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**Iain McGilchrist, *The master and his emissary: the divided brain and the making of the Western world* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010)**

**Rupert Read**

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Besides being a brilliant work, this book is an event. McGilchrist lays out a startling, novel account of the importance of the right hemisphere of the brain, and what is more, he turns this into a gripping and dizzying account of the trajectory of the whole of human (but especially of western) civilisation and offers, in the course of this, *the most powerful argument penned by any living author of the importance of the arts and humanities* (including philosophy, properly understood, the social studies and ‘les sciences humaines’). This is an argument—helpfully, by a scientist—for how and why the arts and the humanities offer a quite different and hugely important way of visioning (and reclaiming) our world and for why we cannot rely on science to do this, because trusting science too much is the very root of the problem. The imperial takeover of the world by the scientific world-picture that naturally emerges from the left hemisphere of the brain, once it is off the leash, is what is diagnosed in the title of the book.

The ‘master’ of the title is the brain's right hemisphere and the ‘emissary’, the left. McGilchrist's basic thesis is that most neurological events and processes need to begin in the right hemisphere with its ability to see what is new, and end there too, since this is where we are able to relate, vitally, humanly and as a part of a whole(s). His idea (borrowing his metaphor from an ancient Chinese myth) is that the left hemisphere is essentially there to be the right hemisphere's servant or emissary, but that the left hemisphere, with its obsession with analysis and its tendency to denial, has usurped the leading role and no longer relinquishes the power assigned to it for a specific purpose. Hence, McGilchrist suggests the master has been ever more betrayed by its emissary, especially over the last 200 years.

It is crucial to appreciate that McGilchrist is not committed at all to the probably ill-founded view that the two hemispheres are precise locations for different *things* or even different *activities*. That idea, he nicely suggests, was *itself* an overly left-brained idea. Rather, as McGilchrist carefully explains, with reference to a wealth of

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experimental and clinical evidence, the hemispheres are distinctive for their ways of seeing, their *styles*, the *kind* of world they present.

McGilchrist sees the (increasingly dominant) left hemisphere worldview as seeing the world as if from the perspective, as we might put it, not even of a brain in a vat, but of a left hemisphere of a brain alone in a vat. We are in danger, then, of being even worse off than Descartes would have it.

Here is a typical passage, taken from the latter part of the book, which gives a sense of the scale of McGilchrist's ambition and of the impressively original delivery of his thesis:

“[W]hat if the left hemisphere were able to externalise and make concrete its own workings—so that the realm of the actually existing things apart from the mind consisted to a large extent of its own projections? Then the ontological primacy of right-hemisphere experience would be outflanked, since it would be delivering, not ‘the Other’, but what was already *the world as processed by the left hemisphere*. It would make it hard, and perhaps in time impossible, for the right hemisphere to escape from the hall of mirrors, to reach out to something that truly was ‘Other’ than, beyond, the human mind. // In essence this was the achievement of the Industrial Revolution.” (p.386)

Building on broadly Heideggerian thinking here, McGilchrist takes the measure of the world-picture that the left hemisphere has delivered to us. The re-grounding that the right hemisphere could bring, by way of for instance of reconnecting us to living things and to each other (whether through being in and with nature, or, as McGilchrist himself tends to suggest most often elsewhere in the book, via the arts or via religion) gets lost in such a world-picture. The left brain tends to relate principally to machines and lifeless things, whilst the right brain focuses on the likes of living things. Our living and breathing in a sea of the latter rather than the former becomes, according to McGilchrist, increasingly difficult, a possibility increasingly closed off to us, as the left hemisphere changes our understanding of the Earth itself so that it comes to seem something like a ‘standing-reserve’ of ‘resources’—one giant filling-station, to employ Heidegger’s terrifyingly apposite metaphor—and, moreover, one increasingly and actively patterned into the form of invariance, of mechanism, of straight lines, of lifelessness and at best (!) of ‘management’ of all this and of ‘nature’ itself.

The fabric of the world is becoming fabricated, such that even the mirror ‘of nature’ no longer appears natural to us.

