

THE MASTER AND HIS EMISSARY

1. Introduction

If we look at the brain as having ‘functions’, as we usually do, sure enough the left and the right hemispheres both share many of those functions. Contrary to popular belief, neuroscience has shown that every conceivable activity such as language and visual imagery are served by both hemispheres. However, if we don’t just look at what the brain does as if it was a machine, but at *how* it does it in the sense of ‘in what manner’ as part of a living person, some very important differences start to emerge. The relationship between the two hemispheres is not symmetrical. Although both need each other and each has an important role to play, those roles are not equal as one depends more on the other.

2. Why is the brain divided?

So why is the brain divided? There is a bump on the left side towards the back and one on the right side towards the front. In nature, structure and function go hand in hand, which means that those bumps point to some particular functions of the hemispheres.

A. Handedness:

One asymmetry humans display is handedness. Are these bumps about handedness? Research shows they are not, for several reasons.

(1) One is that we could have equally skillful hands, and apes have a left-sided bump but no right-sided handedness.

(2) Not only that, but this relative advantage of this relationship between the left hemisphere and right-handedness is not the result of an increase in function in the left hemisphere, but of a deliberate handicapping of the right. Human right-handedness is related to left hand weakness, not right hand strength. The genes for asymmetry do not code for left hemisphere expansion, but for right hemisphere restriction.

B. Language:

Also, in the left hemisphere language and right hand dominance are remarkably closely associated. They have something in common – we use them both to *grasp* things, concretely and figuratively. However, they are not the cause or explanation of hemisphere difference, just the symptom.

Looking at evolution of language we find further puzzles. It is simply **not true that we have language to communicate or think.**

(1) Speaking is dependent on the evolution of not just the brain, but also the articulating apparatus (larynx, tongue etc.) and respiratory control. We developed the necessary improvements in tongue, larynx and respiratory muscle control way before we developed language. So why did we need these developments? Anthropologists now believe it is in order to sing. The ‘music’ of speech, the connotations accompanying our language, constitutes the majority of what it is we communicate. **Denotative language (left brain) is not necessary for I-thou communication.** Music is largely right-hemisphere dependent and the aspects of speech that enable us to truly understand the

meaning of an utterance at a higher level (intonation, irony, metaphor, meaning in context) are all served by the *right hemisphere*. Denotative language becomes necessary when we have projects and expands immeasurably our capacity for manipulation (I-it communication). It is therefore not necessary for communication itself, only for a certain kind of communication.

(2) We also don't need language to think or conceptualize as pigeons capable of distinguishing a Picasso from a Monet show. We only need language for certain kinds of thinking.

C. Two types of attention:

Hemisphere differences seem to underwrite different kinds of attention. **Attention is not just another cognitive function, but the way we relate to the world. It not only dictates the kind of relationship we have with whatever it is, but also what it is that we seek to have a relationship with.** Attention is the basis of our experience of the world. It is not just a function alongside other functions, but the basis for having a world at all in which those functions can be exercised. Though it is true that **what it is we are attending to determines the kind of attention we pay**, it is at least as true that **the type of attention we pay determines what it is we see**. The way reality comes into being is much like that *famous picture by M.C. Escher* of hands that draw hands.

An example of how both hemispheres differ in how they pay attention are birds. They pay narrowly focused attention to what they are eating with their right eye (left hemisphere), while keeping their left eye (right hemisphere) open for predators. Birds and animals also use their left eye (right hemisphere) to form bonds with others of their kind.

This difference is preserved as we evolve. The **left hemisphere specializes in a piecemeal attention that helps us make use of the world**, but in doing so also alters our relationship with it. **The right hemisphere subserves a broad open attention that enables us to see ourselves connected to and empathize with whatever is other than ourselves.** These two kinds of attention are mutually incompatible. Therefore, the ability to have both ways of understanding the world available to us, yet keeping them apart, is paramount. The **corpus callosum** that connects both hemispheres helps us do that, although it is more involved with the process of inhibition that keeps things apart than it is with the process of connection that binds things together. Interestingly, new research has found that men tend to have more neurons in each of the hemispheres, while women in the corpus callosum. This may explain the male tendency to be achievement- and goal-oriented, and the female tendency to be relationship- and embodiment-oriented.

