

REVIEW ESSAY

The Global Brain and Its Hemispheric Separation

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The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World, 2nd expanded edn, by Iain McGilchrist, Yale University Press, London, 2019, 616pp, ISBN-10: 0300245920 / ISBN-13: 978-0300245929, price (paperback) £14.99

Dr Iain McGilchrist – psychiatrist, former professor of poetry at Oxford and a fellow of All Souls College, highly regarded for his definitive study of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, *The Master and his Emissary*¹ – has now brought out a revised version of the same title and length, 462 pages of main text, to expand on and look more deeply into conclusions that he reached more than a decade ago. It is a very long book, but so informed, fascinating and elegantly written that it has been a delight to read again.

First noted by Greek physicians of the 3rd century, the split brain has been a topic of popular speculation ever since. McGilchrist's academic and psychological prestige brought it into academe as a subject of urgent enquiry; I bought my first copy at a meeting of the Scientific and Medical Network. His concern in bringing out this second edition is that Western culture has so overemphasised and prolonged the left hemispheric analytical process, diminishing the role of the right hemisphere, that it can no longer produce the solutions needed to solve the very complex problems we are confronting today. The title of the book

refers to a Sufi story in which the master, representing the right hemisphere, is usurped by his own emissary, representing the left brain, who, because he is unable to experience, recognise or deal with the complexity of the world, believes that his own clear but limited understanding is superior.

For those who have not read the first book, nature's intention in shaping the bi-lateral brain is to provide it with the means to keep watch globally on the world-as-a-whole (right hemisphere) and at the same time, its moment-by-moment changes (left hemisphere). His example is of a bird watching attentively for predators with one side of the brain whilst simultaneously pecking seed from a flower with the other; the scrutiny of the environment is the more complex operation. This mindful attention involves new information entering through the right hemisphere, to be globally processed. Thus, our first encounter is with things in their wholeness, seeing the bigger picture. The message is then passed to the left to be serially processed, one thing at a time, which brings the possibility of conscious recognition and analysis, pinning things down for better

manipulation of the world. It finally returns to the global context of the right for further consideration and integration of meaning. This ingenious design of weighted oscillation between right and left enables us to achieve maximum flexibility and complexity of thought.

The right hemisphere mediates all our attention most of the time because it is global, aware of everything at once, whereas the left hemisphere covers focussed, analytical thinking. The function of the corpus callosum, which joins the hemispheres together, is really to hold them apart, to inhibit communication between them so that each can get on with its own task. The role of the left hemisphere (the Emissary) is essentially informational; the right (the Master) has the much more complex task of ongoing decision-making, which requires that it remain in perpetual computation and observation. It cannot therefore become conscious; it is always in the state of pre-conscious processing prior to selection to awareness.

Each hemisphere offers a different form of concentration: the left thinks in what McGilchrist describes as an autistic way – narrow, tense and focussed on outcome (picking the seeds) – whereas the right must remain open and relaxed, seeing as big a picture as possible, and deeply understanding the meaning of words so as to form a plan of action. As in martial arts, relaxation enables it to remain acutely attentive to the slightest movement, change and subtle, shifting implications. With the left, we take action, closing on an idea to immobilise something previously fleeting or ambiguous so that it can be concretised, defined and interpreted in the light of what is already known. McGilchrist's fear is that centuries of rationalism have compromised this delicate balance.

The book begins with fascinating accounts of interaction with patients with right-hemispheric lesions who behave in bizarre ways because of the damage to their means to self-awareness and self-control. For example, a psychotic patient in retreat after right-hemispheric damage denies the arm that can no longer be moved, regarding it as a foreign body trespassing in the bed beside him. Another

patient, who insisted he was perfectly well, neglected to shave or clothe the left side of his body. They also become irritable and adversarial. Such examples serve to show the intricacy of our systems, and the mayhem that results from damage to the 'wiring'. The normality or default mode is intricate collaboration between both hemispheres, requiring pin-point precision of interactions occurring in fractions of a second at every moment throughout our day, led by the unimaginable sensitivity of the right hemisphere, appropriately called the Master.