This book seems to be regarded as controversial.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps it is not surprising that those stuck in the diseased condition that it is diagnosing would find it hard to accept, even though its scientific credentials seem pretty impeccable.<sup>2</sup> The book goes against the current grain. The forces of the left hemisphere, which are currently culturally hegemonic, would evidently resist it and indeed would probably find it

<sup>1</sup> For example, Anthony Grayling somewhat slated it, in *The Literary Review*: [www.literaryreview.co.uk/grayling\\_12\\_09.html](http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/grayling_12_09.html). This is somewhat ironic, given the magnificent defence mounted in the book of the humanities, when juxtaposed with Grayling’s attempted launch recently of his own *New College of the Humanities*; it seems to me that Grayling hasn’t got the hang of McGilchrist’s book.

<sup>2</sup> At least it is worth noting that the book has been much praised by neuro-scientists as diverse as Ramachandran, Panksepp, Hellige, Kesselring, Schore, Bynum, Zeman, Feinberg, Trimble and Lishman.

profoundly hard to understand at all. As already intimated above, McGilchrist suggests that the very way we come to understand the right and left hemispheres is itself among the topoi crucially distorted by our left-hemisphere-dominated worldview. Witness, for instance, the way that the right hemisphere has long been deemed the 'minor' hemisphere in much of the scientific literature (a habit which McGilchrist delightfully pillories early in the book.). McGilchrist argues that there is a spiralling 'dialectical' relationship between the way in which our brain both limits and facilitates the way we 'take' the world and between the way that the world's (changing) nature influences but can constrain the way in which our brain is and thus the way in which our brain both limits and facilitates.

Nevertheless, one may justly hope that the 'foundation' of the work, in neurology, may offer an unusually useful bridgehead, a way into our culture and in particular into the world of science, that most such defences and articulations of humanity have typically lacked, however much they may have coveted it (e.g. Hegel). Though, as we shall see, McGilchrist's impressive command of the field and authority as a neurologist and psychiatrist is perhaps a double-edged sword.

*The master and his emissary* is a work of extraordinary erudition. McGilchrist seems to be a polymath, who has managed to feel his way into a vast array of different 'literatures'. The book's bibliography is so huge that the publishers excised most of it in the hard-copy version, so that one must go online to find the full bibliography to check many of the references. One influence is Lakoff and Johnson; McGilchrist leans on their account of metaphor and its implications in *Philosophy in the flesh*. (This is certainly congenial to me, though, like McGilchrist, I would suggest we need to draw a veil over their grandstanding scientific imperialism in that work.) I also warmed to McGilchrist's *hostility* to much 'Cognitive Science': He gives a powerful argument against the disastrous and ubiquitous 'information-processor' metaphor for the mind, in the first part of his book. He shows how 'information' as a concept suits only the left hemisphere, not the right, so that this model of the mind cannot accommodate any of the strengths of the right hemisphere. Again McGilchrist is suggesting, in effect, that the brain that mainstream Cognitive Philosophy has put into its imaginary vats is only half the brain—and not even the most crucial half.

Besides this important work on metaphor, McGilchrist finds his greatest allies among phenomenology, and Heidegger in particular. These are explored in a novel way in the first half of the book. McGilchrist frequently plays emissary to Heidegger's master in this book.

I mean that metaphor in a tongue-in-cheek way, just to raise perhaps a wry and friendly smile; but I also mean it somewhat in earnest. I had a niggling sense, repeatedly, as I read this book, that McGilchrist's way of working is at times rather *less* 'right-hemispherical' than is that of his great heroes, whom he explicates, often grippingly, in the course of the work: Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, Heraclitus, Goethe, Wordsworth, Blake and (above all) Heidegger. (Among living writers, Cutting and Sass are also key influences. I'd add parenthetically that McGilchrist would also benefit from fellow-travelling with our leading contemporary philosopher of the implicit, Eugene Gendlin, whose work will be known to many readers of this journal.) To give a key instance: There is an obvious danger (one that McGilchrist is not unaware of) that his neuro-story involves a homuncular

fallacy. For most of the book, McGilchrist writes almost as if the left and right hemispheres really were separate people, with intentions, wills, personalities, etc.

True, McGilchrist makes this point focal himself, on pages 98–99 of his book; it is not as if he is naïve about the worry I am stating here. But, nevertheless, it seems to me that the extent to which McGilchrist continues to rely on this ‘model’ could be dangerous. I think that it risks occluding the very (holistic, etc.) insights that he wishes to underpin.

