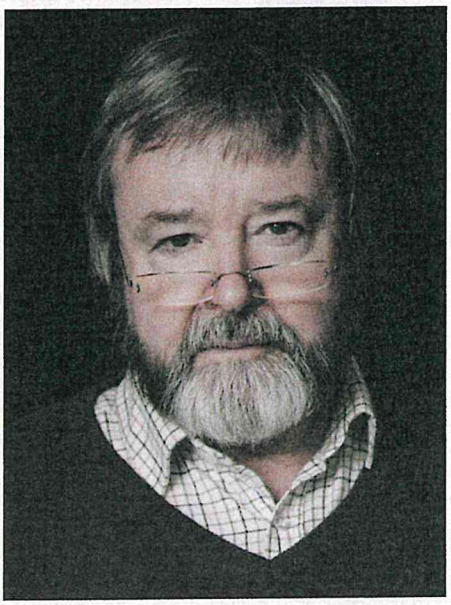
In a new book of remarkable inspiration and erudition, a retired consultant psychiatrist who lives on the Isle of Skye argues that we have become enslaved by an account of 'things' dominated by the brain's left hemisphere, blinding us to an awe-inspiring reality that is all around us / **By RONAN SHARKEY**

'The singing of things'

THOUGH not quite yet a household name, Iain McGilchrist is leading a quiet but far-reaching revolution in the understanding of who we are as human beings, one with potentially momentous consequences for many of the preoccupations – from ecology and health care to economics and artificial intelligence – that weigh on our present and darken our future. Not the least surprising aspect of this revolution is that it began in poetry and has now achieved its most complete expression in a monumental two-volume work, *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*, just published, that ends in a form of undogmatic and heterodox theology.

McGilchrist is a rare example of that almost extinct species, the *médecin savant* (the philosopher Raymond Tallis is another). Psychiatry was not his first calling. In the 1970s, he got a starred first in English at Oxford and seemed destined for an academic career. If, in the end, he didn't pursue that path, it was because he felt alienated by a tendency, common to many academic disciplines, that treats what might be called "wholes" (anything from Shakespeare's sonnets and Victorian novels to firms and societies) as intelligible only if decomposable into their constituent parts. In literature, this produces contradiction: breaking down a poem into its parts doesn't just abstract momentarily from its essential unity; it produces a parallel and rival perception of what is essential to it: that it is not *one* thing, but a collection of things, its wholeness an effect of the way our minds are conditioned to perceive it.

THIS SEEMED to McGilchrist doubly wrong: a work of art, though its creation may be tortured, has an organic unity. To treat it as an assemblage of parts is to fail to see it as *a* work of art. And separating the work – the poem, the symphony, the dance – from the mind that perceives it presupposes that the mind is one thing and what it perceives is something wholly other, as though the mind could exist prior to experiencing anything, as a separate "thinking thing", the world and its contents being "unthinking" things. For McGilchrist, everything about our way of interacting with the world and our fellow creatures suggests something quite different: "betweenness", interdependence, "flow". The mind is no more a separately identifiable bit of "mental stuff" than the world is an accidental heap of singular objects.



Iain McGilchrist

The philosophy of mind initially seemed to offer some light; but its preoccupation with the "mind-body problem" took for granted the dualism that, in McGilchrist's eyes, was part of the problem; and its dependence on methods that reduced rational reflection to sequences of micro-arguments of pristine clarity paralleled what had already alienated him in literary criticism. More promising was continental phenomenology: unlike much English-speaking philosophy, phenomenology sees thinking as overflowing the boundaries of individual minds and permeating the human body as it navigates a path through the world. To reduce the activity of the mind to rational argument alone, and philosophy to the study of such arguments, however rigorous, is to forget a central fact about us: that as *embodied* minds we exist "in the world", as part of its physicality, temporality and finitude.

McGilchrist left university teaching and retrained in medicine, qualifying as a psychiatrist and treating patients with mental disturbances ranging from the effects of strokes to psychotic conditions such as schizophrenia. It was in the context of this clinical experience that he noticed an odd but repeatedly confirmed correlation between the conditions he was treating and the intellectual outlook he was rejecting: the mental world of schizophrenia sufferers is fragmentary, characterised by the loss of what might be called oblique meaning implicit in metaphor, beauty and healthy human relations. Their *rational* capacities nevertheless remain unaffected by their condition: isolated from connections other than logical ones, their minds perceive the world as though it were composed of disembodied parts, connected by causality alone. Interestingly, some aspects of this perceptual fragmentation can also be observed in patients who suffer a stroke affecting the right cerebral hemisphere and who, despite appearing lucid and articulate (speech is a left-hemisphere function), may perceive even parts of their own bodies as disconnected objects.

