

Chapter 1: Introduction

Over ten years ago I gave a presentation that was to change my life. I was speaking at the Newcastle University conference, 'Paganism Today' about another way of knowing: The "somatic, physical knowing ... [that] is the knowledge of faith, of emotion, of the gut feeling" (Harris, 1996: 151). I concluded then that profound spiritual experiences involving nature could inspire environmental action, and that this process was grounded in embodied knowing. My words spoke of an unexplored landscape and I embarked on a remarkable journey of discovery which culminated in this thesis: I have concluded that life changing processes of connection mesh with the embodied situated knowing which underpins our being-in-the-world. My 1996 paper¹ promised much, but left many questions unanswered: I have now attended to those questions, and clarified both the process of embodied knowing and its role in Eco-Paganism. My answers are as profound as I'd hoped and more surprising than I ever imagined.

I begin with an overview, where I set out the deficiencies in existing research, explain my aims and objectives and provide a brief outline of the thesis. After a more detailed discussion of themes and findings, I explain my use of the terms 'organic environment', embodiment, knowing and cognition and then offer my conclusion.

OVERVIEW

Deficiencies in Existing Research

Although I was initially inspired by the puzzle of embodied knowing in Eco-Paganism, I later realised that this revealed a much bigger question: What is the role of embodied knowing in religion and spirituality in general? With very few exceptions, current religious studies approaches are profoundly disembodied, and this question has been far from adequately addressed. This is a severe handicap to the progress of religious studies, because we lack understanding the 'knowing' which is fundamental to religious and spiritual experience.

To approach the bigger questions about the role of embodied knowing in religion and spirituality, I needed to focus on one group, and Eco-Paganism was an obvious choice. In principle I could have researched any group, as embodied cognition is fundamental to being human. There is some material related to forms of embodied knowing in faith traditions, notably Christianity (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998), but Eco-Pagans are an ideal test case for several reasons. First, Eco-Pagans valorize the 'body' and 'nature' - two problematic terms I discuss below - which suggests an enhanced awareness of embodied knowing. Second, I was interested in how embodied knowing might influence motivation, and Eco-Pagans are by definition activists. Third, Eco-Paganism is a significant but under-researched spirituality. Finally, as an insider I am intimately familiar with some forms of embodied knowledge in Eco-Paganism, so I already have a privileged understanding. On a more reflexive note, I wanted to test the bold claims I'd made at the 'Paganism Today' conference with ethnography and a more nuanced autoethnography.

1 Although my paper was presented in 1994, I refer to it throughout by the date of its first publication.

Although embodied knowing is widely discussed across many disciplines, no existing study attempts to integrate this work into a coherent model, partly because Western “[p]hilosophy has established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia” (Grosz, 1994: 5). One of my first tasks was to clarify our general understanding of embodied knowing and formulate a model that could be applied to qualitative research.

Initial Aims And Hypotheses

Aims and Objectives²

My primary aim was to determine how notions of 'embodied knowing' could be used to interpret the practice of Eco-Paganism. Several sub-aims were required to achieve this: I first established which theories of embodied knowledge were appropriate to researching Eco-Paganism, and then used these to develop a 'hermeneutics of embodiment' methodology. This methodology was then used to research a range of Eco-Pagan practice. My final thesis went beyond these initial aims in that I synthesised the enactive process model and set out an embodied philosophy.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into three sections, the first of which locates my research. Because my thesis is concerned with two very different fields, I have two literature reviews surveying first Eco-Paganism (Chapter 2), and then embodied cognition (Chapter 3). In Chapter 4, I use the second literature review to synthesise a model of embodied situated cognition. This raises fundamental questions about epistemology which I address in Chapter 5, "Embodied Philosophy". Having established a sound philosophical foundation, I explain my "Research Design and Methodology" in Chapter 6.