So the **left hemisphere** expansion is related to our capacity to **analyze (separate reality into parts) and make use of the world by forming concepts, forming language and manipulating the physical world with the right hand. Language was thus not primarily developed for communication or thinking, but to enable a certain type of functional manipulation of the world.** For the left hemisphere language is like a map, a representation of the world. Therefore, for the left hemisphere the world is no longer present, but literally re-presented after the fact. **What the left delivers is a useful fiction.**

The right frontal expansion in the **right hemisphere** is associated with an **appreciation of wholeness** and a whole array of functions that relate to **connectivity, relationships and contextualization** through our capacity for empathy, including imagination, creativity, religious awe, music, dance, poetry, art, love, morality, humor etc.

3. The hemispheres in detail

Left hemisphere	Right hemisphere
	Longer, wider, larger and heavier.
	First hemisphere to develop in childhood.
Only connected to the right brain.	Connected to the left brain and the rest of the body.
Only deals with new experiences once they become familiar.	'Presences' in unpreconceived freshness = <i>all experiences are first processed on the right.</i>
Sees the parts .	Sees the whole . Better at making connections between things.
Sees things more in the abstract . <i>Schematizes and generalizes things into categories.</i>	Sees things embedded in real world context in which they occur. <i>Appreciates actually existing things in all their uniqueness.</i>
<i>Much of what matters in experience depends ultimately on not being snatched from the context in which it alone has meaning. All artistic and spiritual experience, and perhaps everything that is truly important, can be implicit only; language, in making things explicit, reduces everything to the same worn coinage, 'making the uncommon common' (Nietzsche).</i>	
Better attuned to tools and to what is inanimate, mechanical or machine-like , and which it has itself made . Such things are understandable in its own terms, because they were put together by it. <i>Everything, incl. living wholes are put together in bits; and if there are no clear bits, it will invent them.</i> Sees time as a succession of points , flowing as a succession of static moments like the still frames of a film.	Adapted to dealing with living things , which are flexible, organic, constantly changing, and which it has not made. Appreciates the organic wholeness of a flowing structure that changes over time, as all living things are. Almost all aspects of appreciation of time .
Can appreciate rhythm as long as it is simple.	Far more important for the appreciation of music : an organic being that flows; needs to be appreciated as a whole; exists almost entirely in 'betweenness'. Melody, timbre, harmony, complex rhythms (cross-betas, syncopes etc.).
Sees things as flat as they would be projected on a screen. <i>Sees things as detached from us.</i>	Depth of visual field (corresponds to harmony in music). From its (right brain) world we are not isolated .

<p>Both hemispheres are involved in the expression and appreciation of emotion, although to very different degrees.</p>	
<p>Anger; Emotions that are superficial, conscious or willed. Cannot read emotional facial expression or understand or remember emotional material as well as right. Competitive.</p>	<p>Regulates most of our emotional life. Emotionally sophisticated. We express more with the left side of the face, governed by the right hemisphere. Recognition of faces, discriminating their uniqueness, interpreting their expressions. More empathic, less competitive, more attuned to compassion and fellowship. Far better attuned to sadness.</p>
<p>More interested in what is impersonal. Relatively autistic.</p> <p><i>Sees a mass of discrete episodes, which it often gets out of sequence →</i> Sense of ourselves as identified with our conscious will that moves us in separate sequential steps through time.</p> <p>As mentioned above, language was not primarily developed for communication or thinking, but to enable a certain type of functional manipulation of the world. For the left hemisphere language is like a map, a representation of the world. Therefore, for the left hemisphere the world is no longer present, but literally re-presented after the fact. What the left delivers is a useful fiction.</p>	<p>More interested in what has personal relevance ‘for me’ (self-relevance). Better able to understand what goes on in other people’s heads and empathize. Intuitive moral sense (closely bound up with empathy for others) depends on frontal cortex that is dysfunctional in psychopaths.</p> <p>Appreciation of narrative →</p> <p>Sense of ourselves as complex, beings with a past and future, single beings with an enduring story over time.</p>
<p>Our embodied nature enters into everything we do, not just our actions and feelings, but also in into our ability to reason, philosophize and engage in science. The hemispheres have different ways of understanding the body.</p>	
<p>Sees the body as an assemblage of parts. Sees the body as if it were an object in space alongside other objects. We live in the body rather as we drive a car.</p>	<p>Has a whole body image. Sees the body as mode of existence. We live the body – we are the alive body.</p>