In the early-1990s, McGilchrist attended by chance a lecture by the philosopher-psychiatrist John Cutting, a leading authority on the right cerebral hemisphere whose interest in phenomenology mirrored his own. He has often said that this was for him a turning point: contrary to a widely shared belief inherited from "split-brain" operations in the 1960s, according to which its cognitive abilities were extremely limited, Cutting demonstrated the fundamental importance of the right ("silent") hemisphere in enabling the human subject to make sense of the world. A second key encounter was with a remarkable book, *Madness and Modernism*, by the American psychologist Louis Sass. Sass showed how the traditional picture of psychiatric illness as a loss of rationality is misleading in the case of schizophrenia, since "what dies in these cases is not the rational so much as the appetitive soul", the sense of being alive. He describes the experience of schizophrenics as resembling a "death-mood", "a sort of morbid wakefulness or hyperawareness". An obsessive rationality takes control, freed from the restraining influences of normal human emotion and interaction, a condition disturbingly reflected in modernist art and literature.

McGILCHRIST absorbed these two perspectives, combining them with his own findings in clinical practice (his daytime job) and personal research (an exhaustive trawling through specialist publications in cognitive neuroscience). Over two decades, he pursued this dual existence, the fruits of which were published in 2009 as *The Master and His Emissary*: a large, powerfully argued and richly documented work that combines detailed exploration of the relations between the two hemispheres of the brain with a lengthy treatment of the very different ways, as illustrated in painting, literature and philosophy over two-and-a-half millennia, each hemisphere perceives, or "attends to", the world.

The human brain, like animal brains, is

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both lateralised and *a*-symmetrical, the asymmetry having an evolutionary purpose: to enable the individual creature to maintain simultaneously two distinct forms of perception. The first, developed in the left hemisphere and (setting aside complications in the case of left-handedness) mediated through the right eye and the right hand (or paw or claw) is narrow and strategic, typically fixed on an object such as a prey. The second, originating in the right hemisphere (which controls the left eye and the left hand), is broader, less precise and above all non-instrumental: rather than giving the animal the means of controlling its environment, it enables it to have a receptive awareness of it.

THOUGH IN their animal incarnation these two forms of perception are functionally different, they complement one another, the one providing an efficient means of obtaining food, the other ensuring that the predator does not become the prey. In the higher primates and in humans (who have the largest brains of all), elements of additional complexity emerge with the development of the frontal lobes of each hemisphere, which enable the individual to establish mental distance from the object of its attentions and defer immediate gratification. The deferral can be in the interest of greater efficiency and more prolonged satisfaction – hence the emergence of rationality, the ability over time to maximise gain or the satisfaction of desire. Human beings are thus capable of strategic thought of a degree of sophistication that has no equivalent in the animal world, and when we describe human beings as rational, this is usually what we mean.

But the same "distance" also permits the development in the right hemisphere of the moral sense, the non-manipulative ability to treat other individuals as persons, subjects, "other selves" having intrinsic value. Notice, however, as Raymond Tallis has cogently argued against the materialist "neuro-philosopher" Patricia Churchland, that this does *not* mean that morality can be reduced to neural wiring. There is, in fact, no simple answer to the question, "Why are we moral?", though evolutionary advantage is certainly a factor.

THE TITLE, *The Master and His Emissary*, evokes a "fable" with parallels in the creation myths of the world's religions: the good and wise master of a vast domain, aware of the need to delegate the administration of distant regions, allows his clever but unscrupulous emissary to take advantage of him, ultimately bringing ruin everywhere. In his new work, *The Matter with Things*, McGilchrist instead makes use of a far richer and more complex legend drawn from Iroquois mythology, with rough parallels to the earlier fable (limitations of space prevent relating it here – it is described at the beginning of Chapter 20, in the second volume of the book: McGilchrist calls it "one of the most remarkable intuitions of the structure of the mind and its influence on human destiny ever brought forth from the depth of the human imagination"). Both myths illustrate the respective ways in which the brain's hemispheres deal with reality. Like the master, the right hemisphere ("the one that sees and understands most") is concerned with understanding what is general and contextual; it perceives individual things as wholes, as what makes them the unique entities they are (and not as they might be used), an ability McGilchrist calls "presencing" the world. The concern of the left hemisphere (the emissary) is less to comprehend reality than to represent (re-present) it in an artificial and narrowly rational way, rather as the map of the London Underground presents in straight lines and symmetry what are much more irregular Tube routes.

Perhaps the most significant difference brought out by the fable is that the form of thinking incarnated in the right hemisphere includes a Socratic awareness of its own limits; whereas the left hemisphere, unable to perceive its own ignorance, takes for granted that its impeccable rationality is in the end all that matters. As McGilchrist puts it in *The Matter With Things*: "Not ignorance, but ignorance of ignorance, is the death of knowledge."

