



To Work or Not to Work: The Hand and Embodied Wisdom of the Valiant Woman in Proverbs 31:10–31

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ABSTRACT

The discipline of embodied cognitive science and associated concept of *intercorporeality* provide the theoretical framework of our analysis of Proverbs 31:10–31. This essay fleshes out the underlying cognitive and meaning-making processes and entailments inherent in the valiant woman's use of her hands and body as depicted in the poem. The valiant woman is contrasted with the hands and body of the sluggard fool to unveil how the activity or inactivity of the hands (and body) substantially affects the knowing of the valiant woman and the fool. Knowledge and wisdom emerged and are shaped by one's hands and bodily interaction with the real world.

KEYWORDS

Proverbs 31:10–31, valiant woman, knowledge and wisdom, hands, embodied cognition, lazy fool, intercorporeality

Introduction

There are at least two major research trajectories in Proverbs 31:10–31 scholarship. The first mode of enquiry is on the femininity of the main character against the ancient or modern social milieu. Scholars like Claudia Camp see the woman as subversive of the sociocultural context of ancient chauvinism and patriarchy,¹ while Bernhard Lang compares the role of the woman with the upper-class wife of Xenophon in putting order to family life.² Christine Yoder reads her as a woman associated with her bride-price,

¹ Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Bible and Literature Series 11 (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985); Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Carole R. Fontaine, "The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 24–49.

² Bernhard Lang, "Women's Work, Household and Property in Two Mediterranean Societies: A Comparative Essay on Proverbs XXXI 10–31," *Vetus Testamentum* 54 (2004):188–207, doi:[10.1163/156853304323018882](https://doi.org/10.1163/156853304323018882).



“expensive to attain.”³ An African reading sees the valiant woman as the epitome of the liberation of women amidst oppression, sexism, and classism in the South African context.⁴ Ecclesiastically, this feminine gender is often connected with the New Testament church as the bride of Jesus Christ.

The second approach to this poem is oriented toward the description “valiant” (*hayil*). This kind of investigation focuses on unpacking the woman’s “strength whether in wealth, physical power, military might, practical competencies, character,” including her social traits.⁵ Yoder locates the woman in a Persian sociohistorical milieu and calls her “a woman of substance” who coalesces with the “woman of wisdom” in Proverbs 1–9.⁶ Al Wolters reads the poem form critically as an heroic hymn like that of the ancient heroic hymns.⁷ Similar to what this paper seeks to accomplish, M. Beth Szlos studies the literary devices in the poem, specifically the hands. She summarises her findings as “the body parts referred to in 31:10–31 indicate a physically powerful and, ultimately, commercially powerful depiction of the woman of valor.”⁸ Jacqueline Vayntrub argues that the valiant woman is praised because of her acquired wisdom rather than innate beauty which is reckoned as deceptive and short-lived.⁹

The scholarly discussion on the valiant woman summarised above has converged on her embodiment of knowledge and wisdom, that is her application and externalisation of her wisdom rather than on her construction of wisdom. Thus, this paper takes the reading of the poem forward (or better backward) into the valiant woman’s formation of meaning, values, knowledge, and wisdom. The *leitmotif* of the *hands* of the woman and how her hands, construed as *pars pro toto*, represent the embodied intercorporeal engagement of the woman *positionally* with her family, social, natural, creative, travel, and linguistic cognitive environments. The intentional and recursive process of her embodied

³ Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1–9 and 31:10–31*, BZAW 304 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), doi:[10.1515/9783110879988](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110879988); Yoder, “The Woman of Substance (אִשְׁת־חַיִל): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31:10–31,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 3 (2003): 427–47, doi:[10.2307/3268385](https://doi.org/10.2307/3268385).

⁴ Madipoane Masenya, “Proverbs 31:10–31 in a South African Context: A Reading for the Liberation of African (Northern Sotho) Women,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 55–68.

⁵ Michael Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 891; see also L. Juliana Claassens, “The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31:10–31 and Martha Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 1 (2016): 5–19, doi:[10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.1.02](https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.1.02).

⁶ Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 102.

⁷ Albert M. Wolters, “Proverbs 31:10–31 As Heroic Hymn: A Form-Critical Analysis,” *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 4 (1988): 446–57, doi:[10.2307/1519288](https://doi.org/10.2307/1519288).

⁸ M. Beth Szlos, “A Portrait of Power: A Literary-Critical Study of the Depiction of the Woman in Proverbs 31:10–31,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 54, no. 1–2 (2000): 97–103, doi:[10.4102/ve.v41i1.1976](https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.1976).

⁹ Jacqueline Vayntrub, “Beauty, Wisdom, and Handiwork in Proverbs 31:10–31,” *Harvard Theological Review* 113, no. 1 (2020): 45–62, doi:[10.1017/S0017816019000348](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000348).



interaction with other agents in the environment is fundamental in her conception and construction of meaning and knowledge. The more her hands are engaged in the material world, the more she creates and knows the world making her wise. Conversely, I also discuss how the same *leitmotif* of the hands similarly characterises the sluggard fool. The fool's (non)employment of the hands and associated tactile and proprioceptive senses due to his slumber explains his foolish reputation.