<p>Sequential analysis aspect of reasoning.</p>	<p>Deductive reasoning, many kinds of mathematical procedures and problem-solving, and phenomena of sudden insight into the nature of a complex construct are mediated by areas involved in the processing of emotion.</p>
<p><i>Overly optimistic, unrealistically positive in its self-appraisal, in denial about its shortcomings, unreasonably certain</i> that it understands things of which it has little knowledge, disinclined to change its mind. It is prone to paranoia and cannot trust. It needs to feel in control. Motor-speech center (but not all of language) lies in left hemisphere.</p>	<p>Sees more, but far more inclined to self-doubt, more uncertain of what it knows.</p> <p>— Has no voice</p>
<p>Difference overall:</p> <p>Experience is forever in motion, ramifying and unpredictable. <i>In order for us to know anything, that thing must have enduring properties.</i> If all things flow, and one can never step into the same river twice (Heraclitus – brilliant evocation of the core of the right hemisphere’s reality), one will always be taken unawares by experience, since nothing can ever be known if nothing is ever repeated. <i>We have to find a way of fixing it as it flies</i>, stepping back from the immediacy of experience, stepping outside the flow. Hence the brain has to attend to the world in two completely different ways, and in so doing, bring two different worlds into being. This looks like follows:</p>	
<p>We ‘experience’ our experience in a special way: a re-represented version of it, containing now static, separable, bounded but essentially fragmented entities, grouped into classes, on which predictions can be based. This kind of attention isolates, fixes and makes each thing explicit by bringing it under the spotlight of attention. In doing so, it renders things inert, mechanical and lifeless. But it also enables us, for the first time, to know and consequently to learn and to make things. This ability gives us power. Pays attention to the virtual world that is has created, which is self-consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the other, making itself powerful, but also curiously impotent, because it is ultimately only able to operate on and know itself.</p>	<p>We experience the live, complex, embodied world of individual, always unique beings, forever in flux, a net of interdependencies, forming and reforming wholes, an implicit world with which we are deeply connected and into which we are deeply embedded.</p> <p>Pays attention to the other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relationship. It is deeply attracted to and given life by the relationship, the betweenness that exists with this other.</p>

<p>The two left and right hemispheric aspects of the world are not symmetrically opposed. For example, they are not equivalent to the subjective and objective points of view, concepts that are themselves a product of the way the left hemisphere constructs the world. The distinction between the two hemispheres is more as follows:</p>	
<p>The world we are more used to thinking of, in which subjective and objective appear as separate poles.</p> <p>A black and white world without betweenness.</p>	<p>Pre-reflective experience of the world, before we had a chance to view it at all or divide it into bits. What later comes to be thought as subjective and objective by the left hemisphere is held in a suspension that embraces each potential pole and their togetherness together.</p> <p>A world in which there is betweenness.</p>
<p>These two worlds are not different ways of <i>thinking about</i> the world, but different ways of being in the world. <i>Their difference is not symmetrical, but fundamentally asymmetrical</i>. Both ways of conceiving the world are very important and essential for our ability to lead civilized lives, but <i>they are not equally valid</i>.</p>	

To make the point about validity, first it is interesting that in the late 19th and 20th centuries, both mathematicians and physicists (Cantor, Boltzman, Gödel, Bohr, Einstein, Planck) as well as philosophers (American pragmatists: Dewey, James; European phenomenologists: Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler, Merlau-Ponty and the later Wittgenstein) started from the premises of the left hemisphere that sequential analysis will lead us to the truth, but then ended up with results that approximate far more closely to and confirm the validity of the right hemisphere’s way of understanding the world, not that of the left.

Second, there are also other **indications of the greater validity of the right hemisphere’s way** of looking at the world:

- Broad vigilant attention must come before we can focus on one part of the field; we see the whole before we see the parts – we don’t put the whole together from the parts.
- We experience everything at first with the right hemisphere, not the left.
- Language originates in the body and is implicit, not something that functions at the abstract level, as something explicit.
- Affect is primary, not the result of calculation based on cognitive evaluation of the parts.
- The unconscious is more closely related to right-hemisphere functioning and is well ahead of anything our explicit verbalizing consciousness can be aware of (Libet 1985).
- Careful analysis (McNeill 1992) of the relationship between speech and gesture shows that both thought and its expression actually originate in the right hemisphere, not the left.
- Re-presentation necessarily relies on earlier ‘presentation’ or ‘presencing’.

- Even the mode of functioning of the nervous system is more right-hemisphere-congruent than left-hemisphere-congruent.