But...

Unfortunately, the inbuilt limitations of the left hemisphere, which enable pin-point concentration, speech and language, may allow it to lose awareness of its dependence on the right. It feels secure with its own rationalistic logic (as did Descartes, whom McGilchrist suspects of schizophrenia), which supports the sorting, organising, defining and structuring that stabilise and harness knowledge and understanding. The left hemisphere normally controls the right hand, pinning things down and using them for better manipulation of the world.

Most of the book is concerned with a demonstration of how hemispheric co-operation or imbalance has led to the ups and downs of the history of Europe, including an enlightening analysis of the French Revolution, conceived in the right but implemented by the left with appalling savagery. McGilchrist's claim, and possible reason for his exodus to the Isle of Skye, is that we are now in a place of similar and escalating left dominance.

It was after reading Louis Sass' book *Madness and Modernism*² that McGilchrist became aware of the similarities between modernism and schizophrenia – which is rather like 'having things wrong with one's right hemisphere'. He cited the overconceptual work of Hieronymous Bosch, painter of delusion, bizarre perspectives, and instead of flow, an infinite series of pieces. Strangely, in his paintings, all on the left (controlled by the right hemisphere) tends to be clear but all on the right (controlled by the left hemisphere) is chaotic and distorted. Compare

Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol with Constable and Turner. Our culture is becoming increasingly similar to the schizophrenic brain, which reveals a lack of symmetry, whereas the ancient Chinese understood thousands of years ago that the dichotomy of the brain hemispheres is a unity essential to peaceful life: inflation of one side will inevitably spark a return towards the other, a balancing that is implicit in the yin yang symbol.

As above, the corpus callosum prevents the hemispheres from trespassing on the other's territory, while holding them together so that they can calibrate each other. It is alarming that the corpus callosum appears now to be growing progressively smaller, towards the point of total disconnection – as in the brains of birds and fish. The most asymmetric part of the brain is the right frontal cortex, which enables us to socialise, empathise and co-operate as well as to appreciate irony, humour and the implicit. It has its own unique form of vigilance, which, unlike that of the left hemisphere, is free from judgement, able to adapt to what it is focussed upon in the moment, applying different qualities of attention in different circumstances, which will result in different realities.

Attention is primary: the nature of our attention changes the world we see, and in the light of what we find as a result of the quality of attention we pay, it will change our attention in the future. If you see a person as a mechanism (left hemisphere), that is how they will be. If you hold them in the right hemisphere, feelings and emotions will colour your thought.

The right hemisphere is designed to take in the first, preconceptual grasp of an object, which involves the full periphery of vision, the whole. When we enter a room, we pay global attention, giving ourselves up to possibility, savouring ambiguity, which allows interesting things to arise; 'everything flows'. By contrast, the left seeks for certainty and a quick decision in the interests of survival. It sees the part, not the whole, detests ambiguity, and misses all the finer shades of meaning that the right needs to consider before action is taken. The left needs everything explicit and decontextualised; the right savours the implicit and the embedded. Schizophrenia, or damage to

the right hemisphere, involve a pathological narrowing of attention; things become particulate, separate and fixed.

Of course, for survival, all structures need both. Whenever we look at something new or unknown, we cannot avoid using both structures; the eye constantly changes the context, which radically alters what we see. Looking at sex or religion through the different hemispheres offers two completely different experiences: exploitative in the left, or deeply savouring in the right. All art is contextualised, music most of all: from notes that are distinct and separate, it creates an experience that changes the way we feel and see the world.

Both hemispheres need to categorise, but the left categorises by the presence of characteristics (e.g. chairs have legs), whereas the right groups things together. The left looks at superordinate characteristics such as big or small, whereas the right looks at the subordinate, such as different breeds of dog. The right is where uniqueness lies; McGilchrist's example was the poetry of Hopkins, who celebrated the uniqueness of all things in nature: 'Glory be to God for dappled things'. The right prefers the concrete, and the left, abstraction. In language, the left favours semantics and the right, prosody: McGilchrist's example was the right-hemispheric musicality of rising and falling tones in the interchange between mother and baby, which is fundamental to their bonding.

