

Book Review

The Master and his Emissary *The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*

By *Iain McGilchrist*
2009, Yale University Press

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In *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009), Iain McGilchrist has produced a remarkable and absorbing book which enables us to comprehend the nature of the world we create—and which in turn creates us—by providing a detailed understanding of the changing functionality of the left and right hemispheres of our divided brain. This is a thoroughly-researched tour de force with 462 pages of text, 55 pages of notes, and over 2000 references.

Its relevance to the work of a Rosen Method practitioner lies in the insights it provides on our ability to be “in touch”. The book highlights a disturbing trend in the West for over-dependence on the left hemisphere, resulting in perceptions that are highly prejudiced by a limited awareness. In Rosen Method bodywork, we need to open ourselves to subtle influences to sense the feeling state of another and, in reading this book, it will become apparent how crucially the work of the divided brain affects this outcome and, in particular, the importance of developing insights derived from right-hemisphere perception.

In referring to the book’s 20-year gestation, McGilchrist acknowledges the influence of John Cutting, especially his *Principles of Psychopathology (Two Worlds – Two Minds – Two Hemispheres)*, and Louis Sass, especially his *Madness and Modernism* and *The Paradoxes of Delusion*, commenting that their massively important work stands behind every page he has written. McGilchrist has impeccable credentials for taking this research further, and his book *The Master and his Emissary* may equally well be described as a “massively important work”. He is a former Consultant Psychiatrist and Clinical Director at the Bethlem Royal & Maudsley Hospital, London, and has researched in neuroimaging at Johns Hopkins University Hospital, Baltimore. He taught English at Oxford University, where he has been three times elected as Fellow of All Souls College, and currently works privately in London.

Like the brain it describes, the book is divided into two parts. In *Part One: The Divided Brain*, McGilchrist focuses on the brain itself and what it tells us, leaving no doubt about the different nature of the two hemispheres and their necessary cooperation. *Part Two: How the Brain has Shaped our World* looks at the history of Western culture in the light of this understanding, identifying changes in the brain related to major historical epochs. The book’s title is taken from Nietzsche’s story of the power of a wise spiritual master being usurped by a trusted emissary sent out to ensure the safety of the most distant parts of his empire. The correspondence is very apt: we are led to the inescapable conclusion that the limited functionality of the left hemisphere is now operating dangerously independently of the more perceptually-aware right hemisphere.

Until recently, the left hemisphere was believed to concentrate on linear, analytical, verbal and reductionist tasks (“masculine” skills which have become highly valued in our society), with the right hemisphere being involved with intuitive, holistic/emotional processing (identified as “feminine” and often undervalued). But neuroimaging studies and research involving split-brain patients (in which the corpus callosum has been severed), and others where one of the hemispheres has suffered damage, have now provided a much more complete picture that McGilchrist elucidates to great effect. The corpus callosum was previously seen as providing for communication between the two hemispheres, but it has been found that a greater part of its function involves one hemisphere *inhibiting* the other. This is necessary to avoid both hemispheres, with completely different perceptions to each other, operating simultaneously on the same task. The contrasting “personalities” of each hemisphere are clearly displayed in patients with a severed corpus callosum or damage to one hemisphere. When there is damage to the left hemisphere, the right hemisphere will acknowledge the reality but be unable to convey this verbally. However, when there is damage to the right hemisphere, the left hemisphere will be adamant that it knows when it clearly doesn’t—such as denying any damage to the body even when a limb is missing! It is the right hemisphere that “takes in” reality and then passes on information to the left hemisphere for action. If this link is missing, the left hemisphere will be incapable of seeing new information and will rely entirely on its old knowledge, often with tragic, if comedic, consequences.

McGilchrist shows that illnesses, anxieties, and predilections of an age are related to the relative dependence on the left and right hemispheres, and argues that current society’s over-dependence on the left hemisphere is leading to disjointed perception with little awareness of its limitations. The world we see is an artefact—a *representation* of reality—and the importance of this book lies in demonstrating how the apparently separate functions of each hemisphere fit together to form a coherent picture, a process which needs to be fully utilised if we are to create a more effectual, integrated society.