Nishida and McGilchrist
Consciousness, Complementarity, and Nondualist Reality

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This essay has been adapted from a seminar presentation titled "Du neuronal au philosophique: conscience et rapport au monde dans la pensée de Nishida et les neurosciences contemporaines," presented for the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture on 27 October 2023. The contributions of the Kyoto School and its founder Nishida Kitarō mark an unprecedented exchange between the Japanese Zen tradition of thought—based on nondualist reality, non-thinking and direct experience of the world—and Western philosophy, which has traditionally privileged subject-object dualism and the grasping of the world through logical argumentation. This essay invites the reader to pursue this exchange by exploring an unsuspected complementarity between Nishida's thought, as set out in his earlier work An Inquiry into the Good*, and the neuroscientific insights of psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist, laid out in his recent book* The Matter with Things*.*

Throughout the history of thought, monumental philosophical intuitions have sometimes complemented each other in unlikely fashion. One such fascinating convergence of seemingly distant horizons is that of English psychiatrist, neuroscientist, and philosopher Iain McGilchrist and Nishida Kitarō. Nishida is of course known to have founded what has become known as the Kyoto School of Philosophy, bridging East Asian religious and moral ideas and Western logic and philosophy, formulating a unique account of experience, nothingness, nihilism and the Absolute. McGilchrist, for his part, has accomplished an unprecedented exploration of our experiential world through the lens of neuroscience, with an original focus on the role of the brain's left and right hemispheres and their distinct ways of attending to the world.

While the ideas of McGilchrist and Nishida are more than a continent apart, and separated by over a century, both thinkers have undertaken the difficult

endeavor of stepping beyond their cultural niche and attempt to reconcile the epistemological traditions of Western and Eastern thought. Nishida drew heavily on Western science and philosophy to communicate ideas aligned with more traditional Eastern experiences of non-thinking and nothingness, and the oneness of matter and mind, which he was acquainted with in his practice of Zen Buddhism. McGilchrist, for his part, reported feeling restricted early in his career in the humanities by Western traditions' dualistic, or mind/matter, framing of the world, and therefore often makes use of passages from the *Daodejing*, Zen Buddhist koans, and indigenous tales to ground insights that canons of Western logic, science, and philosophy otherwise fail to convey.

Ultimately, however, Nishida and McGilchrist have both made convincing and original attempts at articulating a phenomenology of consciousness, experience, and reality that moves beyond ordinary experience. This state of ordinary experience is typically dualistic: it puts our subjective experience at the center of the world as object and periphery. The human being thus navigates the world as a subject with a felt distance conveyed through our reflective experience, our use of language, and a goal-directed mind. In contrast, Nishida and McGilchrist attempt a philosophical investigation of a primary, pre-conceptual, undifferentiated, and in a way foundational mode of experience. Despite arising from very different places and times, these philosophical inquiries bear strong complementarity to one another, and are the subject which concerns us here.

Before moving forward, I must make clear that while this essay may concern primarily those familiar with, or interested in, the legacy of Nishida Kitarō and the Kyoto School, I however have no formal expertise on this matter. Instead, my objective is to open up what I hope to be a fruitful dialogue between Nishida's earlier writings and McGilchrist's philosophical and neuroscientific insights which, I believe, can help shed new perspectives on Nishida's legacy.

Prior to proceeding with a comparative exploration of each philosopher's ideas, it will be helpful first for readers to have a short summary of their respective backgrounds. Following this, I will lay out how each have independently articulated their phenomenological conception of reality and conscious experience. Still in correspondence with Nishida's thought, I will then give a brief account of McGilchrist's neuroscientific insights and lay out his evolutionary account of left and right hemisphere differentiation, as well as how each hemisphere mediates conscious experience. To assist readers in making sense of this perspective, in the next section I provide a brief clinical picture of the left hemisphere's world through experiential accounts of people who suffered right hemisphere lesions or strokes. In the final section, I lay out the moral implications of each writer's philosophy, which for Nishida hints at a pathway towards "good conduct" and the realization of our true selves, whereas for McGilchrist these implications are

more explicitly dire, bringing to light a contemporary crisis of civilization. This short study of brain hemispheres and consciousness, I hope, will enable readers to better appreciate the originality and pertinence of Nishida's thinking today.