Embodied Cognition and Intercorporeality

Our interest in the valiant woman's formation of meaning and knowledge is theoretically informed by the discipline of intercorporeality within the field of embodied cognitive science.¹⁰ Through empirical research, this discipline has produced insightful conceptual theories in understanding human interaction and cognition.¹¹ Essentially, this discipline stands in critical relationship against the separation between mind and body in matters of human cognition, meaning, emotions, communication, and behaviour. Intercorporeality opposes conceiving human cognition as mental exercise of the human mind floating in the air without the perceptive corporeal body. Accordingly, the whole body constitutes the multimodal set of faculties for generating knowledge, communication, and behaviour.

In addition, embodied cognition and intercorporeality disapprove of envisaging human cognition as mental representation or symbols like that of information processing theory (IPT) of the input and output of a computer.¹² Instead, intercorporeality argues for the direct and immediate generation of knowing from the body's sensorimotor and affective resources, at least in a nonpropositional sense.¹³ Contrary to information processing theory, embodied cognition is constituted by the unity of human corporeality, for the body shares the same neural assets and patterns in the human mind/brain. Embodied cognition likewise reexamines the classic Western approach in privileging the eyes and associated visual perception over other senses in the knowing enterprise.¹⁴

¹⁰ Christine Meyer, Jürgen Streeck, and J. Scott Jordan, eds., *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Margaret Wilson, "Six Views of Embodied Cognition," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 9, no. 4 (2002): 625–36, doi:[10.3758/BF03196322](https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03196322).

¹² J. Scott Jordan, "Forward-Looking Aspects of Perception-Action Coupling as a Basis for Embodied Communication," *Discourse Processes* 46, no. 2–3 (2009): 127–44, doi:[10.1080/01638530902728959](https://doi.org/10.1080/01638530902728959).

¹³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* with a New Afterword (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), doi:[10.7208/chicago/9780226470993.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226470993.001.0001). Kevin Schilbrack, "Embodied Critical Realism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42, no. 1 (2014): 167–79, doi:[10.1111/jore.12050](https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12050).

¹⁴ Zdravko Radman, ed., *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).



Prioritizing visual perception in epistemology is deemed limited and even misguided.¹⁵

Another thesis in intercorporeality is the centrality of the body of the human knower and the interaction of that body with coagents as *compresence* in the cognitive world environment.¹⁶ Knowing is not executed in abstraction and engendered in isolation from one's bodily experience, from other bodies, or from the natural world environment.¹⁷ The natural and human environments are regarded as coagents with dynamic *affordances* and as instrumental in developing the cognitive neural structures, memory, resources, and frames for knowing. James Gibson speaks of the affordances "of a physical environment are what it offers the [animal], what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill."¹⁸ The locus of human experience, meaning, thought, value, communication, and action is situated and generated by body-environment interactions.

The nature, intentionality, and frequency of the corporeal engagement and interaction of agents is another crucial element. Intercorporeality experts argue that the creation of meaning emerges through recursive frequency rather than merely a single engagement creating a series of coordinated and interplaying activities. An interbody interaction spectrum locates the fully engaged body on one end and the minimally engaged body on the other end. In Jens Loenhoff's categorization, this spectrum is labelled as "strong and weak forms of intercorporeality."¹⁹ To be sure, there are scholars representing both ends and in between the continuum. This essay subscribes to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeality and Susan Stuart's *enkinesthetic* of the body's full embeddedness to its environment. They speak of *enactivism*, that is, how the subject or agent is repeatedly and variously "coupled" or "embedded" with the environment.²⁰

¹⁵ Matthew Ratcliffe, "Touch and the Sense of Reality," in *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013): 130–58.

¹⁶ Compresence is defined as follows: "In our engagement with other bodies, we are able not only to embody the other while the other simultaneously embodies us." Meyer, Streeck, and Jordan, "Introduction," in *Intercorporeality*, xx.

¹⁷ Jürgen Streeck, Charles Goodwin, and Curtis LeBaron, "Embodied Interaction in the Material World: An Introduction," in *Embodied Interaction: Language and the Body in the Material World*, ed. Jürgen Streeck, Charles Goodwin, and Curtis LeBaron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 1–26.

¹⁸ James Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986), 127.

¹⁹ Jens Loenhoff, "Intercorporeality as a Foundational Dimension of Human Communication," in *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction*, ed. Christine Meyer, Jürgen Streeck, J. Scott Jordan (Oxford University Press, 2017): 37.

