

# Modern Science Meets the Canon

Post by "Godfrey" of June 2, 2019 at 8:44 PM

Due to the shortage of verifiably authentic writing from Epicurus dealing with the Prolepseis/ Anticipations/ Preconceptions, and the conflicting interpretations of same (DeWitt/Cassius/common sense v everybody else/academics), I've been on the lookout for present day information which may apply, and I'm just beginning to read up on it. In my field of design, there currently is critical interest in "embodied cognition". Here are some quotes from the book *Welcome To Your World*, by Sarah Williams Goldhagen, a proponent of this idea. In terms of the science involved, these quotations are quite generalized. As far as I know she has no interest in Epicurus. Words in [] are my comments.

*"The new paradigm of human cognition begins by reframing the relationship of our thoughts to our bodies. Cognitions do not emerge in tension with a corporeal self, as was thought for centuries, nor from a disembodied mind— a paradigm encapsulated in the dualistic "mind-body problem." Instead, cognition is the product of a three- way collaboration of mind, body, and environment. Inherent in the very fact of human embodiment— life lived in a body— rests the notion that the physical environments that a body inhabits greatly influence human cognitions. The body is not merely some passive receptacle for sensations from the environment, which the mind then interprets in a somewhat orderly fashion. Instead, our minds and bodies - actively, constantly and at many levels - engage in active and interactive, conscious and nonconscious processing of our internal and external environments."*

*"The common western understanding of human thought and experience relies on the idea, first formulated by René Descartes in the seventeenth century [really?], that our conscious mind operates at least on some level independent of its corporeal home. The basic structure of this Cartesian dualism is as follows. First, through our senses— sight, touch, taste and so on— we receive information from the environment. After we sense a stimulus, we perceive it. After perceiving, we begin to process, forming a preliminary judgment about that information by running it through our internal data bank of familiar, recognizable patterns and by reacting to it emotionally. Thus we conjure a preliminary interpretation of the initial stimulus. Only then comes the highest step of cognitive processing, whereby we consciously use logic, reason, and abstraction to evaluate the importance of the given stimulus to our life and make decisions about whether and how to act."*

*"The emerging mind- body- environment paradigm starts differently: with the somewhat obvious fact that the human brain inhabits a body, and that this brain- mind- body lives on the earth, in space, and in the social world. The brain and the body together facilitate the*

*operations of the human mind, which depends on their architecture for its very existence and for its modes of functioning. Human cognition takes place in a corporeal body that lives on the earth and in space. Not only that: our cognitions are shaped by the fact of our embodiment, sometimes in surprising ways— such as thinking more creatively when we sit outside (instead of inside) a box [this is from a study mentioned in the book, it's not referring to “thinking outside the box”]. In this new paradigm, a cognition can be linguistic or it can be prelinguistic; it can occur anywhere on the spectrum from the non- conscious to the conscious. Learning to understand cognition’s complex, multilayered, often subterranean quality involves attending to our own fleeting thoughts and perceptions— precisely the ones that we are more or less predisposed to ignore.”*

*“Those cognitions that are more audible, more distinct, usually come in the form of the words we hear inside our heads. Language is the enabler and medium we use to express our internal thoughts to ourselves as well as the enabler of social communication. Because words have such a hold on us, many philosophers of language and thought have for generations mistaken our interior monologues or the spoken language that forms them for the entirety of cognition.”*

*“That people experience emotions first as physical states— as feelings, in other words, as things that we feel in our bodies— and only then as cognitions has been hypothesized ever since one of the founders of modern psychology, William James, proposed it. We now know, for example, that the cerebellum, which coordinates sensory input with muscular responses, is also involved in processing emotions. Fear manifests itself as a jolt of energy, and muscles tense.... Today, psychological research confirms that what we call “feelings” are cognitive responses to what our bodies literally feel, and not just in the case of the familiar fight- or- flight response activated by the feeling of fear. Our emotions are enmeshed in and intermeshed with our bodies; in other words, they are “in the body,” or embodied.”*

*“People acquire a vast body of knowledge simply by living embodied in the world, as an object among objects, and as matter in space.”*

A couple of more specific practical examples:

*“Recognizing and identifying patterns produces in us the sensation of pleasure. Whether it’s when we listen to a piece of music or look at a painting or walk through a building or landscape that slowly reveals the nature of its order, recognizing patterned organization rewards us with a little jolt of the opioids in the area of our brain associated with our “liking” system. Presumably, the functional origin of this reward system lies in our evolutionary need to rapidly situate ourselves and the members of our group within an environment and a social group.”*