Section two presents the results of my fieldwork. After a brief introduction to provide an overview of the territory, I present Chapter 7, " 'You're not studying it – you're living it': An Autoethnography". This autoethnography provides an intuitive, felt understanding of life on a road protest site, which compliments the more formal ethnographies that follow in Chapter 8, "Listening to the Threshold Brook: Urban Eco Paganism" and Chapter 9, "The Power of Place: Protest Site Eco-Paganism". Section two closes with Chapter 10, "Eco-Paganism: A 'sacred relationship with the world' " which draws together the treads of my fieldwork to present a coherent pattern. Section 3 consists of my final concluding chapter which sets out my argument, my original contributions to research and its wider relevance.

Audience

Although of primary interest to religious studies scholars, my survey and model of embodied knowing will prove of interest to researchers in a wide range of disciplines, including social science, philosophy and cognitive neuroscience. Social science academics in general will find my hermeneutics of embodiment methodology useful in researching the embodied knowing that lies beyond existing approaches. Finally, my study provides Eco-Pagans with a deeper understanding of

2 Adapted from those registered with the University of Southampton, February 2004. See Appendix 1.

our spirituality.

THEMES AND FINDINGS

Mapping the key themes running through this thesis will both present and contextualise my main findings. My thesis has four main themes, two of which set the initial questions and two of which emerged from the research. To research embodied knowing in Eco-Paganism, I undertook an *ethnography of Eco-Paganism* (theme 1), to which I then applied a theory of embodied situated cognition. My literature revealed that embodied knowing is situated, so my second theme is *embodied situated cognition*. Embodied situated cognition argues that in knowing the world we become part of it, and *connection* emerged as major theme in my ethnography, so this became my third theme. Many aspects of my research *problematizes conventional dualities*, and this is especially apparent in theories of embodied situated cognition and my ethnography, so I identify this as my fourth theme.

I begin by presenting a review of literature on Eco-Paganism (Chapter 2), which introduces the sub-theme of the relationship between Eco-Paganism and mainstream Paganism. I note that some Eco-Pagans are predominantly urban, while others are more likely to be found on protest sites. I next turn to research into embodied situated cognition (Chapter 3), where it becomes clear that there is a great deal of consistency across disciplines. There is generally agreement that mind is immanent in the world, and the degree of integration between what we conventionally understand as 'self' and 'world' problematizes the subject-object distinction. Because of this tight integration of 'self' and 'world', place can have a profound impact, not only on our thinking but our entire being-in-the-world. Chapter 3 describes a form of embodied knowing which Gendlin calls the 'felt sense', which can be accessed using a practice called Focusing³ (Gendlin, 1981).

The degree of consistency in embodied situated cognition research allows me to synthesise a coherent theory of embodied situated cognition (Chapter 4). This - the 'enactive process model' - combines enactivism, a leading approach in cognitive neuroscience (inter alia, Varela et al., 1991), with Gendlin's process philosophy (Gendlin, 1997). My synthesis is presented graphically in Chapter 4, fig 2, as 'The Cognitive Iceberg'.

By this stage, my thesis has raised fundamental questions about epistemology and ontology which need to be addressed before discussing my methodology. Chapter 5 uses Gendlin's embodied philosophy to address these issues. Gendlin's epistemology enables me to discuss embodied knowing from the perspective of propositional, academic knowledge, and collapses the subject/object distinction, thus avoiding the problems intrinsic to dualism (inter alia, Gendlin, 1997; Levin, 1997).

My methodology chapter builds on this epistemology to demonstrate how Gendlin's Focusing approach can both access embodied knowing and underpin an embodied

³ I always capitalize Gendlin's term Focusing to distinguish it from more common usage of the word. Not all authors follow this practice.

hermeneutics (Chapter 6). This allows me to explore embodied knowing using an embodied methodology that is underpinned by an embodied epistemology, and thus grounds me in a virtuous circle of reflexive understanding.

