

*The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* by Iain McGilchrist (2009)



McGilchrist asserts that we have lately been in a fit of despair to discuss how the left and right hemispheres of the brain perform their functions because we have found that they are more complex and integrated than we formerly believed, so we have given up talking about it. He claims that it is not true that one part does reason and the other part does emotion; both parts of the brain are profoundly involved in both. Similarly, he states that it is not true that language resides only in the left hemisphere and visual imagery is only in the right. McGilchrist takes a strong stand. He points out that most certainly there are differences, and our modern era has witnessed an increased allegiance to left hemisphere thinking. Characterizations of left hemisphere differences in thinking can be summed up as: denotative language, abstraction, decontextualized, general in nature, fixed, isolated, static, lifeless. Characterizations of right hemisphere differences in thinking can be summed up as: individual, changing, evolving, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, living.

He stresses that imagination and reason reside in both hemispheres; but as Einstein said, the intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. McGilchrist holds that we have created a society that honors the servant, but has forgotten the gift.

“Despite the asymmetry in their roles, in favour of the right hemisphere, there is an important opposing asymmetry of power, in favour of the left hemisphere. The Master makes himself vulnerable to the emissary, and the emissary can choose to take advantage of the situation, to ignore the Master. It seems that its nature is such that it is prone to do so, and it may even, mistakenly, see the right hemisphere's world as undoing its work, challenging its 'supremacy'. (McGilchrist, 2009, Location 5871)”

“Technical language, or the language of bureaucratic systems, devoid of any richness of meaning, and suggesting a mechanistic world, would increasingly be applied across the board, and might even seem unremarkable when applied to descriptions of the human world, and human beings, even the human mind itself. This is what the world would look like if the emissary betrayed the Master. It's hard to resist the conclusion that his goal is within sight. (McGilchrist, 2009, Location 11330)”

“What the evidence suggests, if reviewed in greater detail than I have here, is that the East Asian cultures use strategies of both hemispheres more evenly, while Western strategies are steeply skewed towards the left hemisphere. In other words, the emissary appears to work in harmony with the Master in the East, but is in the process of usurping him in the West. (McGilchrist, 2009, Location 11965)”

“The Master needs to trust, to believe in, his emissary, knowing all the while that that trust may be abused. The emissary knows, but knows wrongly, that he is invulnerable. If the relationship holds, they are invincible; but if it is abused, it is not just the Master that suffers, but both of them, since the emissary owes his existence to the Master. (McGilchrist, 2009, Location 11192)”

## References

McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The master and his emissary: the divided brain and the making of the Western world*. New Haven: Yale University Press.