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### Articles

**The Master's Theory of Everything: A review of Iain McGilchrist's *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*** (Perspectiva, 1500 pp. ISBN: 978-1914568060)

by Marius Dorobantu, *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

When pointing towards inanimate objects, chimpanzees use their right hand, whereas when pointing towards living creatures, they do it with their left. Such a striking difference can, to some extent, also be noticeable in humans: for grasping things, we mainly use our right hand, while exploration is instinctually done with the left hand. What does this have to say about the nature of truth, the hard problem of consciousness, or the existence of God? Quite a lot, according to Iain McGilchrist's recent magnum opus, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*.

The book's argument is as follows. The two cerebral hemispheres of the mammalian brain evolved to produce very different kinds of cognition and attention to the world, and this difference is most pronounced in humans. If this hypothesis is true, McGilchrist argues, then we can extrapolate a surprising amount regarding what we can know and, ultimately, about the nature of reality itself.

At more than eight hundred thousand words, McGilchrist's book is more voluminous than the King James Bible, so a comprehensive review is close to impossible. Instead, what I attempt to do is a simplified summary of the main ideas, with a focus on some of the aspects that are most interesting for a science & religion readership.

In my teens, I used to take a lot of pride when teachers would commend me for being a "left brain type" because I was relatively talented at the game Go and math. As the stereotype goes, the left hemisphere is responsible for logic, language, and calculation, while art and emotion are the domain of the right hemisphere. As it turns out, I was doubly wrong to take pride in such compliments. Firstly, as McGilchrist has already argued in his previous book, *The Master and His Emissary* (McGilchrist 2009), this stereotype is wrong. The right brain has a much more sophisticated understanding of reality, and it underlies everything we do, including (especially) our most complex cognitive activities. Mathematics is thus primarily *not* a left-brain endeavor, especially if by math we mean something more than rote calculation, such as creative problem-solving, insight, original correlation or integration. Secondly, the book provocatively argued, it is precisely our fascination with the left hemisphere's rigid, detached, machine-like cognition that is highly problematic. My teachers' admiration for what they thought to be signs of left-hemisphere dominance was a symptom of a much larger trend in Western culture

of replacing the natural master – the right brain – with its emissary – the left brain, with disastrous consequences for the individual person and the future of our civilization. To be a “left-brain type” should thus have a negative connotation, at best, and a pathological one, at worst.

In *The Matter with Things*, McGilchrist again picks up the hemisphere lateralization hypothesis and explores its implications for how we make sense of the world, given the “equipment” we have available (part I, “The Hemispheres and the Means to Truth”), what are the available ways and methodologies to knowledge and truth (part II, “The Hemispheres and the Paths to Truth”), and how reality might appear to be constituted in light of this (part III, “The Unforeseen Nature of Reality”). To simplify, the three parts of the book correspond to three core themes: neuropsychology, epistemology, and metaphysics.

Before diving into the details, it is helpful to clarify the book’s main thesis: there are no things. At its most fundamental level, reality is not composed of things and states, but of relationships and processes. To support this, McGilchrist cites an impressively numerous and diverse collection of sources: from Heraclitus to Whitehead, Goethe, Woody Allen, Wordsworth, Meister Eckhart, Bohr, William James, Taoistic, Kabbalistic, and Iroquois myths. The frequency of references to poetry is not surprising. It has to do with the author’s belief that “the most fundamental truths, of both a physical and a psychological nature, can ultimately be expressed only in terms of poetry” (p. 387). But it is also due to the fact that McGilchrist was primarily trained as a literary scholar at Oxford, before retraining in neuropsychiatry and achieving an accomplished second career at the highest level of the profession, as a researcher at Johns Hopkins University, and a psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital in London.