My qualitative study of Eco-Paganism has three strands: an autoethnography, and studies of urban and site Eco-Paganism. I use my enactive process model to explain the role of embodied situated cognition in all strands. In Chapter 7 I present an autoethnography of my life on road protest sites which enhances the reader's embodied understanding of my research by providing a "vicarious experience of the things told" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 751). I problematize several dualities, including academic discourse versus emotional engagement, and entering/leaving the field. Chapter 8 is a study of urban Eco-Pagans which highlights several differences from mainstream Pagans. Feelings of connection with place emerge as the key interview theme, and I identify several processes which facilitate this experience, including the felt sense (Gendlin, 1981). The role of embodied situated cognition is especially apparent in the way participants 'think with place', as well as in spiritual healing, trance, ritual and relationships to the organic environment. Chapter 9 discusses protest site Eco-Paganism, and again notes the importance of processes of connection, the most important of which is the 'wilderness effect', which has previously only been observed on wilderness treks (Greenway, 1995). I show how the processes of connection can catalyse profound spiritual experiences, and blur perceived boundaries between self and other. Embodied situated cognition is again extensive. I draw these threads together in Chapter 10, where I use the enactive process model to analyse the processes of connection and thinking with place. I conclude that the processes of connection can enable a communion with the world that awakens Eco-Pagans from the dualistic dream.

TERMINOLOGY

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Nature

In the course of this thesis I use several terms that resist simple definition, and 'nature' is the first and most mercurial. Both Sutton and Williams consider the word to be the most complex in our language (Williams 1983: 219; Sutton 2007: 2), mainly because its meaning changes over time, revealing as it does so major developments in human thought (Williams 1983:224). 'Nature' encompasses three areas of meaning: "(i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings" (Williams 1983: 219). During the Romantic period of the late 18th century, the third meaning acquired an ethical flavour, as 'nature' came to refer to the "goodness and innocence" of the 'unspoiled places' of the 'countryside' (Williams 1983: 223). These different meanings are often confused or conflated, a fact that complicates any explanation of contemporary Paganism as a 'Nature Religion'. The editors of *Nature Religion Today* (Pearson, Roberts and Samuel, 1998) suggested that contemporary Paganism is a nature religion in that it involves "a reorientation towards, and a resacralisation of, both external nature and our own physical embodiment" (Pearson, Roberts and Samuel, 1998: 1). This definition, though

adequate, is based squarely on meaning (iii) given above and ignores meaning (ii) of nature as an "inherent force" which is at least as significant to many contemporary Pagans. (See 'Eco-Paganism Literature review').

Bookchin claims that the languages of many aboriginal peoples lack any equivalent for our word "nature" because they are "[i]mmersed in nature" so "it has no special meaning" (Bookchin, 1993). Some argue that we should avoid talking about 'nature' altogether: As Evernden points out, our contemporary use of the word emphasises a "sense of separation between the human subject and the surrounding field of natural objects" (Evernden, 1992: 102). Ingold concurs that 'nature' only exists "for a being that does not belong there, and that can look upon it, in the manner of the detached scientist" (Ingold, 2000: 20). He prefers the word 'environment', but clarifies the term, emphasizing that any environment is relative to those organisms who exist as part of it and that an environment is a process, which is "fundamentally historical" (Ingold, 2000: 20). Ecopsychologist Fisher, comes to a similar conclusion: In as much as "the natural world" is "a network of relationships", it "is not a thing all, but a constant flux of interweaving processes" (Fisher, 2002: 97). Ortner's re-thinking of her 1974 paper 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' recognises the limitations of her prior use of Levi-Straussian binary oppositions, and adopts a more process based approach, wherein 'nature' becomes understood as Strathern puts it, "those processes that proceed autonomously in the world, and 'that limit the possible' of human action" (Ortner, 1996: 179).

