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reads

*The Matter with Things: Our Brains,
Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*

by Iain McGilchrist¹

COLERIDGE, LIKE MANY OF THE ROMANTICS, traced the schisms of modern life to one within the self, a relationship between two powers, which he named Reason and Understanding. The dominion of Understanding, which he associated with the rational intellect, had ruptured what he called ‘One Life’, or the proper attunement of these capacities, by way of the imagination, to the metaphysical order of things. Coleridge might well cock one skeptical eye at neuroscience, beginning as it does in fragmentation, with a piece of the human. In *The Matter With Things* (hereafter, *MWT*), Ian McGilchrist proposes (in 1500 pages!) a paradigm shift in neuroscience—with Coleridge at the center.

Already in his epic 2009 *The Master and His Emissary*, McGilchrist put forward his ‘hemispheric hypothesis’ (HH) with considerable help from the Romantics.² The narrow version of the HH can be distilled into three neuroscientific claims, restated in some detail at the beginning of *MWT*. First, brains are near universally bilateral and asymmetrical, and the two hemispheres direct two modes of *attention*, one a “precisely focussed, narrow-beam attention” (left hemisphere), the other for “broad, open, sustained, vigilant attention” (right hemisphere) (*MWT*, 20). In evolutionary terms, the left hemisphere functions for “manipulation” of parts, the right for “understanding” the whole (*MWT*, 28).



Second, in humans these two forms of attention produce *two phenomenological worlds*, which McGilchrist maps onto familiar philosophical dichotomies (*logos* and *mythos*, *ratio* and *intellectus*, understanding and reason). The left hemisphere’s focal-grasping attention underwrites capacities for abstraction, analysis into parts, and a tendency to see things in isolation, as non-living, and impersonal. The right hemisphere’s global awareness tends, by contrast, to view things concretely and as wholes, in context, and encounters the world as living and

¹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, 2 vols. (London: Perspectiva, 2022).

² Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); hereafter, *MHE*.

personal. Perhaps the most salient pair of descriptors for these advanced functions is that the right hemisphere ‘presents’ the world in all its depth and richness, while the left ‘represents’ it as pale and abstracted copy (*MWT*, 28–30).

Third, extensive study of psychic and neural pathology confirms the *normative* priority of the right hemisphere. He focuses here on schizophrenia as an exemplary case (*MWT*, 305ff).

What we might call the extended HH encompasses a much wider set of anthropological and sociological assertions, limited here to two. The second part of *MHE* interprets Western modernity as a pathological overreaching of the left hemisphere. His diagnosis takes the form of a historical sociology that much resembles those of Weber, Adorno, and Heidegger: ‘all the available sources of intuitive life—the natural world, cultural tradition, the body, religion, and art—have been so conceptualised . . . and “deconstructed” (ironised) by self-consciousness . . . that their power has been drained from them’, the natural environment replaced by a technical one in which the ‘left hemispheric world has become externalized’ or ‘colonised’ in a ‘self-reflexive hall of mirrors’ (*MHE* xxiii, xxiv). Unlike these master narratives of modernity, McGilchrist wants to relocate the brain in a teleologically ordered cosmos, the denial of which he rather regards as a symptom. This places him nearer the Romantics, and indeed he treats Romanticism as a (right hemispheric) corrective to the left-hemispheric instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, ascendent in the twentieth century. This sociological thesis is underwritten by an anthropological one, that as attention shapes the world, language shapes attention and therefore mediates experience (although McGilchrist is sometimes inconsistent on this question, arguing that attention and even thought can occur without language).

MWT largely assumes both the narrower and extended versions of the HH, extended again in its three impressive divisions on neuropsychology, epistemology, and metaphysics. Part one examines perception, judgment, apprehension, intelligence, and creativity in relation to the HH. Part two treats science, reason, imagination, and intuition as paths to truth, and the third part takes on such grand metaphysical themes as the One and the Many, time, flow and movement, space, matter, consciousness, value, purpose, and our sense of the sacred. The Romantics again make significant appearances in all three parts, particularly in the last two, where Coleridge anchors the pivotal chapter on imagination (see especially 768ff.). Just at this point, however, a series of tensions emerge between McGilchrist’s philosophical sources, and these in turn trouble even the narrower HH, as well as its anthropological, sociological, epistemological, and metaphysical extensions. The difficulties arise in his triangulation of the brain, consciousness, and language.