²⁰ Enkinaesthesia is defined as "the reciprocally affective neuromuscular dynamical flows and muscle tensions that are felt and enfolded between coparticipating agents." Susan A. J. Stuart, "Privileging Exploratory Hands: Prehension, Apprehension, Comprehension," in *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013): 330, doi:[10.7551/mitpress/9083.003.0023](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9083.003.0023); see also Stuart, "Enkinaesthesia: The Essential Sensuous Background



The “Hands” of the Valiant Woman in Proverbs 31:10–31

One striking feature of the acrostic poem of Proverbs 31:10–31 is how the hand or palm of the valiant woman is employed as the overarching conceptual and compositional device as listed below.²¹

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands. (31:13)

She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. (31:16)

She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong. (31:17)

Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates. (31:31)

Besides the above lines, Proverbs 31:19–20 stand out because the hands and palms govern the chiasmic structure of the two verses.

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands [palms] hold the spindle.

She opens her hand [palm] to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy. (31:19–20)

The uses of hands (*yad*) and palm (*kap*) may be construed as literary defamiliarization. However, there is more to these uses than meets the eye. The ensuing pages will show how the uses provide a subtle nuance to these two terminologies. There is also an explicit reference to her forearm (*z^{er}ôa^c*) in 31:17. Besides the explicit references to physicality, other poetic lines describe activities and skills where hands and palms are inferred. Of note, whenever the hand is invoked, the poem assumes the participation of the woman’s whole body including the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, constituting the so-called *multimodality* of resources in fully switched-on *plenisient*.²²

for Co-Agency,” in *Knowing without Thinking: Mind, Action, Cognition and the Phenomenon of the Background – New Directions in Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 167–86, doi:[10.1057/9780230368064_9](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230368064_9); and Stuart, “Feeling Our Way: Enkinaesthetic Enquiry and Immanent Intercorporeality,” in *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction*, ed. Christine Meyer, Jürgen Streeck, J. Scott Jordan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 104–40, doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.003.0003](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.003.0003).

²¹ Unless noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV).

²² Stuart, “Enkinaesthesia,” 170. *Plenisient* means the senses are fully switched on proprioceptively, kinesthetically, visually, auditorily, tactilely, etc.



As I unpack the haptic sense and kinesthetic value of the hands in meaning making, I am reminded of what are thought to be Immanuel Kant's words: "the hand is the window to the mind."²³ The hands receive thousands of sensory stimuli from the skin on the front and back of the hands, the fingers, fingertips, and the interphalangeal joints—such that they can capture complex and detailed information and feeling. As Mountcastle states, "the human hand is an organ of considerable virtuosity."²⁴ The hands are considered to be perceptual organs wielded "for sensing, exploring and discovering the world around us."²⁵ The eyes and ears receive stimuli from a distance or indirectly, but the reaching, grasping, and touching hands are direct and corporeal.²⁶ Further touching with hands is the only access to the reality that creates a sense of belongingness.²⁷

Cognitive Environments and the Valiant Woman

Important to embodied corporeal knowing is the agent's bodily interaction with the real-world environment, either with other human agents or with nonhuman objects (plants, textiles, bread, etc.). The real world has a dual function: it serves as (1) the co-source or coagent with affordances, and (2) the goal or object of human knowing. Since my emphasis is on the hands, unlike the eyes, knowing through the hands is not merely about accurate representation of the world but knowledge as "a tool to manipulate and cope with the world" as well.²⁸ Thus, pragmatist scholars vehemently assert that cognition is for action. Nevertheless, insofar as the poem is rich with cognitive environments, I have structured the discussion according to the situated cognitive environments the valiant woman inhabits. And in each environment, I highlight the meaning generated and the underlying cognitive processes involved as a function of that environment. Below are seven types of knowing environments with the relevant meaning created.

²³ Or as Kant is quoted by Richard Sennett, *Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 149.

²⁴ Vernon Mountcastle, *The Sensory Hand: Neural Mechanisms of Somatic Sensation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 1.

²⁵ Elena Cuffari and Jürgen Streeck, "Taking the World by Hand: How Some Gestures Mean," in *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction*, ed. Christine Meyer, Jürgen Streeck, J. Scott Jordan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 175, doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.001.0001).

²⁶ Stuart argues, "Our hands are the richly-sensitive instruments with which we begin the sensory enquiry of lived experience, and it is through their feeling-engagement that we construct our world." Stuart, "Privileging Exploratory Hands," 329.

²⁷ Ratcliffe argues that only with touch is there the possibility of the reality that is "there" or "present" and posits, "Hence, touch has a kind of phenomenological primacy over the other senses. Without vision or hearing, one would inhabit a very different world, whereas one would not have a world at all without a touch." Ratcliffe, "Touch and the Sense of Reality," 131.

²⁸ Svend Brinkmann and Lene Tanggaard, "Toward an Epistemology of the Hand," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29 (2010): 253.



Marriage and Family Household Environments

The Proverbs 31:10–31 poem begins within the marital affective environment wherein the husband *trusts* his wife. The explicit reference to the husband's heart (*leb*) encapsulates both the cognitive²⁹ and emotional sense of trust. Consequently, the woman requites (*gml*, “repay” or “recompense”) this trust by doing good instead of harm to him as seen below.