The bigger message of the book is that if we attend to the world in the way we’re supposed to – that is, by allowing the right hemisphere to reign with the help of the left, where needed – the only possible reaction is awe, and the only possible conclusion is that we matter, there exists purpose and meaning in the world. Our religious and artistic intuitions that we are part of something bigger are ultimately correct, despite the left hemisphere’s desperation to dismiss them because of its inability to understand them. The holistic, open, and paradox-tolerant worldview of the right hemisphere is more reliable than the reductionist, narrow, and foolish view of the left. The implication of all this, which will be music to the ears of theology/religion scholars, is that most of the problematic mottos of our recent cultural history are nightmares dreamt up by the left hemisphere: reductive materialism, determinism, scientism, that consciousness is just an illusion, that organisms are ultimately machines, that there is no teleology in physical and biological processes, moral

relativism, utilitarianism, that what cannot be quantified does not matter, that science will eventually come up with a complete theory of reality, etc.

When it comes to our only available vehicle for knowing the truth – the brain and its possibilities and limitations –, one of the main takeaways is that the two hemispheres are not concerned with different things (e.g., language vs. emotions). They are both concerned with everything but in a different way, and so they give rise to two different experiential worlds.

The reason why we evolved to have two different hemispheres is that, in order to be effective, we needed to attend to the world in two different ways at once. Put shortly, throughout evolution, the right hemisphere kept us safe from dangers (predators) and endowed us with the qualities that make us the “social animal”: an ability to take distance from the stimulus, empathy, the ability to interpret subtle signals, to integrate experience in memory, be in touch with the reality here and now and facilitate exploration (hence why we instinctually use our left hand for exploration, as the left side of the body is controlled by the right hemisphere). The left hemisphere made us effective predators. It enabled us to manipulate the environment (through tool use), to take emotional distance from others and simulate their thought processes – what is usually called ‘theory of mind’. This is what the left hemisphere does best: go offline, re-present, ruminate on what it already knows, and simulate. The left brain does not work with reality as it presents itself, but with its own re-presentation of reality. However, a key point is that when it comes to the left hemisphere’s ability to simulate other minds, this was not to empathize, but to outsmart them.

This picture already poses an uncomfortable question for theological anthropology. It seems that the right hemisphere is more compatible with the biblical idea of a good human being created in God’s image. McGilchrist explicitly keeps away from a simplistic dichotomy of right brain good – left brain bad (which would be a left-brain type of categorizing) and emphasizes time and again how both hemispheres are needed in almost everything we do. Nonetheless, the reader is left with a strong feeling that many of the propensities we might call sinful in theological anthropology are connected more with the left hemisphere than with the right one. The problematic issue is that a creature that is supposed to image, at least potentially, a good and perfect creator has such appetites for domination and, as we’ll see later, self-delusion and objectifying built-in deeply in its psyche. What’s more, these predatory tendencies are part and parcel of what it means to be human (and a mammal), so they are historically prior to any ancestral Fall (for McGilchrist, if there was any fall at all, it occurred much later: starting with the Enlightenment, with the increasing imbalance between the two hemispheres). In other words, it seems that at least when it comes to what renders us in the image of God,

we could have been better off without these propensities of the left hemisphere, especially if *imago Dei* is interpreted through a relational lens.

Perhaps the existence of the left hemisphere, as it is, points toward a functional interpretation of *imago Dei*, one that emphasizes our ability to do things and exercise dominion over creation, but we know already what kind of a tyrannic master the left hemisphere can be. How can we mirror God if such problematic propensities are built-in deeply within the structure of our minds, and what does this say about God and the nature of the world? This leads to familiar questions of theodicy and why a left hemisphere is needed at all in God's good world. McGilchrist wrestles with these questions head-on in part III of the book, although he notably does it without subscribing to a Christian or even theist worldview in the standard sense. Without going into details, his answer is somewhere along the lines of finding an issue with our need for rigid categories, such as a perceived perfection of creation or the human being. This might be itself a symptom of left-hemisphere thinking. Instead of expecting such clear and stable harmonies, as in scholastic cosmology, we should be prepared to embrace the openness of the world, and the creative (perhaps divine) force behind it; we should accept the paradoxical but necessary co-existence and co-operation of opposite forces in bringing about a world marked by creativity and freedom, as in Eastern cosmologies (e.g. the yin and yang).