Because language and imagination are the chief capacities in world-making, forming a bridge between the strictly neuroscientific claims of the HH and the larger sociological theses that make McGilchrist’s work so consequential and controversial, a more thorough engagement with Coleridge might point up the sources of confusion with which this work is bound to meet.

McGilchrist follows Coleridge in privileging imagination in the process of world-making, and, like Coleridge, he conceives the imagination as both linguistic and metaphysical. This coupling of ideas distinguishes Coleridge from either Heidegger or Whitehead, the primary sources of McGilchrist's views of language and metaphysics respectively. The pair sits uneasily with Coleridge or each other. Heidegger's radical philosophy of the world-disclosing power of language swallows up metaphysics and subjectivity; Whitehead's metaphysics minimizes the potencies of language and at every point exemplifies the sort of objectifying, onto-theological thinking attacked by Heidegger. Coleridge holds these tendencies together far more coherently and in a manner more consistent with McGilchrist's ambitions. He differs from his fellow English Romantics in his speculative bent; from the German Romantics in giving a positive, rather than skeptical account of the metaphysical ground of language and self-consciousness; and from Schelling in omitting this abyss (*Abgrund*) from the inner life of God and in providing a richer account of language.

These philosophical fault lines need not undermine McGilchrist's project, but they do expose certain weaknesses in its architectonic. Again, the issue here is how he triangulates three sets of philosophical problems relating the brain, consciousness, and language. The first is how two streams of consciousness are stereoscoped or 'transduced' into a single stream, the fundamental unity of which is not aggregative *and* has the peculiar reflexive form of self-consciousness (*MWT*, 33). Focusing on qualia, neural correlates, and the like simply will not get the whole problem in view (*MWT*, 1066ff). It is not the unity of consciousness but of self-consciousness that is at stake. The tendency, after Heidegger and Wittgenstein, to dissolve self-consciousness into language obscures the relevant questions. The Romantics did not make this reductive move, and neither does McGilchrist, but he does not raise the theme of self-consciousness in any detail.

Second, what the Romantics and Coleridge offer us is a bilevel account of self-consciousness, which is, at the level of ordinary experience, linguistically mediated, and not just in our relentless use of first-person signifiers. The German Romantics showed, against Kant and Hegel, how this conceptual self-knowledge had to depend on a prior sort of self-relation, a primitive original unity. But where Schleiermacher and Hölderlin conceived this original level as preconceptual, as a kind of blind, faceless absolute, Coleridge understood it as personal and conceptual, a divine 'I AM' of which human imagination is a repetition or analogical participation. This at least affords some way of explaining how individual self-consciousness relates to the wider field of consciousness from which it emerges (*MWT*, 1102 ff).

What do these two differences entail, third, for the large-scale clinical, sociological, or metaphysical judgments that make McGilchrist's books so powerful and provocative? He never denies that both hemispheres, and both phenomenological worlds projected out of them, are always present in part. But the unity and complexity of a linguistically mediated self-consciousness, out of which these worlds are projected into a unity, interrupts any attempt to draw a straight line from one hemisphere to psychic or social pathologies. This is not to

deny the impressive empirical data, gathered from decades of research into the psychological consequences of impairment in either hemisphere, or the analogies between psychopathologies, such as a schizophrenia or depression, and the left-hemispheric dominant states McGilchrist sees in scientism and technocracy. What he needs is a more careful account of how these two projected worlds, as well as base functions like attention, perception, and judgment, are interlaced in a unified self-consciousness whose strange symbolic fabric weaves attentions into worlds that muddle the traces of their divided neural origins. Such a perspective seems necessary to explain how the linguistic dimension gets up and running in the first place. In this respect, we have not really moved beyond the questions posed by the Romantics and Coleridge.