

## *The Holistic Nature of Perception*

**James Steil**



### **Introduction**

The problem of perception is as old as the question, “Who am I?” Feeling ourselves separate from nature, the world meets us with questions instead of answers; facts, but not meaning. The various branches of philosophy and science are two offshoots of this separation that may one day grow to overcome it.

### **Two Worlds**

An acquaintance recently suggested I read *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009) by Iain McGilchrist<sup>[1]</sup>, a psychiatrist, and brain-researcher. His book is informative and insightful; so-much so, we will use it as a guide for what follows. McGilchrist traces patterns in the brain, and in human culture, concluding the divided-mind is of greatest importance for understanding who we are, and charting our course for the future. By “divided” he means the separation of how we think, feel and act into two categories, mirrored in the left-right symmetry of the hemispheres of the brain. Thinking alternates between the tendency toward closed, abstract, and explicit qualities (associated with the left-hemisphere), and open, concrete and implicit (associated with the right). McGilchrist writes:

My thesis is that for us as human beings there are two fundamentally opposed realities, two different modes of experience; that each is of ultimate importance in bringing about the recognizably human world; and that their difference is rooted in the bihemispheric structure of the brain. It follows that the hemispheres need to co-operate, but I believe they are in fact involved in a sort of power struggle, and that this explains many aspects of contemporary Western culture. (p. 3)

Elsewhere, McGilchrist admits ensoulment of the hemispheres (their need to “cooperate,” for example) is metaphorical (pp. 194, 462), and the split-brain phenomenon may have deeper roots in the world at large (p. 460). Regarding the “power struggle” between these two ways of seeing, he employs the allegory of The Master and his Emissary – equating an overzealous emissary with the left hemisphere, and the (abandoned) master with the right. The terms of his argument are metaphorical, but his argument is clear. Furthermore, McGilchrist writes: “...all understanding, whether of the world, or even of ourselves, depends upon choosing the right metaphor (p. 179). Unfortunately, I believe in “The Master and his Emissary” he has chosen a metaphor with crucial differences between the tale and cognition. But he is not to blame, for these findings lie outside of brain-science per se. His thinking has helped mine greatly – both by expanding its scope, and more clearly defining the details - so rather than sweep it aside, I would rather make use of, and add further meaning to it.

Alongside a detailed characterization of the differences between activities associated with left and right hemispherical activity, McGilchrist points out the deep resonance between them: At all levels of cognition, “the principle of division (that of the left hemisphere) and the principle of union (that of the right hemisphere) need to be unified: in Hegel’s terms, the thesis and antithesis must be enabled to achieve a synthesis at a higher level” (p. 198). For their importance, however, he argues forcefully for the right hemisphere – allocating to the right “the ultimate priority of the principle of union over that of division” (p. 201). This, I believe, is a value-judgment. The sciences, and to some extent our whole world-view (with its mechanistic tendencies), are lacking in this domain, but as a *cognitive* phenomenon, I must defer to the facts – which demonstrates the lawful necessity of both.<sup>[2]</sup> This difference does not diminish the value of *The Master and his Emissary* as much as it influences how we take the next-step. I fully embrace his over-arching goal – to promote holism. However in my opinion, thinking is not the problem; it is the *thinker*.

### The Cognitive Law

Considering the role of the one-who-thinks brings us to the question of perception, where I hope not merely to show the necessity of the principles of union and division, but in a few brief lines, to enable the reader to make better use of thinking to achieve a truly holistic understanding. These thoughts are drawn from my recently-completed master's thesis<sup>[3]</sup>. Therein, I have compared three interpenetrating cognitive sequences: the acquisition of sensori-motor skills in infancy, imaginative thinking in children (up to about age 7), and the stages of cognitive development up to about age 20 (as first articulated by Piaget). From this comparison, I postulate a cognitive law; a sequence of cognitive events which alternates between centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in the same manner McGilchrist describes, but differs by explicitly including intentionality. This law applies to all cognitive (perceptual) events, and in fact *organizes* them.<sup>[4]</sup> In addition, the final stage of this sequence integrates all of the above: the ego or I, open, and closed thinking, in a holistic perception Bortoft calls "intuitive thinking," but which I believe I have put a finer point on. This final stage is the goal McGilchrist points to:

"The need for ultimate unification of division with union is an important principle in all areas of life; it reflects the need not just for two opposing principles, but for their opposition to be ultimately harmonized" (p. 200).

By incorporating the third-facto, (the self), we have a final synthesis, and in ever-widening spirals of the cognitive law, integration of Man and the world.

### An Example

How does it work? The cognitive law is made-up of four "stages." Since they belong to each and every cognitive event, we may illustrate the cognitive law with an everyday example. Metaphor-use is an important cognitive phenomenon, so I will illustrate the law by considering the meaning of the metaphor "Thinking is seeing."