The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain [booty].
She does[rewards] him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life. (31:11–12)

Susan Stuart's affective kinaesthetic and enkinaesthetic theory explains the underlying principle between the affective coordinated interaction and the reciprocity between the two agents. Trust is an emotional and abstract feeling yet experienced bodily as “bodily resonance.”³⁰ The husband's trust in her is corporeally experienced by the woman to elicit a reciprocal response from her. He trusts his wife for providing and managing the family's economic resources, albeit strangely described as war booty or plunder here.³¹ And in appropriate exchange, the wife does good to the husband implicitly through her hands. The hands of the woman externalise her personal affective response, thereby constructing the blending of reciprocal and moral conceptual maps of “does him good, and not harm.” This trust is detailed by “all the days of her life” indicating the recursive and dynamic “interaffectivity” between the two.

Still in the household environment, the composite of the temporal and spatial environments of the woman are evident:

She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls. (31:15)

²⁹ In the Hebrew Bible, the heart (*leb*) is also understood as the seat of the human brain/mind (Exod 14:5; Deut 29:4, 3 [MT]; 1 Kgs 8:17; Ps 140:2 [MT]; Prov 12:20, 23).

³⁰ Thomas Fuchs, “Intercorporeality and Interaffectivity,” in *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction*, ed. Christine Meyer, Jürgen Streeck, J. Scott Jordan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 3–23, doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.001.0001).

³¹ Yoder reads this verse as the business-like dynamics of marriage. “The husband trusts her not because he loves her but because he never lacks for ‘loot.’ His plunder from what she brings home makes him a wealthy man.” Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 78. Fox writes, “the husband trusts her and allows her to go about her business freely that he does not lack for gain” Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 892–93.



Moving around the house at night requires a different set of sensibilities for the nocturnal physical environment. Presumably, she gropes and “feels her way” around the house in the dark. The proprioception of the hands more than the eyes is stimulated, shaping the sense and prehension of movement, sensing, orientation, and location.³² Her haptic sense acts as her vision.³³ Presumably by the light of an oil lamp, her pair of hands engages in cooking activities, presupposing her culinary know-how. The verbal giving of instructions to her female servants indicates she has planned out the intended tasks for the whole day. This planning is driven by “intentional perception” such that her visual perception is “coupled with forward-looking action.”³⁴

Moreover in Proverbs 31:27, the woman is summed up as follows: “She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.” The household itself bears affordances perceived by her visual perception (*tsapah*, “watch closely”). The language implies that upon seeing her household, her bodily assets trigger the so-called *centrifugal emotive component*, moving her body into action as she thoughtfully executes plans for her family’s well-being.³⁵ Jordan states, “Perception is inherently intentional in the sense that it is about what one can do with a stimulus.”³⁶ Although no distinct, physical, tactile touch is evident in the text, the woman’s attention given to her family is explained by Stuart’s so-called *indirect touch* of the hand, which “can be achieved through a look where one becomes the object of someone else’s attention and experience.”³⁷

Emotion is a social phenomenon which is a product of sequential and recurring practices in a situated interaction and involves “not just facial expressions but relevant actions and bodily displays of the parties involved.”³⁸ Moreover, “Touch plays a crucial role

³² Stuart, “Privileging Exploratory Hands,” 335; Nicholas P. Holmes, “Hand-Centered Space, Hand-Centered Attention and the Control of Movement,” in *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013): 57–75.

³³ Mountcastle, *Sensory Hand*, 468–70.

³⁴ Perception-action coupling includes a theory of event coding which asserts (1) actions are planned in terms of the distal effects they are to produce; and (2) action planning and perception utilise overlapping neural resources.

Jordan, “Forward-Looking Aspects,” 127.

³⁵ The same lexeme is used and paired with “eyes” in Prov 15:3 with Yahweh as subject: “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.”

³⁶ Jordan, “Forward-Looking Aspects,” 130.

³⁷ Stuart talks about direct and indirect touch. “Direct touch includes the physical touch of a caress, a pat on the back, a hug, or the rebuff of the shrugged pulling away from contact or the strike of a hand. Example of indirect touch includes: an unspoken admonishment of a look or a wagging finger, a papal blessing which can shrive us of our sins, a friend’s wave from a departing train, the touch of eyes that meet across a room, or in the way words and language can alter the way we feel.” Stuart, “Privileging Exploratory Hands,” 329–30.

³⁸ Cognitive science explains emotional stance as the product of “sequential organization of actions in a situated interaction.” To be more specific, emotional stance is built through the use of the following: “(1) sequential position, (2) resources provided by the setting where action occurs, and (3)



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in intimacy, attachment, bonding, emotional communication and compliance in humans.”³⁹ Thus the valiant woman’s engagement with her husband and family members are corporeally and meaningfully communicated to fellow agents and intersubjectively reciprocated by the superlative praise of the family members, as seen below.

Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.” (31:28–29)

Natural Environment

The valiant woman is located at her natural and material environment. She transforms a natural agricultural field into a real estate vineyard environment.

