

Two Ways of Understanding Things

A Conversation With Iain McGilchrist about What Matters with Bonnie Badenoch

In April of 2013, I was privileged to spend an hour with Iain McGilchrist, author of a seminal book on the relationship between the two hemispheres, *The Master and His Emissary* (2009). He was speaking from his beloved home on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. The kindness and wisdom that flow through those writings are also very evident in the way he shared the personal process that is at the foundation of this transformative work and other important areas of his life, including what the future might hold.

Bonnie: I was wondering if we could start with talking about how you got drawn into this fascination with the two hemispheres.

Iain: It goes back a long way. I suppose in a way I have always been interested in the two ways of understanding things. And I have always been particularly concerned about the value of the implicit, and how making things explicit just destroys them, how it's taking things out of their context. That was at the back of my mind long before I approached the brain at all.

In fact, I wrote a book (*Against Criticism*) in the 1970s, published by Faber in '82, which is really about this problem in literary criticism. When you approach the work of art, you find yourself having to make things explicit and take things out of context in order to say this is going on with the meaning or that is going on with the form. In the process, the whole life of the thing just disappeared. Interestingly, the very things that in the context of the work of art were part of its excellence and part of the

reason why you loved it, seemed like imperfections once they were taken out of the context of the whole. So you were left with this heap of nothing at the end of the process. And yet, there had been something there that spoke to you, deeply. This was a bit of a conundrum. When I was in Oxford as a young academic, I was fortunate to have a colleague who was an eminent sinologist, David Hawkes, and he was asking me one day what I was writing about. I was trying to explain to him this problem in criticism. I was saying, "The trouble is there aren't the right words. When you start using words to describe the problem, the very words betray you because they don't seem to apply to the sort of thing it is you are talking about." And he said, "Well, you know, the Chinese would understand entirely what you are talking about. There are concepts in Chinese that describe many of the things you're struggling to express in English." So he put me onto looking at Oriental literature, in a very amateur way.

But there still seemed to me, at the core of the problem, a difficulty about the mind-body relationship. Works of art, including great po-

ems, music, sculpture, or whatever they might be, are just exactly what they are, in the embodied form they find themselves, and can't be recast in a set of abstractions, or paraphrased. They are unique and unrepeatable, embodied entities, more like living beings than things; and the process of criticism makes them general, abstract, disembodied and ultimately lifeless. I studied the philosophers on the mind-body problem, but they all seemed to me too disembodied; and I thought I'd better go and study the problem in a more embodied way. So it was that I went off to study medicine, in order to understand more about the relationship between mind and body. And that took me into the interface between neurology and psychology.

Then I came across John Cutting's work on the right hemisphere of the brain. He was a colleague at the Maudsley Hospital in London. This was 1990, and he had just published his amazing work, *The Right Cerebral Hemisphere and Psychiatric Disorders*. It was the fruit of long, careful and detailed observation of people who had right hemisphere deficits of some kind. In the general neurological literature, these were treated as no more than a bit of a curiosity, because on the whole, these people seemed not to have anything like the same degree of problems that people with left hemisphere deficits had. People with left hemisphere deficits couldn't speak or use their right hand, which was all very obvious and striking, of course; but, it turned out, people with right hemisphere deficits had subtle but devastating changes in their experienced world, which actually constituted a greater handicap—as demonstrated by the fact that it is easier to

rehabilitate people with left hemisphere strokes than people with right hemisphere strokes, despite the fact that those with left hemisphere strokes usually have problems with speech and their dominant hand.

John Cutting didn't know anything about my interest in literature, but as I was listening to him talk, I was thinking, "This is extraordinary. The right hemisphere is interested in manner. It's interested in tone, irony, humor, metaphor. It's interested in all that is implicit. It's interested in the embodied. This is what is missing, the other part, the other side." So that was how I came to study this whole matter of hemisphere difference, and it stemmed from a life-long interest, from at least adolescence onward, anyway, with these two ways of thinking about the world.

Bonnie: We have an interesting overlap in that my early work was in comparative literature in college, both a bachelor and master's. Then I left my doctoral program because I couldn't take the literary criticism part of it. I couldn't have voiced it as well as you have, but I knew I didn't like it. So I went and got a doctorate in comparative religion with an emphasis in mysticism, trying to feel my way back into what is living. At an embodied level, I understand what you are saying.