Nishida Kitarō and Iain McGilchrist

While one cannot do justice to Nishida's philosophical work by simplifying it to this angle alone, an important part of his engagement with philosophy is thought to be rooted in the practice of Zen Buddhism. Indeed, Nishida's work has sometimes been understood as an attempt to translate Zen into philosophy, while simultaneously exposing philosophy to Zen.[1] His first philosophical efforts can be seen as attempting the seemingly paradoxical project of articulating the ineffable experience of "non-thinking" into a logical discourse inherited from Western traditions. Doing so, he also borrowed from the philosopher and pioneer of psychology William James, and used his concept of "pure experience" as a starting point to explore consciousness in its primary, synthetic form, a fact of experience both originating and transcending our experience of the world as a thinking subject.[2] As Nishida explains, "[over] time I came to realize that it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but that an individual exists because there is experience" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. xxx). This insight has been foundational to what has become known as the Kyoto School of philosophy in Japan, giving rise to original philosophical perspectives on identity and self-negation, reality and nothingness, and religion and nihilism. Nishida's use of the concept of "pure experience" was instrumental in conceiving of reality as something that can be experienced directly, not through reflective thinking but in participation and unity, reflecting the fundamentally undivided nature of reality.[3] To this pure or direct mode of experience, Nishida contrasts our everyday experience of the world as mediated through the dualistic lens of a subject peering at a world, where subject and object stand in opposition. This mode of experience enables an analytic

1. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. xii.

2. Nishida articulates this clearly when stating that "[the] fact of pure experience in this regard is the alpha and omega of our thought" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 16).

3. It's important to note that Nishida's concept of "pure experience" is particularly emblematic of his earlier work, *An Inquiry into the Good*. Through the development of his thinking, at later periods, he gradually moved away from "pure experience" and formulated this direct experience of reality instead as *jikaku*, loosely translated as "self-awareness," and eventually to the logic of *basho* (place), emphasizing the topological nature of experience, and also the broader dialectical relation between experience and its place and history. Nonetheless, as Nishida highlighted in the preface to *An Inquiry into the Good*, his life's work can still be understood as an expansion of the concept of pure experience, and a template upon which his later philosophy, namely his "logic of absolutely contradictory self-identity," were already budding.

and pragmatic, but ultimately partial point of view which is at odds with reality's non-dual, synthetic, and unified nature.

McGilchrist follows a similar conclusion: our experience of the world is useful but inaccurate insofar as we limit our experience to that of a subject separate from the world which, in his work, corresponds to the mode of experience of our left hemisphere. In a way, he informs Nishida's intuition with the workings of the brain as a channel through which reality is given conscious form. It is important to note that, beyond being a physician, McGilchrist first contemplated the pursuit of philosophy early on in his career (but instead completed his studies in literature, at Oxford University), and ultimately pursued this interest through his studies of medicine, psychiatry, and neuroscience. He was elected a fellow of the All Souls College four times during his career, giving him considerable time and resources to expand his ideas more freely. His work is striking for a particularly broad scholarship, however his thinking is most aligned with process philosophers,[4] and readers will note similar insights have been captured in the writings of Heraclitus, Pascal, Schelling, Heidegger, Alfred Whitehead, Henri Bergson, and William James. Nonetheless, it is his unique experience in neurology and psychiatry—for example, witnessing how cerebral lesions, namely strokes, can affect a person's experience of the world—that has led him to postulate that each brain hemisphere "calls forth" a distinct, yet complementary, experiential world. As will be detailed below, McGilchrist's distinction between the left and right hemispheres' way of attending to the world gives rise to a twofold or double posture that is not unlike Pascal's spirit of finesse and spirit of geometry, Martin Buber's I-Thou and I-It worlds, and of course, Nishida's pure experience and our subject-object, dualistic apprehension of reality.