She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself [loins] with strength,
and makes her arms strong. (31:16–17)

For pragmatists, worldly physical materials are “objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things *had* before they are things cognized.”⁴⁰ They are objective knowledge achieved by perception. Also, pragmatists maintain that cognition is for action and perception is for planning. Thus in using the linguistic marker “consider” (*zāmam*), the valiant woman *perceives* the economic *affordances* of the piece of land with the intent to purchase it to plant a vineyard (viticulture). The forward-looking perception involved here goes even further—presumably this vineyard is purposed to produce wine and eventually supply a wine making business. The blending of vinification and business knowing is not inconceivable here.

The act of planting a vineyard is externalised by the description of her strong hands and arms. Manual viticulture involves the whole body—her strong loins (*moṭnayîm*)

artful orchestration of a range of embodied actions.” Marjorie H. Goodwin and Charles Goodwin, “Emotion within Situated Activity,” in *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 239, 247.

³⁹ Marjorie Harness Goodwin, “Haptic Sociality: The Embodied Interactive Constitution of Intimacy Through Touch,” in *Intercorporeality: Emerging Socialities in Interaction*, ed. Christine Meyer, Jürgen Streeck, J. Scott Jordan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 95, doi:[10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210465.001.0001).

⁴⁰ Brinkmann and Tanggaard, “Toward an Epistemology of the Hand,” 246.



bending and squatting. In this viticulture cognitive environment, she makes her hands dirty. Her outstretched hands register the prehension of hard and soft soil, the pressure in grasping the trowels and cultivators to till the land, and the spears to plant the grapevines. The same intercorporeal analysis may be applied to manipulation of the grapes in vinification. In sum, the hands are engaged in complex locomotion; the more the motion, the more neuro-mental patterns are initiated and activated.

Creative Environment

Here the valiant woman is embedded in a workshop cognitive environment to produce yarn and garments manually.

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands. (31:13)

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle. (31:19)

The combination of the woman's *seeking posture* for wool and flax (inferring her eyes) and the outstretched and agile movements of her hands externalises her emotional stance of willingness and eagerness (*ḥēḇeṣ*) in this production activity. Her tactile hands are fully *plenisentient* to engage with her creative world.

The woman is *enacting* with her tools and materials to make wool and linen yarn. Similarly, these inanimate tools (the spindle and distaff) and raw materials (wool and flax) possess *affordances* for her to manipulate in the context of a creative environment. Using a visual map, the hand takes on "the center of the mental map which allows a rapid hand-object interaction to occur and hand-centered focus of attention."⁴¹ In analysing the meaning-making processes involved, I adapt the analytical method of Richard Sennett presented in *Craftsman*.⁴² The knowing that emerges out of the spinning process comprises the following: (1) the gripping of the tool involving pressure, force, and intentionality; (2) the state of balancing and cooperation between two hands—one gripping the raw flax or wool, the other the tool; (3) the intertwining of the materials to form yarn; (4) the process of trial and error anticipated in the creative process; and (5) the repetition of movement or action. Sennett maintains that the embodied experience of the raw material must involve the recursive trial and error processes. In the process of spinning, she encounters resistance in such a way that it makes her rethink the craft-making procedure, thereby making the vital hand and procedural adjustments. The

⁴¹ Holmes, "Hand-Centered Space," 57.

⁴² Sennett, *Craftsman*.



repetition of the creative process creates a rhythm such that she moves from *no* knowledge to *tacit* knowledge to *explicit* knowledge about the art and science of spinning. The process develops into a technique or Sennett's so-called "craftsmanship." Brinkmann and Tanggaard sum up the creative process beautifully:

We would argue that experimentation, training and an adequate amount of feed-back can be viewed as "a pedagogy of reiteration," as the basis of creative retransformations within an epistemology of the hand. No human being is able to be creative or original out of the blue, although this idea may serve as a captivating fantasy for the lazy person. The basis for creativity is not flexibility in a vacuum or simply "thinking out of the box," but is found in the ability to "dig deep" within a particular field, which requires considerable time and hard work.⁴³

The valiant woman's corporeal experience with the spindle and wool constitutes practical meaning and skill. The more complex the movement, the more complex the sensory and motor stimuli. The enactive engagement "metamorphosises" into textile products.

Proverbs 31:22 records her hands skilled in making coverings and clothing of fine linen and purple. Just as knowledge is about what we do (action) and what happens (consequence), the valiant woman applies her manufacturing knowledge to weaving fabric from her spun wool and making polished clothing. Her acquisition of knowledge and the objectification of knowledge occur in a dialectical relationship.

She makes herself coverings;

her clothing is fine linen and purple. (31:22)

Sennett aptly talks about the manoeuvring of the hands that requires learning the skill of force of grip and release. In order to make fine linen royalty coloured purple, texture cognition occurs when the hands, particularly the palms, learn to control grasping and sensing. It is noteworthy that the same hands are used first with brute force to plant a vineyard, then to spin the yarn out of raw materials and dye it purple, perhaps using fruit juice, and finally to use gentle and delicate movements and sensitive touch to weave and sew fine linen garments. The various pressures and movements through the wrists, palms, and fingers of her hands are mirrored in her neural fine motor system. Overall, the manipulation of the hands of the woman yields prelinguistic somatosensory sensing of agility, balance, coordination, force, sense of timing, and speed.