Iain: I think it's something that is increasingly important in mainstream philosophy as well. People are waking up to the idea that embodiment is a very important idea. Waking up slowly. I take *The New Yorker* because I think actually it often has some very interesting articles, but I love the cartoons. There's one that I saw

recently. It has these two sort of down-and-outs standing on the street talking. One of them is saying to the other: “Good news. I hear the paradigm is shifting.” Well, yes, it’s good news. I think the paradigm is actually shifting.

Bonnie: Thank heavens. So you have spent 20 years deeply looking at the two hemispheres.

Iain: Yes.

Bonnie: How do you sense it’s changed you, or do you sense it has changed you?

Iain: Well, of course, it’s notoriously hard to see oneself and what is happening, especially when change is gradual, so I don’t know. It doesn’t feel like a discontinuous sort of track at all. I feel it’s all of a piece with the way in which my intellectual and spiritual life—which are not easy to disconnect from one another—started to grow in my early teens. They always have been side by side, and it’s been continuous with that. But in learning more and more about how the brain does see the world—if you can put it that way, or, better, how the constraints of brain structure change the way in which we see the world—so many things have fallen into place. It was like having a very strong sense that something is going to happen. And it happened. Something I was dimly aware of that just became more and more clear.

I knew that I just had to write about this before I died. The problem was how was I going to do that. First of all, I was very busy. I was a full-time practicing clinician with very hefty clinical commitments. There was also the fact that intellectually speaking, the more I learned, the

more impossible it was to know how to marshal this in a book or even in a series of books. The problem was that everything seemed to imply and connect with everything else, so that it was a bit like a cat’s cradle. How do you straighten it out? I couldn’t make a nice linear argument because to explain A, I really needed first to explain B, which was fine. To explain B, I needed first to explain C. But unfortunately, to explain C, I had to explain A.

That was one difficulty, knowing where to get a way into this. That took me a long time. It didn’t always have the organization it has now, which people say seems to unfold like a story and has its own structure and momentum. It wasn’t like that. At one stage, it was 60-something pieces of paper on the floor of my living room, little pieces of paper I was moving about, aggregating and clustering. I tried to link them together and ended up with something that looks like the Krebs cycle, only more complicated. So it wasn’t straightforward.

Bonnie: No. But by the time you get to the concluding chapter of *The Master and His Emisary*, there’s so much heartfelt embodied poetic expression that is just deeply moving.

Iain: It’s lovely that you feel that. It’s a very personal book. I don’t think that conflicts with the idea that I tried to be very true to a vast body of literature in as objective a way as I can. One thing that upsets me is that, when people don’t like the conclusions I draw, they say that I must have, as they put it, “cherry-picked” the data. That is such an easy thing to say and such an impossible thing to refute. I want to say, “Look, perhaps you’d like to dedicate the next 20 years

of your life getting to know the literature on laterality and asymmetry, and then you might be in a position to make that remark.” Most people wouldn’t. I imagine there can’t be very many people alive who have spent so much time on it, because it’s a largely unpopular and unfashionable way to think about the brain. Hemisphere difference became so tarnished for a long time that nobody could be bothered, no serious scientist would be bothered to look at it. There just aren’t that many people who really know the literature. I do think it’s awfully cheap to suggest that one may have cherry-picked the literature. One thing I’d like to say is I have absolutely no interest in doing that, because what impassions me is the truth. If I were kidding myself by having made it up, it wouldn’t excite me or interest me!

In the original text, I put in little excursions, little digressions, wherever there were data that might look, at first glance, to be in conflict. And I discussed the findings. But it’s already a very long and very complex book. So, my editor said, “That’s fine, but you can’t leave these in the body of the text. You must put them in the footnotes.” I put them in the footnotes, but, fair enough, people find it a long book to read already without delving into the footnotes. If they do, however, they will find that I don’t disregard what might look like conflicting evidence. I deal with it as dispassionately as I can, as befits scientific work, but that is not to say that I am not impassioned about what I have found. In that sense my book is indeed a personal statement

Bonnie: It especially comes through toward the end. I often read the opening paragraph of the concluding chapter when I teach, and people frequently tear up. They sense it. They sense that vulnerability of the right.

Iain: You know, I could honestly never have anticipated in my wildest dreams that people would respond to it the way they have. I get such beautiful emails from people who never met me, but just want to say, “This book has meant so much and has changed my life.” People say things like that quite often, which I didn’t anticipate. I didn’t imagine it would be widely read at all, but especially didn’t anticipate that kind of response.

