

Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett on The Functions of the Brain

Post by “Don” of December 15, 2020 at 7:49 AM

I just started reading Dr. Barrett's book *How Emotions Are Made* (2017) and find it fascinating. I just finished the first chapter, so, in looking for something to listen to on the treadmill this morning, found her TED talk.

I see implications and applications to Epicurean philosophy (I think). She talks about the basic experiences all humans have from birth like pleasure and displeasure (I'm calling that pain). Overlaid on these basic sensations are the emotions our brains build from contextual clues and predictions from past experience.

This seems to me to be akin to the pathē being foundational to how we should react to any given situation and how we should decide our choices and rejections.

Her primary thesis, backed up by extensive research, is that our emotions are NOT hardwired. Those basic experiences are (pleasure, displeasure) but not what we call emotions (anger, fear, etc.) People experience the same physical reactions as different emotions in different contexts. This also speaks to me in light of my unease over talking about "feelings" as opposed to "reactions" of pleasure and pain.

I'll be interested to read what anyone thinks if they watch this or read about her research.

Post by “Don” of December 15, 2020 at 2:12 PM

I also recommend taking a look at the 5min animated summary of Dr. Barrett's research here <https://lisafeldmanbarrett.com/multimedia/> I could see parallels between what she calls "affect" and the pathē.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 15, 2020 at 4:10 PM

I might be missing something but I don't see a link to the Ted talk. Is this it? talk?
https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_fel...hem?language=en

Also there's this really short youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS-9lrDDzuU>

I haven't watched these yet but the subject sounds fascinating.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 15, 2020 at 4:12 PM

Oh I just found all her videos (including these) on her multimedia page. 😊

Post by “Don” of December 15, 2020 at 5:10 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

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LOL. A link would be helpful wouldn't it.

https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_fel...es_them/up-next

Post by “Godfrey” of December 15, 2020 at 8:10 PM

Listening to the Ted talk, I noticed she spoke a lot about *predictions*. It seems like these may correspond to prolepses, and it's also interesting to note that these predictions respond not just to sensations but also to pleasure and pain. If I'm understanding this correctly Epicurean sensations are external stimuli, Epicurean feelings are internal stimuli, and predictions which

she speaks of are how we process both external and internal stimuli. This processing then results in such things as emotions, thoughts, opinions, actions, etc. How we work with these emotions, thoughts, opinions, actions then adds to our experiential storehouse, which in turn affects our future predictions. Am I getting that right???

Post by “Don” of December 15, 2020 at 8:31 PM

That's sort of my take as well. Honestly, I'm just learning myself, having literally just discovered her work when I couldn't get back to sleep last night 😊

I was listening to a podcast today with her that struck me as Epicurean as well.

<https://podcasts.google.com/?feed=aHR0cHM6...sode=NDM2MTA3Mw>

Episode #129 at about timestamp 31:36

She's talking there about the importance of sense data etc.

Post by “Don” of December 15, 2020 at 9:19 PM

In this one she's talking about being aware of your mood or 'affect' which is basically just pleasure/pain//calm/aroused and using that to make choices (and, I might add, rejections)

<https://www.tedxcambridge.com/talk/cultivati...-power-of-mood/>

Just to be clear, I'm not saying Dr. Barrett is Epicurean. And I'm not saying Epicurus was prescient and knew this research. But I am saying I find it surprising that Epicurus seemed to intuit this line of inquiry, especially in the importance of understanding your pleasure and pain reactions or as Dr Barrett calls it, your affect.

Post by “Godfrey” of December 15, 2020 at 11:10 PM

I agree with your take Don. It seems similar to Epicurus' physics in that he seems to have been on the right track, although modern science is fine tuning the details. Once again, it would be nice to have his elaboration on the prolepses to really understand how his canon fits together.

Of course this is the first I've heard of this modern line of inquiry, so it's premature to jump to conclusions. Lots to dig into!

Post by “Don” of December 16, 2020 at 10:19 AM

Listening to the podcast in entry above [RE: TED talk: Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett](#)

on way to work today.

Around 1:19:00, she talks about the formation of concepts (a scientific term, not colloquially), and it struck me that her explanation could be describing prolepses.

Interested to hear if anyone has a similar reaction.

Post by “Cassius” of December 16, 2020 at 4:05 PM

I will download and listen. Don are you talking about episode 129??
<https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6L...DM2MTA3Mw?ep=14>

Post by “Don” of December 16, 2020 at 4:23 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Yes. 129.I

Post by “Godfrey” of December 16, 2020 at 5:07 PM

I'm only listening in bits and haven't got that far, but her whole line of research is quite intriguing when compared to the Epicurean perspective. I think I might read her book so I can consider these ideas more fully.

Post by “Don” of December 16, 2020 at 8:14 PM

1:31:00 ~ 1:34:00ish in that episode sounds to me even more like the creation of prolepses in infants and small children! Dr Barrett even talks both about abstract concepts like emotions and concrete concepts. I'd say like justice and Socrates to use Epicurean examples. 😊

Post by “Cassius” of April 12, 2021 at 10:33 AM

Looking for a place to out comments on Barrett's podcast at Ten Percent Happier. For now I'll put it here:

54:15. "Scientists don't agree in how to define emotion."

