Intercorporeal Resonance: Linguistic Experientiality and Affectivity in Roman Texts

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How do we attempt to appreciate cognitively situated perspectives on affective experience in ancient texts and contexts? Drawing on 4E cognitive theories (see esp. Devereaux, 2019) and cross-cultural studies of affectivity (e.g., Mesquita, 2022), this paper argues that knowledge which is situated in the body provides the answer.

In the Roman context, the poetic and medicalized body were not entirely distinct (for summary of this dichotomy see Rosenwein & Cristiani, 2019), and so to appreciate affective linguistic expression in ancient texts, one has to internalize an experience of the body that differs from that of many modern cultures. In this respect, authors like Pliny and Galen offer a tremendous amount of insight, particularly in terms of the Roman propensity to embed affectivity in the narrative by means of bodily experiences that are not necessarily marked as such (see esp. Devereaux 2018 & 2023). In light of the beliefs about the body laid out by scientific writings from the Roman period, I will accordingly suggest that seemingly unremarkable linguistic patterns are actually the gauzy, seductive contours of affective experience that inconspicuously shape the texts and, potentially, our interpretations of them.

The significance of such patterns -- which are essentially hidden in plain sight -- is their invitation to readers to resonate with the affective experience supplied by the text. Such resonance is fundamentally intercorporeal (on intercorporeality see e.g., Fuchs, 2017), which is particularly consequential when the text also solicits moral appraisal (for seminal work on moral emotions see Haidt, 2003). Exactly such language -- taken from a range of texts that include Ovidian exile poetry, Senecan tragedy, and the Apuleian novel -- will be the focus of the paper, which ultimately seeks to understand the role of linguistic experientiality in the production and transmission of ancient texts.

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