*“The appeal of bilateral symmetry does appear to be innate: even very young infants gaze at such objects longer than they do at asymmetrical ones, and this is true across cultures. “Good symmetry,” neuroscientist Eric Kandel writes, “indicates good genes”— and, he might have added, robust health. Even without our conscious awareness, our evolutionary heritage has taught us that almost every healthy animate being exhibits symmetry either globally, in its*

*overall composition (the form of a butterfly) or locally (the pattern on its wings) or both. Symmetry in a perceptual object, then, heralds (in the words of V. S. Ramachandran) a "biological object: prey, predator, member of the same species, or mate." Although the objects in the built environment, including its buildings, are inanimate, symmetry may also appeal to us because it intimates a human presence."*

My observations:

1) To me, this indicates that biological sciences are validating and updating Epicurus's thinking, in a similar fashion to the previous validation/updating of the physical sciences, at least as far as I am familiar with them. This seems to be a description of the prolepseis and their integration into the Canon.

2) This seems to me to confirm and elaborate on the DeWitt/Cassius/common sense interpretation. If I understand it correctly: correct understanding is the whole point of this exercise. 😊

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### **Post by "Cassius" of June 3, 2019 at 6:23 AM**

Wow Godfrey, I just read this for the first time and probably need to reread to see if there is anything I disagree with, but wow this seems to me to be directly on point. Thank you!

Might be good to collect some relevant links:

<https://www.amazon.com/Welcome-Your-W...=gateway&sr=8-1>

<http://sarahwilliamsgoldhagen.com/>

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### **Post by "Hiram" of June 3, 2019 at 1:24 PM**

Embodied cognition was a prominent theme in this essay @ Aeon, which was very enjoyable to read

<https://aeon.co/essays/feminis...e-from-its-body>

In it, Sally Davies is the first person that I'm aware of who attacks transhumanist ideology as an expression of an irrational Platonic anxiety about the body. She also challenges Descartes for a similar reason. Concerning Plato, she says:

Since Plato, generations of philosophers have been gripped by a fear of the body and the desire to transcend it – a wish that works hand-in-hand with a fear of women, and a desire to control them. In the dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato likens the force of his ideal, immaterial forms to a disciplinarian father, imposing order on all this unwieldy material *stuff* that was nonetheless ‘the mother and receptacle of all created and visible and in any way sensible things’. Here Plato deploys a well-worn technique for suppressing corporeal angst: carving off the mind (rational, detached, inviolable, symbolically male) from the body (emotional, entangled, weak, symbolically female).

Plato’s legacy persisted into the Medieval world, as the split between form and matter assumed the moral complexion of Christianity. Humans were believed to be in possession of an immortal soul, which reason and restraint should shield from the corrupting influence of earthly pleasures. Women and the female body, the presumed targets of men’s sexual desire, therefore bore the semiotic burden of sin. The theologian St Augustine, for example, chastised himself for repeatedly succumbing to lustful urges in his youth, where women ‘found my soul beyond its portals, dwelling in the eye of my flesh’.

Christianity took the Platonic neurosis to new heights. We must not forget that Eve--like Pandora before her--was blamed for all the evils in the world, and that after the primal so-called "fall from grace" she and Adam are imagined as covering up their nakedness out of shame--shame of having a body, of being a natural being.

With the advent of modernity and the Enlightenment, this wish to detach from the material became a self-consciously scientific and rational enterprise. ...

No wonder feminist thinkers have been so skeptical about attempts to raise ‘rationality’ above all else. The concept of reason itself is built on a profoundly gendered blueprint. But a surprising rapprochement might be in sight: between feminists who criticise the mind/matter split, and certain philosophers and scientists who are now trying to put them back together. Fresh theories and findings about human cognition suggest that **those feminised zones of physicality, emotion and desire not only affect the way we think, but are the very constituents of thought itself.**

... Within a broad church that can be called – not uncontentiously – *embodied cognition*, a growing number of psychologists, scientists and theorists **are approaching mental life as something that is not just contingent on, but constituted by, the state of our bodies.**

## **Post by "Godfrey" of June 3, 2019 at 2:14 PM**

An interesting and thought provoking essay, Hiram!

