takes this question into consideration with his concept of *jouissance.* This is something that only the psychoanalysts can contribute to, this particular question around the role of this sort of primary driving search of *jouissance*.

We know all too well that intense emotional experiences can be both pleasurable and painful and that they provoke fear and de-center or destabilize the human subject. And because all this relates to impulsivity, I don’t know, it would seem that they are at different levels. It appears to me to be a discharge phenomenon.

**But wouldn’t you say that someone feels or is impulsive when they are experiencing a high level of anxiety?**

Yes, it is true, since one of the ways to deal with intense anxiety is through impulsive acts so that it can be discharged; but I don’t know if it is the only source of impulsivity. It certainly is one of them. We also have the question of how we learn to deal with our desires. Children are generally very impulsive and careless, but that is normal at their age. Nonetheless, they have to develop a way to mediate their impulses. This is an area of great interest.

**What is your idea in relationship to the contemporary approaches of emotions that underline the preeminence of neuroplasticity?**

Well, this connects with what we discussed previously. We know about the plasticity of the development of the brain and that it doesn’t follow a purely innate path. It does follow an innate path in a way, but it is molded and requires exposure to a human other, to human voices, so that the brain can develop.

The most obvious example is that one needs to listen to language; one needs to hear the phonemes in order to receive language. The visual cortex, for example, needs to receive visual information to organize itself and develop and I think that the visual image of the other is crucial in order to be able to organize the human face, even if there might be a certain predetermined potentiality. But in order to really recognize the face of the other, this must relate to a visual exposure.

The same happens with smell and with a variety of networks of neuroplasticity that are at stake in order to enhance and move development forward. These are the advances of the neurosciences of the last 20 years, but the idea that the networks of neuroplasticity that underline the brain in some sense respond greatly to the experience or encounter with the human other is a fairly recent finding.

**If we follow Lacan’s position of underscoring the preeminence of the symbolic, the preeminence of the Other in the birth of subjectivity, couldn’t we say that even if the human infant has a certain innate capacity, without the Other’s support, without the Other’s loving offer, or without the provision offered by the Other, in the manner that Winnicott understands it, the human infant would simply not be able to develop?**

Yes, that is a just word “support”, the support of the other, and the idea of the mirror neurons. Someone presented this theme for us this past week in Boston and told us that, in reality, the brain itself is a mirror system, not just some neurons, and that the brain has developed throughout evolution so as to function within a social frame. And this has to do with the unconscious theme of listening to the voice of the Other; we are listening to these voices all the time and they really change us, even if we are not present. These messages about us truly arrive to mark us.

**We were mentioning that throughout the second part of the 20th Century, Andre Green wrote psychoanalytic studies of important value regarding the question of affect. What else can you add about the contributions of Dr. Green?**

Green is an author that I value deeply. I don’t believe him to be the most elegant in his style; sometimes he is a bit arrogant, for example in his book “The Living Discourse”, where he writes about affects and passions. Yet, I believe that this is one of his best works. Green has tried to synthesize and to present a teaching; he has tried to organize this theme and to see if a consistent model could be developed. I think that Lacan was not interested in this work; for him this brought about the risk of concretizing things more than what he aspired to. Maybe it is a question of personality styles, of someone who is more of a hysteric rather than someone who is more of an obsessive. I don’t know.

What we can say is that Green really offers us a very broad and profound reading of the question of affects, particularly in *The Living Discourse*, which is truly a revision of everything which has been thought around this particular topic, in Freud and beyond Freud. He also makes reference to Lacan in this book and really argues with him there, whereas in other books such as “Private Madness” he is no longer as interested in Lacan. I believe that his contribution to this topic and question is really important and that he is very rigorous in his research.

**Are emotions and passions the same? Which would you say are the emotions and passions more characteristic of the times that we live in?**

I was thinking in the question of religious passion, like in the case of the passion of Christ. Green speaks about this and also about saints.

**Lacan does as well. He claims that analysts occupy the position of saints…**

And then, what type of passion is that? Would Lacan say that it is a masochistic passion? I don’t know, is it that we as analysts accept all the suffering? I don’t know … And would ask myself what the object of a passion such as that might be. It does seem different to me to other passions that motivate people, including the great amorous passions; this seems to me really different from the passion of the saints, but maybe the similarity resides in the common amount of suffering that they each carry.

Green refers to passion as a residue of infantile experience, of the intensity of that experience, of an experience which the infant can barely tolerate because it reaches a limit which can de-subjectify, dissolve or annihilate the child. Green speaks about such cases as a question of energy, of discharge phenomena, so perhaps we could claim that passions are more on the side of the quantitative aspects of the drive and that emotions, as affects, might be the part that is more evolved, more developed and socialized of the drives.

**What about the passion of hating?**

Yes, hatred as a negative passion. We can also find ourselves with the passion to collect, to acquire, to build, to paint, the mania. In France they call it “*la petite manie.”* Maybe this is at the heart of this question, that we all have our *petite manie*, our “private madness”. For Green, passion is more closely related to madness, and he understands madness as a passion that exceeds the limits of containment.

**I think about the need that Don Quijote had to have a companion like Sancho Panza, who had to be with him all the time. I think he needed Sancho Panza to calm and soothe him, he had his passions and he needed Sancho to help him modulate them, in order to insure that they would not exceed a certain limit.**

Yes, that is really interesting. Well, like Freud says regarding the progress of culture, it has more to do with our capacity of emptying out our passions in order to put them to work.

**Anything more regarding the passions of the times we live? You have referred to the religious passion and we could say that such passions have indeed resurfaced in our times and have returned with great vigor and strength.**

I an interview I recently gave for French television they asked me what was the life theme most important in Boston. I answered: “Work”. The people of Boston work all the time. Boston is a city of workaholics. As I remember in *Civilization and its Discontents* work is central in American society. Maybe religious passion is a reaction against rationalization, globalization and programmation. I don’t know, it’s an interesting question. The passion for control is also important, to control life, what exceeds us, like the fear of death, the fear of existence, the fear of a lack of meaning. We try to feel that life has a meaning and that we can somehow control it. Well, here we are.

**Dr Kirshner, thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas on this all important subject for us psychoanalysts.**

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