Humans, like animals, need to combine the distinctive capacities exhibited by hemispheric difference (you can't cook or plan a journey or use a computer without your left hemisphere, but if your right ceases to function the reasons for doing these things become unclear). This need is supplied by a complex membrane of neural tissue, the *corpus callosum*, situated between the hemispheres. However, since the hemispheres are defined by incommensurably different ways of perceiving the world, communication in the strict sense is ruled out: rather, what is needed is a degree of balance, which the *corpus callosum* achieves by reciprocal *inhibition*, the left hemisphere inhibiting the operations of the right, or vice versa.

MUCH OF this is widely corroborated scientific knowledge. Where McGilchrist's "lateralisation hypothesis" becomes original and fascinating is in suggesting that, though inter-hemispheric balance is in theory possible, the functioning of the modern, post-Enlightenment world testifies to a disastrous eclipsing of the right hemisphere's take on the world (which accepts the necessary opacity of much of what is most important to us – relationships, beauty, life, love, the sacred), thereby favouring the left's conception of thought as exclusively characterised by explicitness, clarity and rationality. This is the disposition that we find untethered and rampant in virtually every field of human activity, most disturbingly at the moment in AI, whose artificiality lies precisely in its incomprehension of the delicate balance of opposing modes of understanding that is characteristic of being humanly – *humanely* – intelligent.

This bleak diagnosis does not mean we should give up hope. *The Matter With Things*

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opens with one of Wittgenstein's enigmatic *Bemerkungen*: "Yes, a key can lie for ever in the place where the locksmith left it, and never be used to open the lock the master forged it for." Having, in the earlier book, identified the root cause of the world's disenchantment in the power we have allowed left-hemisphere thinking over our lives, McGilchrist turns to the resources at our disposal for correcting this imbalance. These resources, primarily philosophical and spiritual, are deployed to encourage us to "reconceive our world, our reality", to "learn again [...] to see", freed from the obligation to view everything through the deforming lens of the left hemisphere's monopoly of rationality narrowly conceived.

Since a great deal of what passes for *philosophia* (literally "love of wisdom") is anything but wise and often deeply hostile to spirituality, this means engaging at length and at a high level of abstract argument with competing philosophical theories of truth, rationality, knowledge, perception and being. For philosophically-trained readers, those at least who would adhere to Friedrich Waismann's conviction that "at the heart of any philosophy worth the name is *vision*", this central thread of the book is deeply satisfying, far more so than the more limited and introductory treatment of philosophy in *The Master and His Emissary*. At the same time, McGilchrist interweaves this argumentative thread with discussion of the work of scientists in a wide range of disciplines, many of whom combine adherence to reductive materialism with a "working assumption" (quoting the philosopher Hans Jonas) that their own actions and decisions are not causally determined. His goal is not, however, merely to point to these contradictions, but rather to encourage a "fertile symbiosis of philosophy and science, helping one another, each turn building on the next, to rise to a new, more truthful vision of who, indeed, we are".

LIKE EVERY other aspect of the *The Matter With Things*, its final chapter, "The Sense of the Sacred", defies summary; but given its importance as the conclusion of nearly 1,400 pages of text, it seems appropriate to indicate something of what McGilchrist reveals, quite briefly, about his own religious sensibility and its relation to his general philosophy. This sensibility emerged, he tells us, not from a conversion, still less from a proof of God's existence (he describes his own metaphysical position as being, like Wordsworth's, a form of panentheism), but instead from receptivity to natural beauty, art, music and literature, and "human beings who seemed to me to be deeply spiritual people". In approaching the sacred, he gives central importance to direct experience, a path usually associated in the world's religions with mysticism. And in a sense, what he is referring to *is* the mystical: not that of the beatific vision, but rather "a deep gravitational pull towards something ineffable that, if we can just for once get beyond words and reasons, is a matter of experience". He is somewhat suspicious of formal doctrines, which tend to favour left-hemisphere thinking, but acknowledges that "there is a virtue in having a sort of scaffolding in place, even though it cannot reach Heaven".

In a striking passage in *The Master and His Emissary*, McGilchrist suggested that language may have originated in song ("the communication of emotion") rather than the other way round. Though *The Matter With Things* contains much detailed and rigorous argument, it is, as its author says at the outset, less an argument properly speaking than a plea for openness to what reality, once our taste for precision and exploitation is set aside, can teach us. The "terrible" clarity that the poet Rilke saw in modern language led him to complain that even the sacred was being colonised "right to the border with God". McGilchrist's *œuvre*, a hugely ambitious vision without parallel in contemporary thought (no university research project would allow a professor to work on such a scale), is deep down animated by Rilke's very personal reaction to this lifeless precision: "I so love to hear the singing of things."

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