Most of the things we know about brain lateralization come from either split-brain patients or people with damage in one of the hemispheres. The colossal amount of studies and anecdotes gathered by McGilchrist seem to point to a clear conclusion: damage to the left hemisphere is not as impactful as to the right hemisphere. When the right hemisphere is damaged (and so the left remains in control), something fundamental changes in people's perception, cognition, and way of being, to the extent that their world is no longer recognizably the same. For example, entire chunks of the world simply cease to exist for the person because the left hemisphere does not pay attention to them. In extreme cases, people cease to care for the entire left side of their bodies. The reverse is not true: when the left hemisphere is damaged, the world is experienced more or less normally; it is just the ability to handle the world that is impaired.

There is a lot to say about the differences between hemispheres. The left hemisphere's portrait emerges along not very flattering lines: it confabulates and tries to interpret actions without a feel for what is realistic; it has a fragmented view of space, time, motion, and the world; it manifests a lack of emotional depth and appropriateness. The left hemisphere is less interested in uniqueness and more in category: it lumps things together even though they are significantly distinct, because this enables it to control them better.

It starts from parts and tries to construct the idea of a whole, whereas the right hemisphere begins with the whole, the *Gestalt* (a word featured frequently throughout the book). The right hemisphere is better at pattern recognition, better at dealing with uncertainty and incomplete information, and it is dominant in the perception of the physical and emotional self. The left hemisphere's knowledge is *about* the world, while the right's is *of* the world. The left does *apprehension*, while the right does *comprehension*. The right hemisphere wrestles with reality, while the left prefers its own theory about reality.

One particularly insightful conclusion is that the left hemisphere is akin to our biological computer: it aids intelligence but is not itself the source. The only two things the left hemisphere can do on its own are to produce language, but with only partial understanding, and calculate. This description looks strikingly similar to that of current state-of-the-art artificial intelligence programs. Large language models, such as ChatGPT, do precisely this, and there are currently hot debates regarding whether what they do is enough to label them as intelligent or if more advanced versions could replicate human-level intelligence and even “wake-up” to sentience. For anyone wrestling with such questions, McGilchrist's treatise on the key differences between the two hemispheres can serve as a very helpful starting point for assessing the similarities and differences between humans and AI.

The left hemisphere has higher self-esteem than the right. It is unreasonably optimistic and lacks insight into its own limitations. When regarded through the lens of spirituality, this difference can be of high relevance. In most spiritual traditions, being so full of oneself and blind to one's limitations are very undesirable traits – hence the emphasis on humility as a steppingstone for any kind of advanced virtue. If spiritual growth makes one more humble, empathetic, and less egotistic, a case could be made that it involves a transformation from left to right hemisphere dominance.

Incidentally, this is strikingly aligned with what we found in our recent investigation of the notion of spiritual intelligence, carried out by an interdisciplinary team at the *International Society for Science & Religion*. In short, the assumption is widely shared in cognitive psychology that human minds use two modes of cognition (which are traditionally referred to as *head* and *heart* in spiritual literature): one more intuitive/holistic/relational/unconscious/better attuned to the body and senses, the other more abstract/rational/conscious/linguistic/detached. Various models have been proposed (see table below). Although there exist significant differences between these proposals with respect to focus and details, they all seem to converge on the idea that these two modes of cognition can be seen as almost amounting to two separate minds inside our heads. Notably, McGilchrist's proposal is the

only one rooted in the anatomy of the brain, while the others are less concerned with neurology and more with psychology and behavior.

	Heart vs. Head
Daniel Kahneman	thinking fast vs. slow
Seymour Epstein	intuitive-experiential vs. analytical-rational
Jonathan Haidt	elephant vs. rider
Steve Peters	chimp mind vs. human mind
Colin Camerer	monkey vs. press secretary
Hubert Dreyfus	knowing how vs. knowing what
Martin Heidegger	ready-to-hand vs. present-at-hand
Philip Barnard	Implicational vs. propositional subsystems
Iain McGilchrist	right vs. left hemisphere

What we found (Watts and Dorobantu 2023; Dorobantu and Watts 2023) is that spiritual intelligence is associated precisely with a move from the rational/analytic/left-brain type of cognition toward the more intuitive/holistic/right-brain type. Spiritual practices, especially meditation of various kinds, promote a re-balancing of these two modes of cognition, with a prioritization of the more embodied and holistic one.