McGilchrist described the left as the map (language) and the right as the terrain (the pantomime of love). The right is responsible for understanding of others' points of view, for narrative, aesthetic appreciation and all things that 'presence' to us, as opposed to the manic symbolic representations popular today such as smiley face stickers given to children as evidence of teacher approval. Inspirations for radically new ideas and innovations, such as Einstein's theory of relativity from the concept of riding on a sunbeam, or Kekule's dream of the snake eating its own tail, which introduced the concept of the benzene ring, come from the right hemisphere and necessarily have a chaos about them. In his own words, the left hemisphere is the map and the right is the terrain.

The right-hemispheric world was given priority by the ancient wisdom traditions such as the Kaballah, which present a picture of creation that begins with withdrawal, allowing God to create a space. Next, a spark of fire falls into that space; information is sent to the left hemisphere. Finally, there is repair, when the whole picture is restored to a place in which all things can express their true nature. The right-hemispheric approach is implicit in Michelangelo's famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. God is shown to be about to touch the left hand of Adam, making the right hemisphere the first to be sparked into life.

McGilchrist writes of three great upwellings in the Western world of everything that is vital to culture, making great strides in art, sciences, law and organisation; each was followed by decline and reversion to the left brain. When the right declines, the left wanders into what he described as 'lala land'. Great civilisations such as that of ancient Greece rose from right-hemispheric dominance, flourished and blossomed to full height, but then began to decline as the left became more and more dominant. The final part of the book looks at the increasingly psychotic world of today (which is also the subject of McGilchrist's new book, still in the writing, *When the Porcupine is a Monkey*).

The left hemisphere has an exalted view of self and is an inveterate optimist, unable to appreciate the gravity of a situation, whereas the right knows truth and therefore often takes a distressed and worried view. This indicates two entirely self-coherent worlds: in the right, we participate, merging, changing and re-combining to create new conditions. We recognise that everything has contradictory aspects, and every attempt to reflect on the meaning of life must include that awareness, whereas in the left, things are isolated, clear, knowable, separate from each other, and all is open to exploitation. The left has no doubts about its rightness; think of politics, the European Union and the people's urge to leave it.

McGilchrist described the constantly escalating dysfunction of today's society as obsessively hard-working but counterproductive, allowing the same disasters constantly to recur because we fail to learn from them: waging war with intent to achieve

peace, upholding a 'business ethic' that drains all initiative from practitioners, and over-protecting our children to the point where they are no longer safe in the real world, due to abnegation of control by the right hemisphere. When the temporal parietal lobe in the right hemisphere is constantly suppressed, we make wrong decisions because the left has no access to the 'whole picture' and simply goes on re-describing the same phenomenon, at ever lower levels. We rely on rationality, logic, certainty and control at the expense of the more complex qualities of intuition, empathy, curiosity and emotionality; this creates a mildly schizophrenic world.

The Return

In his conclusion, 'The Master Betrayed', McGilchrist sees a nation in terminal decline, having lost its religion and its art, by comparison with the complexity of oriental cultures. All these things would be true (China is an exception only because a dictator murdered all those who practised the oriental balancing art of Chi Gong) and they are related to the left brain, which undoubtedly became dominant in modern culture. However, this does not mean that the situation will persist into the wasteland that he envisages; as he himself pointed out, pendulums necessarily swing. One that has been in progress for some time is the rise of women, thanks to Emmeline Pankhurst, Marie Curie and modern scientists such as Candace Pert, whose discovery of the 'molecules of emotion'³ and the psychosomatic systems of the body provided fundamental concepts essential to developing today's epigenetics, the human ability for mastery over the biology of the body. Because of her work, it is now possible to map precisely the impact of trauma on the brain and its distortion of the various different types of memory.⁴

However, men are undoubtedly foremost in innovation, and although Dr McGilchrist seemed to anticipate a future without any, there can be no doubt now that it is well underway, but was necessarily hidden until ready for patent because vast sums of money are involved. Remember Wilhelm Reich, murdered in a prison cell for his discovery of orgone energy (now very important to counteract 5G that is already a fact of life in

America), and Nikola Tesla who, after his discovery of electricity was stolen by Edison, died penniless in a hotel room.

