



Précis Paper

The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain - the Author's Perspective

Introduction

In this edition of BenchTV, Iain McGilchrist, and Kevin Connor SC discuss a book which Iain published in 2009: *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* Yale University Press, 2009, Allsop CJ has invited Iain to Australia to give a presentation to Federal Court judges and Iain will also make a present to and speak with the Supreme Court judges of NSW. Iain's work involves the brain's right and left hemispheres and much of the interview involves a discussion how Iain came to write his book and the ideas it contains.

Key points of the discussion include:

1. Background to the book
2. Things learned in a lecture by John Cutting on the right cerebral hemisphere in psychiatric disorders.
3. Ideas underpinning *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*
4. The physical nature of the brain's two hemispheres
5. Iain's experience in hospitals
6. What happens to the left side of the body in event of a right hemisphere stroke

7. How the cartoon: 'RSA Animate: The Divided Brain' came about
8. Other projects: Iain's essay: he Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning. Why are We So Unhappy? - the film 'Tawai' - a book in progress 'There are no things'

Matters covered in the presentation's key points

Background to the book: Iain talks about the time he spent at Oxford reading English. After studying English he obtained a Fellowship at All Souls College where he reflected on what he had found unsatisfactory about studying Literature at university. Iain was concerned about the critical approach to works of art. Iain explains that a work of art is often thought of a receptacle for ideas. However, giving the example of a poem, Iain says that he felt that the meaning of a poem is as much contained in how it is said, as in what is said. Iain was concerned with the approach of critics; the way in which they turned the embodied into the abstract, unique into the general, and the implicit into the explicit, Iain then wrote a book called *Against Criticism*, Faber and Faber, 1982. Iain felt there was a problem with the way the mind and body related. Again, in the context of a poem, Iain felt that a poem affected one's whole physical frame, it was not just a bunch of ideas. Iain decided he needed to study medicine to find out what was happening when a change to someone's mind affected their body, or something happened in their brain which altered the way they saw the world. Iain was influenced by Oliver Sacks. Iain studied medicine, with some neurology and neurosurgery. Iain then studied psychiatry at Maudsley Hospital in London.

Things learned in a lecture by John Cutting on the right cerebral hemisphere in psychiatric disorders: In 1990 Iain attended a lecture by John Cutting on the topic of the right cerebral hemisphere in psychiatric disorders. Attending the lecture was pretty much a life changing experience for Iain. John Cutting had published a book called *The Right Cerebral hemisphere and Psychiatric Disorders* Oxford University Press 1990. There are some very important things happen when you suffer a right hemisphere stroke, and Iain heard from John Cutting's lecture that the right hemisphere understands implicit meaning: for example tone of voice, jokes, metaphors, reading faces and reading body language, but the left hemisphere

takes things literally. Iain was very struck to hear this because he had been trying to explain how works of art were necessarily implicit, and destroyed by making them literal. Having looked at literature Iain had realized that everything was in context, and completely changed if taken out of context. Iain then did some work on hemisphere difference in psychiatric patients and studied asymmetries of the brain at Johns Hopkins University.

Ideas underpinning The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World: Iain developed the idea that we were living in a world where the left hemisphere's view, which should be tributary to view of the right hemisphere's view of the whole picture, was like the emissary taking over from the master. Iain refers to the book by Louis Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, Harvard University Press 1994. Iain explains that Sass's thesis was that something odd had happened in the modernism movement, also carrying on into postmodernism, which was that a lot of its aspects reflected the schizophrenic subject's world. Iain wondered whether what Sass was seeing was that we had perhaps started to rely on a more and more mechanistic linear view of the world, and stopped using what the right hemisphere could tell us. Iain then identified three periods in Western history in which a civilisation had sprung forth in which the left and right hemispheres were working together before they began to decay into a left hemisphere world.