4. The challenging dance between the two hemispheres

The problem for us with these two hemispheres is not the hemispheres themselves, but the way they relate to each other on the basis of the way we relate to ourselves. More specifically, our problem is the fact that for all the reasons explained above we become enslaved by the left hemisphere as opposed to having it integrated as a useful tool to be used when needed.

The age-old story of a wise master and his emissary told somewhere by Nietzsche makes the point. Once upon a time a wise spiritual master ruled over a small, but prosperous domain. He was known for his selfless devotion to his people. As his people flourished and grew in numbers, the bounds of his small domain spread, and with it, the need to trust implicitly the emissaries he sent to ensure that safety of its ever more distant parts. Not only had it become impossible for him to order all that needed to be dealt with, but he also wisely saw that he needed to keep his distance from certain concerns. And so he nurtured and carefully trained his emissaries so that they could be trusted. Eventually however, his cleverest and most ambitious vizier, the one he trusted most to do his work, began to see himself as the master and used his position to advance his own wealth and influence. He saw his master's temperance and forbearance as weakness, not wisdom, and on his missions to his master's behalf adopted his master's mantle as his own. Eventually the emissary became contemptuous of his master and usurped him. The people were duped, the domain became a tyranny and eventually collapsed in ruins.

What the left hemisphere offers is a valuable, but intermediate process of unpacking what we are experiencing in order to hand it back to the right hemisphere, where it can once more be integrated into the experiential whole – much as the painstaking fragmentation and analysis of a sonata in practice is reintegrated by the pianist in performance at a level where he or she must no longer be aware of it. That is how the two should work together: The emissary reporting back to the master, who alone can see the broader picture.

Although the hemispheres need to cooperate, **they find themselves in competition, not because of the right hemisphere, but because of the left.** Enamored by its own sense of power the left **thinks it knows it all**, even though it cannot be aware of what the right knows. Even though the left is more dependent on the right than vice versa, the left **thinks it can go it alone.** The left is **prone to paranoia and cannot trust.** It **needs to feel in control.** The more dependent hemisphere, the left one, has a much more limited view of the world, yet it does not know that and often **functions as if it was independent of the right.**

The self-consistent rationalism of the left hemisphere has convinced it that it does not need to concern itself with what the right hemisphere knows, because it believes it has the whole story itself. To make such a **power grab** possible it has **three great advantages:**

- (1) It has control over the voice and the means of argument – language, logic and linearity.
- (2) The self-consistent world of pure theory and ideas it creates is like a hall of mirrors. All attempts to escape are deflected back within: The main paths that might have led us to something beyond – the intuitive wisdom of embodied tradition, the experience of the natural world, arts, the body and religion – are all emptied of force by the abstracting, rationalizing, ironizing impact of the left hemisphere. Living presence becomes no longer accessible.

- (3) There is a tendency for positive feedback to come into play – instead of redressing the imbalance, we just get more of the same.

Left-brain power grab in summary:

Controls the voice.

Controls the means of argument: logic, linearity, detachment and language.

Parses reality into bits – if no clear bits, it will invent them.

Constructs a self-consistent world of pure theory that always reflects back on itself and confirms itself.

Competitive

Mass of discreet episodes often out of sequence – maintains distortions

World represented after the fact – useful fiction.

Overly optimistic, unrealistically positive in its self-appraisal, in denial about its shortcomings, unreasonably certain.

Black and white.

Thinks it can go it alone.

Thinks it knows it all.

Prone to paranoia and cannot trust. It needs to feel in control.

The story of the master and his emissary tells us something about what is going on inside ourselves in our very brains. It is being played out in the world around us right now, and since the consequences are grave indeed, we need to understand what it is. This story is the story of the battle between the hemispheres, which causes major problems in our lives and goes a long way in explaining the shape of the history of ideas in the West and may ultimately cast light on the predicament we find ourselves in today with regards to human survival on this planet. We cannot view this hemispheric issue as a pure academic endeavor. The world we live in increasingly reflects the drama of the two hemisphere's battle and the right's submergence by the left. The emissary, insightful as ever, appears to believe it can see everything, do everything, go it alone. But it cannot: On its own it is like a zombie, a sleepwalker ambling straight toward the abyss, whistling a happy tune.

5. Applications to mindfulness meditation practice

Mindfulness is precisely about stilling the flow of verbal consciousness, learning to be present in the moment and in the body. It teaches us to stay with the flow of life as it 'presences', not as it becomes re-presented. It teaches us to inhabit the world that the right hemisphere recognizes. 'The master does nothing, yet nothing is left undone' (Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*).