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## **Post by "Joshua" of June 3, 2019 at 3:18 PM**

Excellent reading, folks! It's no wonder Walt Whitman was a shock to such people: he was the supreme poet of the celebration of the body in that dull age when men most wanted to deny it.

I found an interesting article on Whitman's relationship to the subject;

<https://socialecologies.wordpress.com/2012/12/23/wal...ems-of-science/>

Although perhaps that needs it's own thread.

-josh

Edit; I've just learned that Whitman's father was a devoted student of Frances Wright, attending her lectures and subscribing to her publication. There may be a more-than-cursory connection here after all.

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## **Post by "Cassius" of June 3, 2019 at 4:44 PM**

Joshua if you run into anything of interest on Frances Wright please be sure to comment about it. I find her to be a fascinating but enigmatic figure - I can find nothing else she ever wrote about Epicurus, or even anything particularly philosophical at all, other than "A Few Days In Athens." That has always caused me to doubt whether she wrote it herself, because (1) she had an older relative who was a well known philosophy professor, as I understand it, and (2) I cannot imagine someone who had gained such a depth of knowledge of the details of philosophy in general and Epicurus in particular not writing more on the subject. if I

This is not to put her down, only to try to answer what I think as a mystery. Not to compare myself or the people I know to her, but to me "A Few Days In Athens" almost requires a lifetime of study to have been so deft with the subject as to write it. And if it is possible that she just lent her name to what everyone no doubt understood would be an explosive anti-religious book, then maybe we might be able to locate other similar material that is equally useful.

I am not familiar with the school in which Whitman was traveling (transcendentalist?) and I don't know at all that it is parallel to Epicurus except in certain particulars, but I would like to look up any and all writers of that period who dealt specifically with Epicurus so we can get access to them. I feel sure there are many more beyond the other obscure ones we've found, in addition to Wright, such as Lorenzo Valla and Cosma Raimondi (much earlier figures).

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### **Post by "Joshua" of June 3, 2019 at 4:57 PM**

I'll poke into that when I've got time. My senior thesis was on the subject of the transcendentalists. Some remarkable characters, but none that I would point to immediately as being Epicurean in any deep sense.

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### **Post by "Cassius" of June 3, 2019 at 5:11 PM**

Yes that is what I am thinking Joshua. And in what I read of Frances Wright's personal history, she was definitely a "Doer" and a "reformer" as much as a "thinker" and those characteristics strike me as more transcendentalist than Epicurean. So I am thinking that she may have happily attached her name to a book that someone else was too afraid to publish (especially in England) under their own name.

In fact there is an aside within AFDIA where the author takes to task a particular English professor for essentially embracing Epicurean ideas but denouncing Epicurus himself, and pointing out how hypocritical that was. I sometimes wonder if that isn't itself a link to someone else who was involved in the book.

I've read through the rest of the books of Diogenes Laertius and I can see that most of the details that are in AFDIA could be gained from reading that single book. But the final effect is just so well done, it strikes me as the result of some much older and more mature woman or man.

According to wikipedia AFDIA was released in London in 1822 and if that is correct presumably it was ready for publication maybe a year before that(?) Frances Wright was born 9/6/1795, so in 1822 she was 27 years old. In fact, wikipedia says she wrote this by age 18!

Is it possible that she was so dynamic that she was able to get all that done? Certainly. But I also see on wikipedia -- "In 1813, when Wright was sixteen, she returned to Scotland to live

with her great-uncle, [James Mylne](#), a philosophy professor at Glasgow College." and in fact her father was a correspondent of Adam Smith and a political radical in his own right. She at that time in her life she was moving in a circle of people of whom any or many could have been interested in the same material.

At any rate, just useless speculation, other than to the extent that it leads us to the discovery of other old books on Epicurus which have dropped out of sight but which may still exist somewhere.

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### **Post by “Elayne” of June 4, 2019 at 3:33 PM**

Hi JJ-- cool info about Whitman!

I read a few years ago that Whitman was interested in phrenology-- a popular idea in his time that one could discern character from bumps on the skull. And that this is where some of the language in his poetic self description originated. Phrenology was discredited, but I still love what he did with all that. You may already know this-- here's a link in case not.

I mention that because I have noticed that there is a wide range of inquiry in that general field of embodied consciousness-- some credible and some woowoo. It's a fascinating subject!

<https://whitmanarchive.org/archive1/class...ntroduction.htm>