I expected intellectual responses that would be either, “Well, okay, there might be something here,” or “This is complete piffle,” which I also get. But I didn’t really anticipate this very moving connection, which has made it easier for me, since one of the consequences of writing the book has been that I had to stop clinical work. I just need to have more space and time to deal with the things that people ask, and talking and writing further. To have lost that connection with people’s lives and not to feel that I have made a difference would have been a price I didn’t want to pay. As it turns out, I haven’t had to pay that price, in that it seems that I carry on helping people in some sort of way that they are kind enough and generous enough to say and to write to me about. It’s really lovely.

Bonnie: You said earlier that this has also to do with your spiritual life, and I don’t know if you feel any inclination or willingness to talk

about that aspect and how it weaves in for you.

Iain: Yes. I don't know what it is that I know, so I'm not very good at signing up to any particular creed. If there's anything I do know from living at all, it is that the version of the world offered to us by reductionist materialism is not adequate. It doesn't begin to cover it. My feeling is that I naturally conceive of life in terms other than the material (as well as the material). I see the material as being perhaps a special case of the spiritual.

People say there's this problem of mind. "What is mind? Where does mind come into the picture?" I'm often tempted to say, "I don't know about mind being the problem: it seems to me that mind is not a problem at all. Mind is clearly where we are." What is problematic is the nature of *matter*. What the dickens is matter? Matter is a kind of element that offers resistance. That is the best thing we can say about it. It's a kind of element in one's consciousness that offers resistance. I suppose I think of the relationship between matter and mind as a bit like different phases of one and the same thing. So, I don't see a dualism there. Much as ice and water and water vapor are not the same, and you could easily think of them as three separate things, they are, of course, the same thing in different phases, and not discontinuous at all—I'm using the word "phase" in the way chemists use it.

In fact, another thing I would say is this. If it were possible to succeed in reducing everything to matter, then one would end up having to admit that matter was pretty extraordinary stuff. If it could, of itself, generate something

like Bach's St Matthew Passion, that certainly would be remarkable. We'd need to reconfigure our ideas about matter. It's obviously something very special. You can't get over it by reducing spiritual life to matter. All you have done is say, "Now we have to think of matter as a very complex spiritual thing, too." You just kicked the can down the road.

I'm not a paid-up member of any religion at all. Although I think all religions offer their fascinating insights, I was born and brought up in the Christian tradition, and I find increasingly, as I live, enormous wisdom in it. I know how strong its roots are in Judaism, and learning about Judaism and the Kabbalah has been fascinating to me, too. I used to be very interested in Buddhism, and as time goes on I get less and less interested in Buddhism and more interested in Hinduism, actually. As one's life changes, one sees different things. All of it must be just little chinks of light coming through, just what one can pick up of something much more than we can know. I'm not claiming to have any knowledge of anything, but at least to be uncertain seems to me a more fruitful state than to be certain.

Bonnie: Yes. Going back to what you said about matter, I don't know if you know Brian Swimme. He's a mathematical cosmologist.

Iain: I don't.

Bonnie: One of my favorite quotes from him says roughly this: "You take hydrogen, and you leave it completely alone, and it becomes rose bushes and giraffes and human beings."

Iain: Yes, that is a very nice quote. It's a

most extraordinary business. Only the most incredible blinkering can result in people being blind to that. Children automatically see how extraordinary the world is. One of the things that I love is a little piece of research done by David Hay and Rebecca Nye on following children from preschool up through school in their attitudes to what you might call the spiritual, the religious, or whatever you like. Contrary to what Richard Dawkins says, which is that children wouldn't naturally have these ideas, that they are indoctrinated in them by the culture, Hay and Nye found precisely the opposite: that children naturally think in these terms and naturally have a sense of these things, of a religious awe and a sense of a realm beyond this that is mystical or mysterious. As they grow up through school, they have that, as it were, knocked out of them and learn that it's not smart to think or talk like that, and that clever people don't.

Bonnie: When my daughter was born, we were part of a yoga center that was mainly centered on a meditative tradition. She would sit on my lap at two and three and say, "It's all light, Mommy." She was having this kind of oceanic experience just naturally. Because I was open to hearing it, she could speak it, you know.