Temporal-Climate Environment

The valiant woman's forward-looking corporeal knowing is stimulated by the temporal and natural climate of snow.

⁴³ Brinkmann and Tanggaard, "Toward an Epistemology of the Hand," 252.



She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson. (31:21)

She perceives the snow from afar and acts on this perception to make clothing. The coloured crimson or dark red clothing indicates high quality material as well as thoughtfulness and advanced preparation. The imagined bodily affective experience of cold and wintry snow serves as the cognitive stimuli for her to make thick, warm, and durable clothing for her family. Once again, her perceptive knowing becomes the tool to manipulate and cope with the snow environment.

Neuroscience informs us that the neural coding mechanism for perception of an action and planning or anticipation are the same. Streeck and Jordan call this as a “mirror system” which “renders action perception as inherently forward-looking: To perceive the action of others is to have their actions drive one’s own brain through the planning states for those same actions.”⁴⁴ Neurologically, *mirror neurons* are found in the human brain.⁴⁵ Thus in Proverbs 31:25, the “time to come,” albeit not yet presently experienced, drives the valiant woman to action.

Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come. (31:25)

Her bodily perception has a capacity to see and experience beyond the present and immediate. She can laugh because she has prepared well for the challenges and threats of danger that lie ahead. The woman is metaphorically clothed with strength and dignity, and this strength and dignity emerges out of conscientiousness.

Travel and Spatial Environments

The woman’s body movement and experiential interaction are not confined to her own narrow geographical space of household and city. We see her on the move traveling from distant places to bring food for people.

She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away. (31:14)

First, we imagine her strong arms carrying a basket of food. This image generates the

⁴⁴ Streeck and Jordan, “Projection and Anticipation: The Forward-Looking Nature of Embodied Communication,” *Discourse Processes* 46, no. 2–3 (2009): 96, doi:[10.1080/01638530902728777](https://doi.org/10.1080/01638530902728777).

⁴⁵ Harry Farmer and Manos Tsakiris, “Touching Hands: A Neurocognitive Review of Intersubjective Touch,” in *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental*, ed. Zdravko Radman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013): 103–30, especially 114–15. They speak of mirror neurons in the brain of Macaque monkeys.



proprioceptive differentiation between heavy and light lifting. Second, this journey puts her into a travel environment requiring a set of travel-related cognition. She physically travels to distant places and regions presumably on foot, perhaps even by sea. Traveling on foot places her whole body and multimodal senses to work and in recursive fashion. Travel generates proprioceptive stimulations in different sensory channels as raw elements for the brain to process. This bodily travel necessarily taps in her neural structure the preconceptual forms of orientation and location—of what is land and sea, what are rough and smooth paths, what is near and far, what is up and down, what is back and front, and what is centre and periphery. The neural structures of source-path-goal serve as the basis for metaphorical conception and language.⁴⁶

Economic, Social, and Moral Environments

The body of the woman is embedded in an interpersonal-entrepreneurial world. She makes business out of her own creative and agricultural products like garments and sashes.

She perceives [savours] that her merchandise is profitable.

Her lamp does not go out at night. (31:18)

She makes linen garments and sells them;

she supplies the merchant with sashes. (31:24)

The merchants and the woman are coagents constructing a business transactional environment. As such, business activity involves the movement of the hands depicted in the “giving and taking” of merchandise from one person to another and vice versa. This giving and taking demonstrates “the coordination between agents toward the attainment of a shared goal” of trading.⁴⁷ To be sure, this bodily movement is reflected in the neuromuscular resources of both agents. She possesses an enterprising hand in taking and giving, which forms and constitutes the abstract concept of business as exchange and trading. Moreover, she engages not in simple barter trade (one-to-one mutual exchange), but she gains a profit. In employing the sense of taste (*ta'am*) to speak of the profit, she personally and internally savours the appetitive sense of advantage from the business transaction that cannot be shared with others.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 99–100.

⁴⁷ Jordan calls this coordination “coupling of intentional contexts.” Jordan, “Forward-Looking Aspects,” 138.

⁴⁸ Meredith J. Warren, “Tasting the Little Scroll: A Sensory Analysis of Divine Interaction in Revelation 1:8–10,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40, no. 1 (2017): 101–19, doi:[10.1177/0142064X17723489](https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X17723489).



Moreover, the woman's interactions with other social beings show care and generosity to the poor and needy, generating the abstract concept of empathy.

