

MODELS AND METAPHORS: THE BRAIN AND ITS MEANING

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I have recently been reading a number of books that look at the brain and the way it works and its overwhelming influence on the way we picture and portray and ultimately construct and influence the world. The first is *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey* (New York: Viking, 2006), the work of then Harvard neurologist, Jill Bolte Taylor, who had a massive stroke in the left side of her brain. She explains the eight years it took to regain a sense of self, and her previous capacities and powers, including language. She also speaks of the sense of euphoria she experienced when only the right brain was working, and of the re-emergence of a critical voice when the left side began to wake up and be healed. She found herself not liking this voice, and giving it a very limited rein in her new life.

Another book of interest is *Naming Nature: the Clash between Instinct and Science*, by Carol Kaesuk Yoon (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009) who decries the lack of ordinary naming of nature that now goes on. She writes as a taxonomist who nevertheless thinks that the official impersonal, counter-intuitive naming that scientists do has alienated ordinary people from their intuitive connection to nature, a connection she sees as essential to being human. A further book, *The Brain that Changes Itself* (New York: Viking, 2007) by Norman Doidge, is a fascinating glimpse of the brain's fluidity and non-locality; until recent decades there was widespread pessimism regarding the brain's ability to heal or change itself. This book contains many inspiring stories of people who have overcome learning disabilities and strokes when supported by medical professionals who believe in this fluidity.

These three books all speak to the intersection between culture and biology in fascinating ways. What we believe about the brain, for instance has long hampered our efforts to heal people with strokes, or appreciate different kinds of intelligence. The sudden loss of language and a critical voice revealed to Bolte Taylor that the religious experience of being at one with the universe is often repressed by the left brain's analytical powers. Carol Yoon, although a taxonomist herself, laments the control

that scientific taxonomy has over the intuitive naming of, and therefore connection with, nature that the ordinary person once had. These books all hint at the idea that the brain has wider capacities and deeper ways of knowing than our culture has permitted.

In a similar but far more wide ranging book Iain McGilchrist argues that our civilisation has been taken over by a left brain way of thinking. In the *Master and his Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), McGilchrist takes us on a very accessible cross disciplinary investigation of how our brains and brain function influence our culture and its institutions and values and vice versa. It may well turn out to be one of the most important books of the early twenty-first century. The author is a psychiatrist, philosopher and poet. The

philosophy is evident in the depth of his knowledge of the history of ideas; the poetry in his sensitivity to nuance and meaning, and the psychiatry in the apt parallels between many

Enlightenment figures—Descartes and Bentham in particular—and schizophrenia.

McGilchrist delves into the fraught question of the brain's hemispheres. His thesis is that although the brain is fluid and nonlocalised, nevertheless the way the hemispheres work or don't work together is of enormous importance. In particular, he claims that our civilisation since the Enlightenment has become dominated by a left hemisphere way of thinking, and that the right hemisphere which should be in dialogue and in communication with the left hemisphere is unable to reassert its influence. There is something about the left hemisphere that wants to take over and that doesn't recognise its poverty of input. One might wonder how this befuddlement happens *en masse*. It happens because the culture we live in values language and the mechanical and the abstract, and educates for these values. Other ways of thinking are simply excluded.

The right hemisphere, in most people, pays attention to the overall impression, the particular instance in its context, and to novelty; it is the seat of emotion and wonder; the right understands metaphor. The left pays attention to the details,

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to language and to abstraction. The right brain is concerned with life; the left with machines. (It is a particular characteristic of schizophrenia, apparently, to see people as machines.) In our civilization the left brain and its skills have taken over, like Nietzsche's fabled emissary, from the true master or right brain. The left brain gets obsessed over details and is very hard to derail; the left brain finds it hard to hand back the reins to the wide vista. People who have a stroke in the right brain often refuse to believe that anything is wrong, whereas those whose left brain is damaged know all too well.

This is a very brief summary of a wide ranging detailed romp through the brain and many ages of art, literature, philosophy and discourse. McGilchrist discusses the importance of the frontal lobes in the distance we *homo sapiens* have cultivated from the objects of our knowledge. This distance has enabled the knowledge based power we yield in the world; our knowledge becomes dangerous, however, if the hemispheres are not working together.

McGilchrist is at great pains to affirm that both sides of the brain need the other when performing the most mundane task or the most religious ritual. But, he says, when this unpacking is done by the left brain, especially in the realm of religion and art the result is unnecessarily abstract and empty. When the right side of the brain is allowed in, feeling and a sense of connection to God become possible. Now you might well question whether anything like this is possible on a culture-wide scale; and of course it isn't completely. The right brain keeps popping up and out. Children have not yet been trained in our ways. If we think of the efficient, managerial objective knowledge and skills our culture values, however, one can see that this book has a point. Add this to the knowledge that the left brain has a capacity to be deceived and the thesis is not so untenable.

Of course one of the problems with any book such as this is the ever-present question: how do we compare ourselves to previous ages? As a woman I do not pine to be living in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, however beautiful and humane their arts. How do we really get a handle on the feel and timbre of an era, especially our own? Some aspects of life, like the wheat and the tares, seem to be getting better while other aspects get worse. But for those of us who wonder at widespread loss of faith in the West and how it happens, and also think this matters, this book seems to give valuable clues.

For one thing, we won't ever get a religious culture from the left side of the brain. Only with the involvement of the right brain is awe and the use of metaphor possible, together with the sense

of mystery that is required for belief in God. Yet the left brained machine metaphor has to a large extent taken over our worldview.

And machines are not bad in themselves. They are wonderful human creations and many living processes also involve machine-like processes. But that is not all that is going on. Machine metaphors, like those relating to the process of life itself, obscure deeper pictures of what is going on. When Schleiermacher coined the phrase, the "sense of absolute dependence," it was this inchoate sense that all that is, is dependent on God, that he was recognising from the right brain.

McGilchrist's elaborate arguments do at least give the church pause for thought. We should not be accommodating ourselves to the way of paying attention that the left brain brings. There is already too much reinforcement of this in our society. We should rather be insisting that there is a larger picture into which our ordinary life fits. The church is the guardian and curator of sacred space, the curer of souls. The emissary has gone out, says McGilchrist, and has taken over the world. The church has no less a task than to take it back.

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