Iain: Yes, yes. I have just been unpacking some boxes—because my life has been a bit peripatetic in the last few years. I found some sayings I had written down of my son James when he was three. I was completely amazed by some of these. He was asking, "How did God begin?" and then he said, "I know. He was a hand, and then he drew himself in." I thought, "He has seen the truth behind that Escher

drawing, which I often start my lectures with, the idea that there isn't a road into this. Something emerges out of the something. And that is so beautiful."

Bonnie: (quiet pause) Do you feel ready to change directions a bit?

Iain: Yes.

Bonnie: I think everybody who reads you gets the sense that we're at risk, that there's peril right now of getting so lost in the left that maybe we can't find our way out. So I ponder why that might be. One of my particular interests is in how implicit memory forms during attachment. We have these deep implicit patterns below the level of conscious awareness that really are directing our lives, that really are the main thing that moves us forward.

Iain: Yes.

Bonnie: I have wondered if part of this left shift is that the world is moving faster and faster. Because we're more left, we move faster, and there's more chaos and less connection generally speaking, at least here in the States. Then the right at some level almost becomes uninhabitable, and we move left.

Iain: I think there's a lot of truth in that. I think it is a form of seeking out security, the need for certainty. The same thing drives people to fundamentalist religion and to fundamentalist materialism. I think dealing with uncertainty, dealing with ambiguity, dealing with complexity can be confusing, and people want a clear path through.

What impresses me is that most of the people we would regard as great, even if we don't share a culture or spiritual inheritance with

them—people like Socrates and St. Paul and Montaigne—all ended up at the end of their lives saying, “What do I know?” Their progress was from knowing to not knowing. That is wisdom, and it takes courage. The danger is always in people rushing in to a clear-cut and simplified version of the world. In essence, what the left hemisphere offers is an enormously useful map of the world, but in the way that a map is a thousand times less complex than the world it maps, its version of the world is very simplified. The things that are true of the map are not true of the world. I do think you’re absolutely right, that it’s fear that can drive us left, and we also live in a culture that values the explicit. Indeed, I don’t know if I should say this to an American audience.

Bonnie: We’re actually an international organization.

Iain: This is not meant to be a disrespectful remark, but when I first came to America for any length of time, it was 1992, and I was in Baltimore. If you had asked me, “What is your impression of the difference between the cultures?” the thing that really struck me was how much more explicit everything was in the U.S. What happens in America will hit us Europeans so many years down the line. So I could see that coming. Indeed, in the 20 years that have passed since then, Britain has gone very much further in that direction.

I do think that that is one of the huge problems, that we don’t have a culture in which we respect things that can’t be made explicit. We think that really it’s just a matter of laziness or muddled thinking if we haven’t made it explicit. Actually, in making things explicit, we destroy so much of what they are, what they

mean, what their value is. We have to be able to live with that and not have manuals and procedures and algorithms for everything.

That is not to say that thinking, making things as clear as one can, is not a good thing. In fact, I’m a great lover of clarity. But I think you can only make things as clear as they can be made, and no further than that. When you try to make them clearer than is respectful of their nature, that is when you start to destroy them. This applies to human relationships, and to what a society is, what it means to be a member of a community, what it means to be a parent, to be a child, to be part of a working group and so forth. Much is embodied in things that are historical, that are ritual, that are in culture, things that are thought of now as irrational.

I think one of the ways we could recapture a little of that would be by being more open to what the great art of our culture says, and to some of the spiritual traditions and their messages and their stories. They are not “rubbish”, just because at some very superficial level they seem irrational.

That was one of the things that led me towards science and the brain. When I was studying literature, it seemed to me that as I read a poem, things started happening to my body, if you like, to my heart, heartbeat, the speed of it, my pulse, my breathing. As I read a passage of poetry, I could feel the movement, the physical shape of the sentence, the clauses, the way they mirrored one another or answered to one another. I could feel it in my physical frame. It was like a dance. It had the embodiment of a dance.

Music is essentially dance, isn't it? Our muscles relax and tense as we listen to it. Even if we're sitting in a chair in an auditorium, in fact our whole frame is taken up in it. Of course, in our daily encounters with one another, it's also deeply, deeply that. So to understand life, we can't just rip it all out of its context and out of its embodied nature and then look at it and say that is what it is, because we will just be left with a nothing, with a handful of dust, once we have ripped the thing apart.