#### The Stages of the Cognitive Law

1. *Forming an Intention*: The first stage of the cognitive law is a meeting of the I with the world, and the formation of a question. An intention must be formed, and if the means are not immediately available to understand the question, then the process continues: *"Thinking is seeing" is not literally true; therefore further exploration is required to find its meaning.*
2. *Identification of Parts*: Once the task is identified, individual *parts* must be brought before the eye (the I); their significance yet to be determined: *"Thinking" unites ideas according to their inner-relationship. "Seeing" places one in space in relation to other things, and things in relation to one-another.*
3. *Discrimination between the Parts*: To create meaning, one must find a correspondence between two things. Examining the "parts" in relation to the question, those which add meaning are kept, and those which do not, are put-aside. The whole is becoming clearer, but we have as yet only glimpses of it: *In this case, there are numerous and significant correspondences between thinking and seeing, which we are all quite aware of, but there are differences as well. Thinking does not require the eye, for example.*
4. *Synthesis of All of the Above*: Drawing-together those aspects which are determined to belong to the question, one may reach a point where the whole (the question) and the parts are united in a *Whole* – a simultaneous perception of both, in which a lawful relationship is perceived. Importantly, the individuality is now incorporated *within* the phenomenon – able to move freely between the parts, without any loss of the "Whole": *An important result of intuitive understanding is creativity; understanding the Whole, one is able to express it in many different forms: "My intentions guide my thinking;" "I can walk-through your explanation;" "My inner-light and outer-light are two sides of the same thing." Each and every expression of the Whole (a "Part") contains the Whole within it. This is the Wholeness of intuitive "perception" (cognition).*

The above stages, with slight modifications in language, can be found in all forms of learning – from doing a lay-up, to understanding eco-systems. This places intuition at our very doorstep every time we truly understand something, however small. “So,” one might ask, “if we already know how to do it, and in fact do so naturally from childhood on, where does our thinking get stuck?”

### Cognitive Development

Another way to ask the same question is, “Why then, did McGilchrist have to write his book?” In his survey of the major periods of Western civilization, McGilchrist demonstrates an alternation of emphasis between the two kinds of thinking described. But from another direction, we see the gradual increase in our understanding of the world, not just the alternation between two ways of seeing it. Of course, McGilchrist does not ignore that increasing cognitive facility is co-emergent with this dance between the two hemispheres. But still, he worries that this-time we may have dipped too far to the left, may lose our partner, and spin off the dance-floor. I cannot say he is incorrect; this recklessness is a problem, and we might get voted off the planet.

To answer the question of where our thinking fails us, we must return to thinking itself, for there we find important differences; in particular, differences of intentionality between infants, children, and adults. In infants, intention is almost entirely lacking (although it is visible – consider the sucking ‘reflex’), and the cognitive law - applied primarily to sensori-motor development – is by and large automatic, reflexive. The ego is asleep. Older children are “awake” in some areas, but their thinking is primarily imaginative: the cognitive law is working primarily in the realm of identification – the formation of language, and simple concepts. To be clear, all four stages of the law are still required to form the concept “dog,” but this is the time of concrete operations<sup>[5]</sup> and higher cognitive facilities are still nascent. Similar considerations can be applied to the stages of “preoperational” thinking (with the added facility of discerning relationships between parts), and “formal operations” (where the whole and the parts can be united in a law).<sup>[6]</sup> Cognitive development is a gradual unfolding of sensori-motor logic, imagination, insight, and intuition, which, in their emphasis, are characteristic of the alternation between the analytic and synthetic tendencies seen in cultural development.

In parallel with the inner logic of individual development, what both sequences have in common is a gradual awakening. Cognitive-development goes hand-in-hand with increased engagement by the ego (intentionality). What *is* the role of the ego? Looking again to child-development, the stimulus for the development of new cognitive facility is the need to harmonize contradictions, as they arise out of the refinement of perceptions.<sup>[7]</sup> Central to this “harmonization” is the ability to expand one’s awareness to include context, while simultaneously holding-back habitual and reflexive patterns of thought.<sup>[8]</sup> These are the self-same qualities which Henri Bortoft, in another paper of this edition, describes as necessary for the capacity to move from paradox to a living experience of reality. It is my feeling that in the alternations from ‘left’ to ‘right’ we have a reflection of the beating heart of the universe, while in the continual upward spiral of Man’s thinking, we have the thread which joins the two. Recognizing our own strength and the tools we have been given, it is our job to weave these threads into a strong cord, such that we may raise ourselves to become fitting Masters over all we can see - holistically.

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### References

1 McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and his emissary: The divided brain and the history of the Western world*. London: Yale University Press.

2 For holism – which does not bow-down to material causality – *necessity* is the criterion for lawfulness. Bortoft galvanizes this concept in the italicization of “*belong*” (as in “*belong together*”) throughout his text. Bortoft, H. (1996). *The wholeness of nature: Goethe’s way toward a science of conscious participation in nature*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press p. 59.

3. Steil J. (2009) *Understanding the Holistic Nature of Cognition and its Consequences for Science: A Study of Cognition and Cognitive Development using Goethe’s Phenomenological Method*, Master’s Thesis, The Owen Barfield School of Sunbridge College

4 Borrowing a term from Bortoft (1996), this law may thus be called the “organizing idea” of cognition.

5. Piaget's term for the stage of cognitive development which sees wholes, but cannot distinguish between the parts and the whole ("syncretism"), making differentiation impossible. Thus, having understood "doggie" imaginatively, all four-legged animals are doggies

6. Using Bortoft's language, we see an image of the cognitive law "intensively" within the sequence of Piaget's stages of cognitive development.

7 This is literally a text-book description of "the progressive construction of the operatory structures of intelligence." See Chapman, M. (1988). *Constructive evolution: Origins and development of Piaget's thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 180, 262-267, 338

8 See Gibbs, R. W., Jr. (1994). *The poetics of the mind: Figurative thought, language and understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp. 399-433.

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