She opens her hand to the poor,

and reaches out her hands to the needy. (31:20)

Multiple participants build action together in a situated interaction, typically by using different kinds of semiotic resources that mutually elaborate each other. Having sensed the impoverished affective qualities of the poor, either real or imagined, the woman felt a pathological sense of compassion. Using her "affectively laden" hands, she stretches out and opens her hands to a poor person in a socio-emotional-moral environment.⁴⁹ This body movement builds on and shares the same body movement and networks with the concept of business defined as exchange and trading discussed above. However, the socio-emotional-moral giving and generosity diverge from the business body resource since nothing is taken back in exchange for what is given to the poor. The hands as centre were full when they were stretched out but empty when they return to the body of the woman. Fauconnier and Turner explain this phenomenon as blending of mental schemes from the domains of business and moral ethics of generous giving.⁵⁰

Consequently, Stuart maintains that the human body is "pre-ontologically a universal non-individuated being" in its primordial nature of experience, and only later did a human become an "individuated being." She conceives this individuation as "a derivative and in fact, artificial."⁵¹ Hence, the valiant woman is pre-ontologically constituted with social affective senses. Her "affectively laden" hands in caring for family household, generous hands to the poor, and hands in fair business transactions are reciprocated by words of praise from her community at the city gates: "Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates" (Prov 31:31). This praise assumes her interaction with the community is equally meaningful and consequential. Stuart calls the enactive causality between agents as "reciprocally recursive" and "radical embodiment," not simply bidirectional. This reciprocity is an instantiation of Stuart's so-called *intentional transgression* and intercorporeality among the valiant woman, the family, the socially poor, the business partners, and the elders in the city gates.⁵²

Linguistic Environment

Finally, the valiant woman's thoughts and knowledge are externalised propositionally into

⁴⁹ Stuart, "Feeling Our Way," 51–72.

⁵⁰ Fauconnier and Turner, *Conceptual Blending, Form and Meaning*, 58–60.

⁵¹ Stuart, "Feeling Our Way," 64.

⁵² Stuart, "Feeling Our Way," 61.



a linguistic world. Use of language is an externalisation of “hidden, highly abstract cognitive construction.”⁵³ Her thoughts and knowledge are exteriorised through the use of formal concept and language: “The wise words of her mouth inform the deeds of her hands and *mutates mutandis*, the wise deeds of her hands give credibility to the wise teachings of her mouth.”⁵⁴

She opens her mouth with wisdom,

and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. (31:26)

The capacity to speak wisdom and teach kindness are advanced cognitive knowing that evolved from her deep bodily engagement with the world. She has not only pre-grasped (prehension) the material world but has also reached the level of abstract comprehension of the life world as an outcome of her continuous experience with the world. Hence, she articulates her embodied experience and understanding in linguistic forms and categories. Her wisdom is abstracted from the blending and integration of mental maps arranged by her interaction with heterogenous domains and experience of her family and business partners, and social, creative, and material worlds.⁵⁵ As she speaks both wisdom (understood as analytical, propositional, and representational knowledge of the world), and kindness (an affective thought toward other agents), she is a well-rounded human being with integrated grasp of the real world.

The Embodied Hands of the Sluggard Fool in Proverbs

The above discussion becomes more compelling when the valiant woman is read in comparison with the sluggard. Proverbs 31:27 validates this comparison since she is differentiated from someone who eats “the bread of idleness.” Her whole bodily senses are active and busy, unlike the sluggard fool in Proverbs.⁵⁶ A thorough study of this sluggard fools shows that fools have two iconic gestures: First, they fold their hands to rest.

A little sleep, a little slumber,

a little folding of the hands to rest. (Prov 6:10)

⁵³ Scott K. Liddell, “Blended Spaces and Deixis in Sign Language,” in *Language and Gesture*, ed. David McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 353, doi:[10.1017/CBO9780511620850.021](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620850.021).

⁵⁴ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs 15–31*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 528.

⁵⁵ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, “Conceptual Blending, Form and Meaning,” *Recherches en communication* 19 (2003): 57–86, doi:[10.14428/rec.v19i19.48413](https://doi.org/10.14428/rec.v19i19.48413).

⁵⁶ “Lazy” and “fool” are definitely not synonymous but they are coreferential, referring separately to the behavioural and cognitive character of the same person.



Second, they bury their hands in a dish rather than feed themselves.

The lazy person buries a hand in the dish,

and will not even bring it back to the mouth. (Prov 19:24)

“Folding of the hands to rest” and burying the “hand in the dish” are body symbols that express meaning. With the two gestures, the lazy-bones may unwittingly, but perhaps more wittingly, “reveal aspects of *his* inner mental process and points of view towards events when these are not articulated in speech.”⁵⁷ The iconic gestures communicate two meanings in the lazy-bone’s mind. While *upward or raised up* hand gestures suggest actions and the activities of grasping, reaching, or cupping, the *downward gesture* of the hand buried inside a dish communicates rest and inactivity. Moreover, the folded hands generate the affective affordance of defiance and reluctance, to be contrasted to the valiant woman’s outstretched and willing hands. The lazy fool’s inactivity is marked by refusal to lift up the hands to put food into the mouth. Just as the hands can represent any physical object, folding the hands to rest and burying the hand in a dish are *externalisations* of the refusal to engage in work. Proverb 21:25 makes my reading explicit: “The craving of the lazy person is fatal, for lazy hands refuse to labor.” Consequently in Proverbs 24:30–31, the hands of lazy fools are so withheld that their vineyard is “overgrown with thorns,” “covered with nettles,” and surrounded by unrepaired broken walls (v. 31). This recurrent inactivity in maintaining the land is corresponded in the neural structures of the brain.