Bonnie: I'm so touched by this conversation. I'm wondering where you are going now with all that you are sensing about this.

Iain: There are three things on my agenda. One that should be simple but is proving difficult, is a lot of people have said, "Look, this book is saying very important things, but it is 600 very large pages long, and it takes about three months to read, and you need to write something that is going to get this all-important message across to a perhaps wider audience, to an audience that doesn't have that time."

I must say I genuinely feel I would never have read this book if someone had offered it to me and said, "This is very important." I would have said, "Oh, look, I haven't got time for such a long book."

I need to write something that is perhaps more succinct, and also to show in daily terms how it applies to the world of medicine, to the world of research, the world of teaching, to the world of law, the world of policing, of nursing, of finance and so forth, in very practical ways. The trouble with this is that I feel like I'd rather leave it implicit. I'd rather leave other peo-

ple to see these things. They have done quite well so far without my putting my two bits' worth into it.

The other difficulty is if you start saying things more succinctly and more briefly, you open yourself more and more to the challenge that you have oversimplified. This shorter book might get read instead of the big book. In a way, I said it properly in the big book, and I don't want people to say they have a grip on it by reading the short version, which will not have the subtlety in it anymore. That is the kind of dilemma I'm grappling with at the moment.

Bonnie: That is a good dilemma. In reading the 10,000-word essay that came out from you, it felt to me like your full heart isn't in there.

Iain: Yes.

Bonnie: I feel the different way it lands with me. I'd rather somebody read that than nothing, but I'd almost rather they read the first three chapters and the conclusion of *The Master and His Emissary* and didn't read the middle, if they can't read the whole thing. That gives a different felt sense than the shorter version.

Iain: That's a very interesting reaction. I feel it too. I think I'll be frustrated with anything I write in a shorter form.

Then there are two books which I would enjoy writing because they are sufficiently different. One is a book about the art of mental health patients, particularly patients with schizophrenia, because I think their art is fascinating. I think that it demonstrates things that have hemisphere relevance. That would just be a sort of extended essay with

some wonderful illustrations.

The other thing that I am thinking of, apart from a number of very small essays on different subjects, is a book about, for want of a better word, spiritual things, which I want to call *A Short Book About God*.

Bonnie: (Laughter).

Iain: Rowan Williams, who is the former Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the Anglican Church, likes *The Master and His Emissary*, and he asked me about what I was writing now. I was foolish enough to say I was thinking of writing a little book called *A Short Book About God*, and he just looked at me said, “Er, good luck.” But I would like to write something about spirituality at some stage. I think there are one or two things that are just worth saying.

Bonnie: Oh, I hope you do it.

Iain: That would just be a very simple and kind of personal statement about certain questions that I think cause confusion and lead people to reject things they might otherwise find fruitful to pursue. But I don’t know what to do about this shorter book. I have got a title for it, though, which is *The Porcupine is a Monkey*. It has to do with how the two parts of the brain think about the nature of truth, which is interesting. Anyway, it makes a good title. But I just need to work harder on just how I’m going to do this.

Going back to *The Master and His Emissary*, a lot of people who write to me say that what I’m articulating is something that is, as it were, the way that they naturally think. One of the things that has really pleased me is having had a number of communications from people

who say, “I realize now after reading your book that I’m actually a very left hemisphere sort of person. I have always been like that. I have always seen the world that way. You have opened my eyes to what other people mean when they talk about these other things. And since reading it, I have started to see things completely differently.” One person even wrote to me to say that it had made a huge difference to his marriage and to all sorts of things—his career, things he was pursuing. Something had been awakened in him. When you start to get through to people who aren’t naturally of your way of thinking, that is real progress.

Bonnie: Yes, beautiful progress. Will you be coming to the United States again soon?

Iain: This year I’m trying not to. I want to get to grips with writing. And it’s not easy to do that if you’re on the road all the time. And I love this place. I came to this place for its peace and its beauty. I want not to be constantly rushing off somewhere else. That seems to me counter to the whole spirit of why I’m here and what I want to be. So I need to have peace and time, really. But what is great is that through these kinds of meetings, I can keep in touch with people. Every day I pinch myself to think I’m so lucky to be somewhere so beautiful, so peaceful. And the garden is growing, and I’m doing things with it and just loving it. I have an incessant stream of visitors, which is fabulous, because everyone loves this place. I’m very far from lonely.