The physical nature of the brain's two hemispheres: Iain talks about the reasons why the brain is divided into two hemispheres and discusses the physical nature of each side, as well as the connection between them across the corpus callosum. Each hemisphere is different in size, shape and weight. In addition, the convolution patterns are different on each side, and the sides are asymmetrical. Neuropsychologically, each side is completely different. Iain also talks about the split brain operations of the 60s and 70s, in which the corpus callosum was cut to help people with intractable epilepsy, and how those operations made it possible to present information to one hemisphere at a time and see how they responded. Iain explains how the research emerging from the operations led to misconceptions. Iain states that both hemispheres of the brain are involved in

language and mathematics. In respect of mathematics, Iain adds that the understanding of maths is a matter for the right hemisphere, whereas the proceduralising of maths is a matter for the left hemisphere.

Iain's experience in hospitals: Iain talks about his experience in hospitals, particularly in relation to the overburden of the bureaucratic left-hemisphere way of thinking and the negative effects of that on patient care and morale.

What happens to the left side of the body in event of a right hemisphere stroke:

Iain talks about the effects of right hemisphere strokes, including a disappearance of the left hand side of space and a patient's lack of awareness or acknowledgment of the left hand side of their body. He contrasts that this phenomenon doesn't happen in the case of a left hemisphere stroke, because the right hemisphere is able to see the whole picture. Iain says it is harder to rehabilitate people after a right hemisphere stroke. Iain also states that when you have a right hemisphere stroke you lose emotional depth, become fatuous and unempathic, joke inappropriately, and most delusions and hallucinations occur after right hemisphere injury. Iain says that the left hemisphere has no real grasp of reality on its own and that this is the world that we are now dangerously headed into. Iain is talking about a whole new way of being the world: one in which we relate to the world as a living complex whole rather than a bunch of meaningless resources to be exploited. He follows with some comments on how the right hemisphere understands 'between-ness'.

Other projects: 'RSA Animate: The Divided Brain' - Iain's essay: The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning. Why are We So Unhappy? - The film Tawai - a new book in progress 'There are no things': Iain discusses two recent projects: a cartoon based on Iain's ideas, and an essay that he has written. The cartoon was made from 25 minutes of a lecture which Iain gave to RSA. Iain wrote his essay in 2012 because he felt it would be a good idea to write something that could be read in about an hour and downloaded onto a phone. The essay is an introduction to some of the ideas in Iain's book, and also contains some information that is not included in the book. In the essay Iain talks about how people feel that their lives are meaningless and pointless, and that the reason for this is that the left

hemisphere of the brain doesn't understand the meaning of anything. It is the right hemisphere which understands that things have meaning which can't be made explicit. Iain states that, by narrowing focus and going into details, we've lost the broad field to understand, place and interpret our experience. Iain says that one needs peace and attention, and to cultivate the habit of quiet reflection. Iain concludes the presentation by talking about a soon to be released film, 'Tawai', made by Bruce Parry about knowledges lost by the West. Iain says that Bruce Parry spoke with him about the film in order to get some ideas on which to hang his experience. Finally, Iain talks of a new book he is writing. The book's working title is 'There are no things'. Iain says that in the book he will look at the world's constituents as the right hemisphere would look at them, and as the left hemisphere would look at them. Iain hopes to illuminate some well-known paradoxes in the process of doing this.

Bibliography

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'RSA Animate: The Divided Brain':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFs9WO2B8ul>

Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings*, Duckworth & Co., 1973

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Iain McGilchrist's website: <http://iainmcgilchrist.com/>

Presenters' biographies

Iain McGilchrist, Psychiatrist, Isle of Skye

Iain is a psychiatrist and writer who practiced in London but now writes and lectures in the Isle of Skye. He was formerly a consultant Psychiatrist of the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Hospital in London, working on specialist units including the neuropsychiatry and epilepsy unit, the children's unit, the forensic unit, the national psychosis referral unit and the national eating disorder unit. Iain has also worked as a research fellow in neuroimaging at the Johns Hopkins Memorial Hospital in Baltimore, USA. Iain has published original articles in a wide range of papers and journals on topics in literature, medicine and psychiatry.

Kevin Connor SC

Kevin initially trained as a doctor and was admitted as a lawyer in 1987 after working as Associate to Justice Gaudron in the High Court of Australia. He was called to the Bar in 1987 and appointed Senior Counsel in 2007. He has research experience and continuing interests in the area of neuroscience.