The new technology will be based on Tesla's further understanding of the mathematical nature of what we call 'physical reality', together with that of Victor Schauburger, who tuned in to the energies, currents and levitational possibilities of water (a predominantly right-hemispheric discovery). Instead of fuel-burning, heat-generating technology based on entropy, both Schauburger and Tesla were thinking in terms of inward-moving, cold-generating centripetal motion to enliven substances. Schauburger's suction turbine invigorates water, making it clean and healthy. Sadly, he was forced to build a flying saucer for the Nazis, who then tried to murder him for his pains. But his invention has now been carried forward by Salvatore Pius, recently patented by the US navy in the form of an anti-gravity machine that can travel through air, space and water.

Other signs of right-hemispheric return are a host of new disciplines in psycho-medical healing, such as *tapping* on the body's meridian points, identified as part of the acupuncture system known to the ancient Chinese. The power of tapping was demonstrated by removing almost instantly the terrible trauma suffered by survivors of genocide in Rwanda. A whole new kinesiological psychology has arisen, initiated by Gary Craig in America and now led by psychiatrist Dr David Feinstein, but still awaits official recognition by a sufficient number of peer-reviewed articles in leading journals.

A new branch of medicine on similar lines is that of heart coherence, defined by the HeartMath Institute in Boulder, Colorado, led by Howard Martin, who is also working with Dr Joe Dispenza, on mapping a new science of electricity and magnetism. These seem to be strong signs of imminent right-hemispheric return, foreseen in 1995 by Dr David R. Hawkins in his book *Power versus Force: the Hidden Determinants of Human Behaviour*.⁵ The Steiner teachings are flourishing around the world, opposed only in UK by a government currently unable to appreciate the necessity of diversity. Lynne McTaggart's most

recent work⁶ traces the immense power of altruism to expand human consciousness and achievement.

The tipping-point seems to have been reached. Today's chaos of coronavirus is being mismanaged by government in a dramatically left-hemispheric way: first, isolating older people, which is far more likely to hurt than help them; secondly, schools and businesses are being temporarily closed down, accompanied by ruinous state handouts to those in employment or recent employment; nothing given to the long-forgotten in greatest poverty. This will inevitably trigger furious criticism and a dramatic return to 'common sense', which is to say, the right hemisphere. The new future is already in sight, daily enriched by the detail of current incompetence.

Notes and References

- 1 *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Yale University Press, London, 2009. An example is the work of Carla Hannaford, an American school teacher who applied it in teaching and wrote several books, including *Playing in the Unified Field*, with a foreword by physicist William Tiller of Stanford University; Great River Books, Salt Lake City, 2010.
- 2 Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. / London, 1992.
- 3 C.B. Pert, *Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Feel*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997.
- 4 Explored by NICABM, the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, USA, 2019.
- 5 D.R. Hawkins, *Power versus Force: the Hidden Determinants of Human Behaviour*, Hay House, London 2004.
- 6 See, for example, L. McTaggart, *The Power of Eight: Harnessing the Miraculous Energies of a Small Group to Heal Others, Your Life and the World*, Hay House, London, 2019.

About the contributor

Grethe Hooper Hansen left school-teaching in search of more effective methods in EFL, English as a Foreign Language, and chose Suggestopedia, the creation of

medical doctor Georgi Lozanov. After working in Italy and bringing Dr Lozanov to Florence, she became head of SEAL (the Society for Effective Affective Learning), an international organisation founded to explore Lozanov's work, which is becoming comprehensible only now, as the Western world wakes up to the limitations of scientific materialism.