Back to McGilchrist's account, when it comes to the hemispheres' views of the truth, the left one regards it as a *thing*: fixed, certain, independent of our interaction with it, and concerned with the consistency of representation. The right hemisphere, to the contrary, always regards truth in terms of process: it is contextual and continuously comes into being through our interaction with it in time (p. 402). This is not to say that there exists nothing real outside the projections of our minds, but that everything we can know, our world, is always born out of our interaction with "whatever-it-is-that-exists" and the only criterion for discernment is our experience, individual and collective. It is not that what we experience is not real – a simulacrum – but that it inevitably is only partial (p. 550). McGilchrist thus takes a middle position between two extremes, naïve positivism and naïve deconstructivism, both of which he regards as typical left hemisphere fictions.

Analyzing the available paths to truth in light of hemisphere lateralization, McGilchrist concludes that science, reason, and intuition are all necessary. In doing so, he dispels the myth that science and reason are the sole domain of the left hemisphere and intuition that of the right. Instead, both hemispheres are involved in all these paths to truth, but their approaches differ. In science and reason, the left hemisphere is associated with a procedural mode, focused primarily on internal consistency and prepared to sacrifice the truth in its pursuit. This approach is bound to fail in a world characterized by paradoxes, which the left hemisphere is too eager to quickly (and wrongly) resolve. The right hemisphere's approach is receptive, open, and outwards-turned, prepared instead to sacrifice consistency for the sake of truth, that is, to dwell with uneasy paradoxes without looking for quick solutions.

Another myth that gets brilliantly dispelled is that of science's supposed objectivity, another phantasy of the left hemisphere. Science is neither assumption-free nor value-free, and its objectivity consists not of our delusional ability to stand outside reality and study it like an object, but "in a disciplined disposition, in a modest recognition that our existing answers are inadequate, and in a constant awareness of limitations in handling the possible alternative, always provisional, answers" (p. 417). Science *can* contribute to our understanding of ultimate questions such as "who we are?", but it cannot exhaustively answer them, as the heresy of scientism implies.

The right-hemisphere-mode-of-knowing is much better embraced in physics than in biology, the latter being stuck in an outdated Newtonian mechanistic, left-brain paradigm. Biology still sees 'things' while physics has moved on to see 'processes.' McGilchrist draws a sharp criticism of Neo-Darwinian thinkers like Richard Dawkins, providing ample arguments against determinism and the view of biological organisms as machines. He recapitulates some of the currently inexplicable phenomena in biology: that "parts" seem to mysteriously possess information about the whole; that evolution is marked by convergence and teleology (especially in the inexplicable speed with which mutations occur, certainly much faster than the randomness model prescribes); the inexplicably intelligent behavior of even single-cell organisms. The current mechanistic paradigm cannot account for any of these, whereas, he argues, a "*Gestalt* explanation" is more plausible than one in terms of bottom-up causation (p. 483).

Reason is another of our paths to truth, but it too can be hijacked by a left-hemisphere approach. McGilchrist distinguishes two meanings that are unhelpfully conflated under the English term 'reason': one more holistic associated with *intellectus* or *nous*, the other more linear, local, and machine-like, associated with *ratio* and thus rationality. The former is arguably more important for understanding than the latter because breaking things down never leads to understanding. "What is needed" for understanding, he quotes



philosopher John Cottingham saying, “is not philosophical *analysis* but philosophical *synthesis* – not chopping things into parts, but linking them together” (p. 563).

Reason and abstraction are not the same thing. Unlike what the stereotype might say, reason is actually rooted in embodied experience and very much connected with emotion. A brilliant illustration of how the two hemispheres reason differently is the way they do categorization: for the left hemisphere, things are judged as similar based on the presence or absence of certain features, whereas the right hemisphere judges whether an object taken as a whole resembles an exemplar, based on what Wittgenstein called “family resemblance” (p. 587). Linear deduction is thus just a small subset of what can be called rational, and for our moral decisions, the more holistic type of reason plays a disproportionately large role (hence the absurdity of thought experiments like the trolley problem).