Despite these attempts to clarify the meaning to the word 'nature', I conclude that it remains too vague and culturally loaded for this thesis. Although most of the planet has now been influenced by human activity, this ranges across a very broad scale from wilderness to shopping precinct. Thus, Ingold's suggestion of 'environment' remains problematic, as it fails to distinguish places that are highly modified by human activities, like cities, from those less influenced by us, like ancient woodland; both are my environment when I am there. I will therefore use the term 'organic environment' to refer to the "the natural world" as "a network of relationships" (Fisher, 2002: 97) and processes which "proceed autonomously in the world" and " 'limit the possible' of human action" (Ortner, 1996: 179), but which is nevertheless "fundamentally historical" (Ingold, 2000: 20).

Embodiment and Knowledge

The term 'embodiment' is used with different emphasis by different writers, so I need to be clear about my own understanding. There is a substantive discussion of this term in my literature review of embodied cognition (Chapter 3), but I would note here that I do not use the term 'embodiment' as a more nuanced name for the body, but rather to refer to ways in which we are embodied in the world.

It is difficult to differentiate between embodied cognition, embodied knowledge(s) and embodied knowing, partly because such "subjugated ways of knowing" (Foucault, 1980: pp. 81, 84) evade conventional analysis. Despite the challenge of feminist epistemology, the Western analytic tradition resists the notion that knowledge could in any sense be 'embodied'. Existing definitions, however, can

clarify somewhat: *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* describes cognition as “The use or handling of knowledge” (Gregory, 1987: 149), but leaves moot the question of what ‘knowledge’ means. However, whereas ‘knowledge’ suggests something one might use, ‘knowing’ implies a state of awareness, an understanding or way of being-in-the-world, and therefore more accurately describes what I am researching. As Bourdieu puts it, “What is ‘learned by the body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is” (Bourdieu, 1990: 73).

My embodied cognition literature review (Chapter 3) leads me to conclude that at the level of embodiment it is practically impossible to make distinctions between embodied cognition, embodied knowledge(s) and embodied knowing. However, I perceive an advantage in retaining the terms ‘embodied cognition’ and ‘embodied knowing’ to clarify a fundamental distinction between what Merleau-Ponty calls the physiological or “the objective body”, and “the phenomenal body,” which is how an individual phenomenologically experiences their embodiment⁴. Although there are occasions where we experience our own body as a physiological entity, we typically experience subjective embodiment as “a unified potential or capacity for doing this and that - typing this sentence, scratching that itch, etc.” (Audi, 1999). I therefore adopt two complementary perspectives; one focused on the physiological body (embodied cognition), and the other phenomenological and experientially intimate (embodied knowing). Neither approach is ‘truer’ than the other, but both offer up different, equally revealing modes of understanding. We can learn only so much from looking at an apple; biting and tasting it almost reveals another entity. Approaches such as cognitive neuroscience favour the physiological body, while others – for example phenomenology and anthropology - typically emphasize the phenomenal body. However, adopting these two perspectives offers clarity, as it becomes clear that the objective body engages in embodied cognition, while the phenomenal body can experience an embodied knowing. This approach is most adequately summarized by Varela et al., who “see our bodies both as physical structures and as lived, experiential structures - in short, as both ‘outer’ and ‘inner,’ biological and phenomenological”. The term embodiment carries this double meaning: “it encompasses both the body as a lived, experiential structure and the body as the context or milieu of cognitive mechanisms” (Varela et al., 1991: xv-xvi).

Conclusion

Having described the deficiencies in existing research, I explained my aims and objectives. I then set out the four main themes of my research. The first two themes set the initial questions: I examined my ethnography of Eco-Paganism from the theoretical perspective of embodied situated cognition. This perspective, and my ethnography, highlighted the importance of connection, which therefore became my third theme. As my research repeatedly problematizes conventional dualities, I identified this as my fourth theme. I used these themes to structure the discussion of my research findings, before closing by defining several key terms.

4 The phenomenological tradition often uses the terms ‘leib’ for the ‘lived’ or phenomenal body and ‘körper’ to describe the physical ‘objective’ body. (Embree et al., 1997: 66). Lakoff and Johnson make a similar distinction between “neural embodiment” and “phenomenological embodiment” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 37)