Similarly, some of the other ‘evidence’ (besides that from lesions, shutdowns of one hemisphere or another, etc.) that McGilchrist cites with approval is (ironically) itself questionable *once* one takes right-brainedness (and thus the *unity* of the person) seriously enough.

Here are some more examples of potential covert over-‘left-brainedness’ in McGilchrist’s own approach, taken from his treatment of Wittgenstein and related areas of philosophy:

- In his Wittgenstein, McGilchrist leans heavily, explicitly, on P.M.S. Hacker. But, Hacker’s Wittgenstein, I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> is much more of a scientific thinker, whose fulminations against cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience turn out to hide a deeper collusion with their agenda and a failure to appreciate the nature of Wittgenstein’s ‘apophatic’ discourse.
- McGilchrist takes Cantor’s work on infinity to be an instance of the left brain deliberately undoing itself and showing the way toward the insights of the right brain (see, e.g. page 136). This, however, was not at all how Wittgenstein saw Cantor’s work. He saw it as creating a disastrous new would-be ‘paradise’ for mathematical theorists to play around in pointlessly, and so to avoid the real issues.
- McGilchrist (see, e.g. page 88) takes ‘ToM’ (the Theory of Mind approach to mentality in general and to autism in particular) to offer support for his arguments. But, Wittgenstein-influenced ethnomethodologists (such as Ivan Leudar, Alan Costall, Wes Sharrock and Jeff Coulter) have argued effectively to the conclusion that ToM manifests a scientific failure to look at the quiddities of the phenomena of mentation and conduct. I would, in fact, go so far as to say that ToM is the very disease of which takes itself to be the cure: It is exactly the kind of ‘explanation’ of our mindedness and our sociality that one would expect a high-functioning autistic (basically, someone thoroughly stuck in their left-brain) to come up with. Thus, it is troubling that McGilchrist seems to treat ToM as a relatively unproblematic *resource* for his argument, when it ought to be rather a *topic* for it. (This is all the stranger, given that the wonderful points that McGilchrist himself makes about the phenomenology of time, e.g. on page 76, are themselves applicable against ToM-style thinking.)

Moments like these led me to worry that McGilchrist may be feeding us with neuroscience and with related phenomena and ideas in a way that risks keeping us within a ‘left-brain’ worldview to too great an extent, by preventing us from staying with our own experience. By treating the processes of thinking and being as if they

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g. *Whose Wittgenstein?*, co-authored with Phil Hutchinson: In *Philosophy* 80 (2005), p.432–455 <http://www.jstor.org/pss/4619665>.

were agents, by reifying ‘the right brain’ and ‘the left brain’, does McGilchrist stay too close to the very perspective that he wishes to challenge? My worry here was undergirded by moments (such as at pages 155 and 171) at which it seemed to me that McGilchrist’s coolness toward ordinary life, ordinary language and everyday certainty manifested a failure to pick up on these crucial aspects of Wittgenstein’s project, which arguably provide a greater resource for ‘fighting back’ against left-hemisphere-dominance than McGilchrist realises, and, moreover, a greater and more widespread and ungainsayable resource than those things (art, religion, etc.) that he tends most to highlight.

But, perhaps, that worry is misplaced, and probably, the items bullet-pointed above are ultimately merely points of detail: They certainly didn’t prevent me from staying with the author on the long and compelling journey he conducts the reader on. Nor did his perhaps-regrettable failure to consider the contribution made by much of the growing political resistance to industrial-growthism, etc. (e.g. it might have been worthwhile for him to have looked at the green movement, and/or perhaps at organisations such as ‘La Via Campesina’, the international peasant movement with 400 million members), a contribution that powerfully manifests the kind of thinking and being that he wants to recommend.

That pretty much exhausts my own concerns about this book. A book review in which one only praises the book in question is tedious and suspicious. I hope that readers of this review will not mistake my trying out various objections to McGilchrist’s book for anything other than what it has been: an honest effort to think through whether there is anything much at all wrong with a work whose consequences, if (as I think) it is basically right, are immense.