Furthermore, the lazy hands are supplemented by related imagery of the sluggard in sleeping mode and the associated consequences as listed below.

A little sleep, a little slumber,

a little folding of the hands to rest,

and poverty will come upon you like a robber,

and want, like an armed warrior. (Prov 6:10–11)

Laziness brings on deep sleep;

an idle person will suffer hunger. (Prov 19:15)

Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty;

open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread. (Prov 20:13)

Implicit in sleeping is shutting off the whole somatosensory senses. The sleeping body is

⁵⁷ David McNeill, *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal About Thought* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 109, emphasis original. “Hands construct and impose meanings (as organs of making) because they disclose and gather meanings in their intentional, world-situated, purposive actions.” Cuffari and Streeck, “Taking the World by Hand,” 175.



completely depleted of *affordances* for meaningful interaction. The sleeping body in extended period is tantamount to the defiant body. Any embodied interaction with the family, social, natural, and cognitive environments is rendered impossible and absent.

To be fair, one verse describes lazy people as rotating their sleeping body like hinges of a door (Prov 26:14). The body of the sluggard has physical contact with the bed in a sleeping cognitive environment, and the frequency is recursive. However, such bodily contact does not constitute substantial contact.⁵⁸ Technically, sleeping and eating may be rendered as legitimate cognitive environments as the lazy fools are corporeally embedded with the bed and the dish. However, they comparatively fall short of the variety of cognitive environments and the dynamic interplay corporeally experienced by the valiant woman. The sluggard's bodily movement is embedded in a relatively dull and inconsequential sleeping environment. The inactivity of the sluggard adversely affects perception and knowing as the whole body is *not in plenisentient mode*. Insofar as knowing is a function of bodily interactive movement, the lesser the movement, the lesser the knowing.

Moreover, emotional display of the body cannot be examined in isolation but in relevant social and natural environments. Thus, the "affective-laden" sleeping body communicates emotions albeit negatively toward the social and natural environments. Closed eyes embody disinterest in whatever social or natural interaction. Since this state of slumber is innate in character, the sleeper's corporeal experience and knowing of the world is curtailed, which explains why fools are depicted as self-absorbed and having no social and emotional skills (Prov 12:15; 18:2); as quick-tempered (12:16; 14:17); as lacking receptivity and sensitivity (17:7, 10, 12); as lacking economic and business management skills indicated by lavish spending (21:20; 30:22); as reckless (14:16); and linguistically as one who speaks folly instead of wisdom (12:23; 14:7; 15:2) and hates knowledge (1:22, 29).

Thus if not corrected, the slothfulness of fools jeopardises their obtainment of meaning and knowledge, rendering them foolish by Proverbs' standards (27:22). A lazy fool will not have the necessary knowing to manipulate and cope with the real material world. Neurologically, neuromuscular assets and structures for sleeping and resting hands may register strong signals, but the other movement and activity related sensory patterns will be weak if not completely absent.

In sum, the sluggard's slumber mode and lack of active engagement with the outside world appropriately supports the embodied cognition thesis that bodily interaction with the world is an indispensable ingredient in human cognition, meaning, and communication. Knowledge, values, and wisdom are not floating mental work nor gained only through seeing with one's eyes like those of the fools, much less produced by

⁵⁸ Ratcliffe, "Touch and the Sense of Reality," 130–58.



dreaming of and living in an imaginary world environment when in deep slumber. By contrast, the more the valiant woman's hands are engaged in manual labour, the more she enters into the continuous process of increasing her multimodal creation of meaning and knowledge of the world in which she lives—making her wise. The more interplay, the more sensory stimuli are generated; the more complex the interplay, the more complex the somatosensory stimuli and mental patterns formed.

Final Remarks

Listening to the counsel of wise parents and sages is the primary way of acquiring knowledge and wisdom in Proverbs.⁵⁹ Lest misunderstood, listening is not merely the hearing of sound but it is tantamount to obeying with one's hands and whole body. The above discussion brings to light the central place of the hands in the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom, a thesis currently absent in Proverbs scholarship. Diligently working using the hands in assorted cognitive environments yields personal and deeper intellectual, social, affective, and experiential knowing which is different from simply knowing through hearing or hearsay. After all, knowledge and wisdom are too vast and profound to be grasped only through the ears.

Unlike the sluggard fool whose posture and disposition displays apathy and lethargy in a monotonous environment and consequently yields a dull mind, the valiant woman of Proverbs 31:10–31 is undoubtedly a *homo faber*. She may not be physically charming, but her active and flourishing life makes her genuinely human—alive, wise, and productive. She has a meaningful and eventful family, social, business, and creative life. Her practical skills, planning, and foresight which are pivotal in wisdom theology reverberate in the different realms of her life.

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⁵⁹ Presumably these wise and traditional teachings were first rooted in the parents' direct observation and personal and bodily experience of the world.



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