McGilchrist’s discussion of intuition in chapters 17-18 is also very interesting. As it turns out, perhaps unsurprisingly, intuition is far from the Cinderella of our cognition, as the dominant paradigm currently paints it. Not only is intuition quicker than analytical thinking, but astonishingly, it is also more reliable because it can take into account much more factors simultaneously. Numerous examples are presented where intuitive thinking does better than explicit reasoning, hinting that sometimes too much rationality gets in the way. Incursions of analytic thinking, the left hemisphere’s kind of task, are needed from time to time, usually when dealing with an explicit and definable obstacle, but most of the time we rely on embodied skills and unconscious, intuitive reasoning (pp. 750-751).

For me, the most surprising insight here was that the quick intuitive thinking that we do most of the time is actually *more* reliable than explicit reasoning, because I was under the impression that our heuristics are only useful approximations for crisis situations when we don’t have enough time to “compute”. This is certainly the paradigm that is dominant in cognitive science and artificial intelligence. It has been most famously popularized by Nobel-prize laureate Daniel Kahneman in his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Kahneman 2011). Kahneman’s proposal is that humans have two cognitive modes, one quick and dirty, which works in most situations (system 1), and the other slower and more accurate, which is recruited when we pause and think more deeply about a problem (system 2). As I was reading McGilchrist’s account of intuition, I was becoming increasingly anxious to see whether he engages with Kahneman’s theory. He does (pp. 724-728). While being respectful of Kahneman and Tversky’s work in behavioral economics, McGilchrist points out firstly that the slow system 2 is only better when it comes to logical problems that render themselves naturally to analytical thinking and secondly,

that some of the research Kahneman cites to prove his theory is revealed at a closer look to say something completely different. This only proves the claims made earlier in chapter 12, “Institutional science and truth”, that science does not always live up to its ideals of rigor.

If science, reason, and intuition are all necessary paths to truth, imagination is the gateway through which they all must pass to achieve understanding. Imagination, which is something quite different from fantasy, is not an impediment in our way to truth, but a requirement, something that McGilchrist demonstrates with beautiful examples in chapter 19.

Part III of the book is arguably the most interesting, as well as the most controversial. For McGilchrist, it is obvious that the right hemisphere sheds a very different light on our picture of reality. He advocates that we should move from the eighteenth-century model of mechanistic reductionism, a product of left-brain thinking, to a new paradigm that makes more sense of everything that we know from experience, brain science, physics, and spiritual traditions from both East and West. His proposed paradigm is one heavily influenced by process philosophy: there are no things, just processes; relationships are more fundamental than *relata*; parts are as relevant to the whole as the whole is to the parts; and consciousness is ontologically at least as fundamental as matter.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter for readers interested in science & religion is the last one, “The Sense of the Sacred”. Here, McGilchrist reveals his deep belief that despite his reluctance to adhere to any organized form of religion, his proposed paradigm makes it clear that “there is more than we have words for, or can expect to ever understand using reason alone” (p. 1195). He does not explicitly speak of the divine because the word God is fraught with loaded meaning, but he is certainly open to the possibility. If God exists, it is certainly not an engineering God who made the universe to serve some end, a view he believes to be a “projection of the left hemisphere’s fantasy of endless power to manipulate” (p. 1169). Instead, he opts for a panentheistic view, heavily influenced by Whitehead, because process theology looks more compatible with the right hemisphere’s mode of cognition. Panentheism and animism might actually be different facets of the same intuition (seen through the prism of the left and the right hemisphere), that life is not something cast upon objects, but, as Ingold puts it, “rather immanent in the very process of the world’s continual generation or coming-into-being” (p. 1232). God is therefore not the first cause, as in deism, but the “ongoing ground of Being” (p. 1237), a view fully consistent with Judeo-Christian theology.

The right hemisphere is much better suited to knowing God (or “Being”, as he puts it, following Whitehead), because it is open to the possibility of God’s

existence, unlike the left hemisphere, which excludes anything not consistent with its internal representations. In addition, understanding of the divine requires oblique, indirect approaches through metaphors, tolerance for ambiguity, the apprehension of “betweenness”, appreciation of the *Gestalt*, and valuing *not* knowing (apophaticism) and *not* doing, which are all features of the right hemisphere.