One further major objection that others are likely to bring against McGilchrist’s work is probably that his detailed neuro-story is not needed for his account of human civilisation and of the grave threat which it is now under. In other words, some might say that there is insufficient connection between Part One of McGilchrist’s book (on the brain and on philosophy) and the Part Two (with its history of the present). So, they might say, the terms ‘left brain’ and ‘right brain’ function largely metaphorically, not literally. In the final two paragraphs of his book, McGilchrist deals with this objection in a remarkably disarming way:

“If it could eventually be shown...that the two major ways, not just of thinking, but of being in the world, are *not* related to the two cerebral hemispheres, I would be surprised, but not unhappy. Ultimately what I have tried to point to is that the apparently separate ‘functions’ in each hemisphere fit together intelligently to form in each case a single coherent entity; that there are, not just currents here and there in the history of ideas, but consistent ways of being that persist across the history of the Western world, that are fundamentally opposed, though complementary, in what they reveal to us; and that the hemispheres of the brain can be seen as, at the very least, a metaphor for these... // What [Goethe’s Faust, Schopenhauer, Bergson, Scheler and Kant] all point to is the fundamentally divided nature of mental experience. When one puts that together with the fact that the brain is divided into two relatively independent chunks which just happen broadly to mirror the very dichotomies that are being pointed to—alienation versus engagement,



abstraction versus incarnation, the categorical versus the unique, the general 217  
versus the particular, the part versus the whole, and so on—it seems like a 218  
metaphor that might have some literal truth. But if it turns out to be ‘just’ a 219  
metaphor, I will be content. I have a high regard for metaphor. It is how we 220  
come to understand the world.” (pp. 461–462; cf. also p 7). 221  
222

Now, it is important not too blithely or swiftly to over-interpret this passage. 223  
*Perhaps* all that McGilchrist is saying here is that he would not be particularly upset 224  
(though presumably he would find it very surprising) if it turned out that the way the 225  
brain ‘carves up’ in producing its two distinct ways of being in the world were not 226  
exclusively along hemisphere-lines, but on some other basis, for example, 227  
hemisphericity coupled with differences between the prefrontal cortex and the 228  
limbic system. 229

But, in any case, in the above passage, following once again Lakoff and 230  
Johnson as well as various great literary authors, McGilchrist clearly and 231  
charmingly defends the importance of metaphor (a phenomenon which, as we 232  
have seen, only the right hemisphere understands), and moreover of metaphor that 233  
remains metaphorical, and must not be ‘cashed out’. This could also partially 234  
answer my earlier worry, about the ‘reification’ of the left and right hemispheres 235  
into quasi-homunculi. It will however still leave a nagging twinge with some 236  
readers about how *necessary* all the detail about the brain has been to the real 237  
‘cash-value’ of the account of these two, coherent, different ways of being in and 238  
moulding (or not) the world that comes to a head in the brilliant account (offered in 239  
the final 100 pages of the book) of the growing triumph of the left hemisphere in 240  
the Industrial Revolution, in Modernism and in Post-modernism. In response to 241  
this objection I would say: “Read the book”. For McGilchrist actually does 242  
a remarkable, delicate job of ensuring that there is a genuinely historical dimension 243  
to his story of the faculties, it seems to me. His fascinating discussion in Chapter 7, 244  
“Imitation and the evolution of culture”, for example, displays the possible 245  
biological routes through which neurology may respond to culture. These are the 246  
routes whereby the very structure of the brain may be substantially responsive to 247  
and moulded by—not merely foundational for—the fabric of any given culture. 248  
That discussion crucially feeds into the story he then tells of the development of 249  
Western culture as a kind of battle of the hemispheres. 250

Whether what McGilchrist is telling us is a set of fascinating scientific truths 251  
about the brain, or a metaphorical history of the present that uncovers the reasons 252  
why the human race has reached its current condition of ecological, etc. crisis (and 253  
why we are likely to be in denial about this in just the way we are), or both, what I 254  
found in reading his book is that there are gems on virtually every page, and that— 255  
whether or not it is ‘just’ a metaphor—the way of thinking and of seeing that 256  
McGilchrist here offers is itself compelling, rich and fertile. No one who is seriously 257  
interested in the focal subject matter of this journal can afford to ignore his book. At 258  
least not, as the saying goes, anyone with half a brain.<sup>4</sup> 259 Q4  
260

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Cathy Osborne, Tom Greaves, Philip Wilson, Ivan Leudar, Alex Haxeltine, Shaun Hargreaves-Heap, Joel Kruger and Graham Read for comments and helpful thoughts. Thanks also to Iain McGilchrist for illuminating correspondence on some of the matters I have discussed here.

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