56:06 "You don't have a sensor for feeling uncomfortableor unpleasant.". These are constructed by the brain.

56:28 When you see red that's a feeling of redness. That comes from the brain modeling the state of your body.

Post by “Don” of April 12, 2021 at 11:32 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I need to go back for the context but here's some initial reactions:

54:15. I agree with her. Take a look at just the Wikipedia article on [Emotion](#) or [Emotion classification](#). This again brings up my unease about using the word "feelings" to translate pathé in the sense of Pleasure/Pain

56:06. I don't think "feeling uncomfortable... Or unpleasant" are the same as pain as your nociceptors reacting to stimuli. Including "feeling" in that automatically implies something constructed by your brain. More context needed here for me.

56:28. I agree here too. Your cones intercepting electromagnetic radiation at a frequency of 625 to 740 nanometers doesn't mean RED. We give meaning to that wavelength within our culture. Other cultures may categorize that differently.

Post by “Cassius” of April 12, 2021 at 4:35 PM

Don am I correct to think what we are developing here is detail on the relationship between feelings and emotions and that this thread needs to go under the Canonics category, probably under pleasure and pain? Let me know what you think and we can move it so more findable in the future.

Post by “Don” of April 12, 2021 at 6:53 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Don am I correct to think what we are developing here is detail on the relationship between feelings and emotions and that this thread needs to go under the Canonics category, probably under pleasure and pain? Let me know what you think and we can move it so more findable in the future.

Yes, I'd say Canonics definitely. I'm not sure about the "relationship between feelings and emotions" though. Hmm. The thing that hit me first I think was the sensations and anticipations parallels. Maybe [Godfrey](#) has some insights.

Post by "Godfrey" of April 12, 2021 at 6:56 PM

Definitely under Canonics. But it also covers sensations and prolepseis. More to follow....

Post by "Cassius" of April 12, 2021 at 7:31 PM

OK moved it at least on an interim basis. Probably the TED talk had a title and we ought to change the title of the thread to reflect the title of the talk (?)

Post by "Godfrey" of April 12, 2021 at 7:41 PM

"Lisa Feldman Barrett - How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain" looks like it's the title; that's the book title as well. I'll be posting on the book, so maybe a thread for TED talk and then I'll start one for the book?

Post by "Don" of April 13, 2021 at 5:01 AM

From seeing that other video I posted recently and its references, we might want a broader thread to include Barrett's research and Hoffman's etc. Maybe something like Parallels between modern brain research and Epicurean philosophy? Need to wordsmith that.

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2021 at 7:13 AM

I am struggling to get my arms around one or more of her ultimate points, which I think is probably the ultimate way to decide on a category. For example I am thinking that if someone was interested in some particular author writing on "action at a distance" that would pretty clearly go under Physics, and then maybe "Details of the Interactions between Atoms and Void."

Before we branch into too many separate Feldman threads, I am tempted to want to figure out exactly what direction this is leading and then label the thread (or subforum) with that title. Is the topic: "Lisa Feldman Barrett on the Operation of the Emotions"?

Post by “Don” of April 13, 2021 at 7:39 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

. Is the topic: "Lisa Feldman Barrett on the Operation of the Emotions"?

I think it's deeper than that. The emotions are only one aspect of her research and not even the one that seems to resonate the most with Epicurus's Philosophy. I see much stronger analogies with her talk about sensations and "concepts".. The emotions are along for the ride from my perspective here. That seems to be her most provocative topic for a lay audience.

I think [Godfrey](#) was planning to weigh in again as well.

Post by “Don” of April 13, 2021 at 9:45 AM

If suggesta brain research thread in Canonics with subthreads on Barrett, Hoffman, etc. or individual topics.

Just blue skying it here.

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2021 at 9:53 AM

Ok that moves us in a direction, under Canonics, something like "Modern Research Into the Nature of Brain Function" (?)

I do think we need to make clear that these conversations will be of the "modern research" variety and not really an extension or modification of Epicurean philosophy itself. That's much as we will need to do in many aspects of the "physics."

We're going to have people who want to really focus on material like this, and we're going to have people who think it is irrelevant and even distracting, just as happens in each aspect of the physics discussions, so it would be good to think about how to make clear what people are reading in each section.

Post by “Cassius” of April 13, 2021 at 10:02 AM

OK made some more interim changes. No doubt Godfrey's comments will inspire us to a new direction 😊

Post by “Godfrey” of April 13, 2021 at 10:45 PM

My approach to her book is to relate it to all of the Canon: sensations, prolepseis and feelings. It does seem quite similar to physics in terms of modern research v ancient philosophy. The biggest difference, to me, is that we have so little to work with regarding Epicurean prolepseis that it's very tempting to fill in some gaps using modern research.

I'm about halfway into putting together a post on her book. This week is quite busy so I probably won't finish until the weekend or early next week 😬