The first step in our attitude of awe toward reality is a deep puzzle regarding why there is something rather than nothing in the first place. “Existence”, he quotes theologian David Bentley Hart, “is most definitely not a natural phenomenon” (p. 1193). Religious diversity of the kind we observe should not be surprising because truth cannot be captured by a single set of metaphors and myths.

Religious cognition consists of three steps: starting from experience (right hemisphere) moving to the left hemisphere for articulation (theology) and then back to the right for recognition or rejection (pp. 1128-9). Both religious fundamentalism and militant atheism are consequences of left-hemisphere dominance. In Christianity, according to McGilchrist’s view, this type of over-reliance on left-hemisphere thinking led at times to an obsession for details and being right, and hence to schisms.

McGilchrist also discusses in detail the relation between science and religion, devoting an entire appendix to debunking the myth of their incompatibility. Although he provides a helpful historical account, he seems a little bit too married to Gould’s idea of “non-overlapping magisteria” (p. 1281), which is increasingly less seen as a fruitful way forward in the field (Lightman 2022).

There is one section that I found particularly moving. It is the one about “McGilchrist’s wager” (p. 1263), in which he adds one more option to Pascal’s famous wager. For him, it is not that either God exists and it pays off to believe, or God does not exist and then you lose nothing by believing. The third option is that we might have a role to play in God’s and the world’s Becoming. This is theologically controversial for the obvious reasons: it posits an evolving God, contrary to the omnipotence, omniscience, and complete perfection taken for granted in classical theology. McGilchrist does not buy into that view and makes an intriguing case that the only way we can account for the freedom and creativity that are inherent in our world is to get rid of divine omnipotence and embrace instead the radical openness of the future. While many theologians will raise an eyebrow, to me, his proposal sounded appealing and increasingly plausible, especially in light of the consistency of his other arguments proposed in the book. For the first time, I had the feeling that I finally understood for a tiny moment Philip Hefner’s “created co-creator” metaphor. The idea that we collaborate with a non-omnipotent/omniscient God in co-creating the world is one of the most promising solutions to

the problems of theodicy and free will. It is also particularly powerful in motivating a certain kind of positive attitude to life, because it elevates the human person from the position of an insignificant pawn in the big picture of a colossal universe governed by a perfect God to that of an active and relevant agent in creation's unfolding and coming-into-being: "something depends on our way of being, and it is not just ourselves" (p. 1297).

All in all, I found the book to be excellent in the coherence of its argument, the impressive array of sources brought together, and the boldness of its thesis. People who specialize in one of the gazillion fields synthesized by McGilchrist will likely find things to pick on, and this kind of criticism is absolutely necessary for keeping authors rigorously accountable for their claims. But this will hardly chip at the immense value of this book, which lies in challenging us to think differently about almost everything we know. McGilchrist is perhaps a bit guilty of overindulging in his own metaphor, cherry-picking quotations that support his views, and seeing everywhere dualities that confirm his lateralization hypothesis, like the proverbial man with a hammer for whom everything is a nail. However, he never claims this is the only possible view, but only a helpful metaphor. As an anecdote, since reading *The Master and His Emissary* and now *The Matter with Things*, I cannot help but see the left-right distinction ubiquitously, and I imagine other readers will do too.

For humanities scholars, in general, and theologians, in particular, this book provides a strong and scientifically-based argument that can be of great help in our current dilemmas regarding the place of our disciplines in academic curricula. Instead of hopelessly pursuing quantitative methods at all costs in the hope of being taken seriously by colleagues who specialize in hard sciences, humanities scholars could draw some useful arguments for why their traditional methodologies and approaches are equally important, if not even more important, for our collective pursuit of knowledge and truth.

Finally, a word of praise for McGilchrist's ability to communicate complex information in an accessible style, without presupposing any prior knowledge from the part of the reader. He is a master storyteller, and his frequent use of real-life examples and anecdotes makes the book a pleasure to read. This is also helped by the aesthetically pleasing aspect of the book and the exquisite attention to detail deployed by the team at Perspectiva Press: I have not been able to spot a single typo in an eight-hundred-thousand-word text. This kind of perfectionism is fitting for a monumental book that I have no doubt will become a landmark.

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