As unlikely as their convergence appears, strong parallels can nonetheless be drawn between McGilchrist and Nishida's lives and philosophical traditions. Both thinkers are polymaths who have invested extensive scholarly attention in the paradigms of the sciences, humanities, and philosophy. Both have an important debt to process philosophers (namely, Henri Bergson and William James) in their account of reality and consciousness as dynamic and interwoven. Both have revered the work of Niels Bohr in highlighting the "complementary" nature of mind and matter, of the observer (the subject) and that which is the object of observation. Both ultimately took initiative to expand this intuition about matter and consciousness into a philosophical doctrine of nature, consciousness, and human experience. It is then perhaps less surprising that both Nishida and

4. Process philosophy is an approach in philosophy that focuses on the dynamic and ever-changing nature of reality, and puts a particular emphasis on processes, change and relations. This approach contrasts with traditional philosophical views that place emphasis on being, permanence and static entities.

McGilchrist have developed a similar philosophy, both articulating a twofold aspect of the experiential world into their complementarity, and developing a particular interest in the possibility of their dialectical reconciliation into a greater and unified reality, or between the many and the one.[5]

Nishida's conceptual ark expanded significantly throughout his career, yet the seeds of his philosophy are already contained in his earliest work, *An Inquiry into the Good*, published in 1911. There, his idea of a unified, nondual reality and of pure experience are laid out explicitly, and they exhibit powerful resonance with McGilchrist's ideas, particularly those in his magnum opus, *The Matter with Things*, published in 2021. There, McGilchrist expanded on the neuroscientific knowledge of brain hemispheres that was previously laid out in his seminal work *The Master and His Emissary*, and ventured to explore timeless areas of philosophical investigation such as the nature of truth, time, space, consciousness, value, and the sacred. While a full exploration of those ideas is beyond the scope of this short text, I believe it is in the context of this deep and fundamental inquiry that McGilchrist best expresses convergence with Nishida's philosophy.

The Matter with Things

McGilchrist's *The Matter with Things* extends just over 1,500 pages. In contrast to philosophers before him, an oft-cited strength of this work is that its scholarship rests on a monumental amount of evidence, and indeed, the cited works of philosophy, physics, neurology, and psychiatry together comprise 180 pages of bibliography. In his conclusion, McGilchrist reflects on the purpose of his work with hope that it may inform and shift the account we give of ourselves and, ultimately, our values and behaviors.[6] Doing so, he states, may also enable us to calibrate two ways of attending to the world that are fundamentally in tension, as each brain hemisphere "calls forth, and expects to receive, a different kind of attention, which governs what, in the end, it is that I experience."[7] A centerpiece of his argument is thus to reframe the role of "attention,"[8] which is usually framed as a cognitive function, but is here understood to have an epistemological, even ontological dimension, with "power to alter whatever it meets."[9]

5. To quote Nishida: "The fundamental mode of reality is such that reality is one while it is many and many while it is one" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 57).

6. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1331.

7. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 22.

8. For instance, McGilchrist notes how, depending how we pay attention to the world, it can be "absent, present, detached, engaged, alienated, empathic, broad or narrow, sustained or piecemeal" (McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 21).

9. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 21.

Hence, the evidence McGilchrist lays out makes evident that the left hemisphere's attention characteristically "apprehends" the world and in an instrumental and goal-oriented fashion frames the world as a thing to be grasped, with one's hands or with our language, abstracted from the whole and manipulated to fit our purpose or goal. The right hemisphere's attention, by contrast, "comprehends" the world, allowing reality to present itself as it is, without coloring the field of experience with intentionality, words, or concepts. It experiences the world in unity.

The shift from one mode of attention to the other, when drawn in sharp contrast, has the appearance of an "ontological landslide,"[10] shifting between an experience of the world as it "presents" itself, in a unitary fashion, and a world that is "re-presented" mechanistically, in analytic fashion. We recognize here not only Nishida's focus on "attention"[11] but also his fundamental distinction between ordinary subjective experience—the felt experience of a subject as separate from the observed world—and pure experience, "the original state of independent, self-sufficient consciousness, with no distinction among knowledge, feeling, and volition, and no separation of subject and object."[12] Hence, Nishida also speaks of a tension between the two modes of experience, which cannot be experienced simultaneously: "only when the unity is abstracted and objectified does it appear as a different consciousness—but then the unifying activity has already been lost."[13]

It's important to note that while Nishida took inspiration from the writings of Western thinkers, namely Ernst Mach and William James, he was also critical of Western metaphysics, which he noted devotes more focus to the individual's experience than to experience itself. Nishida's purpose in *An Inquiry into the Good* was therefore to shift the focus back to pure experience, "to explain all things on the basis of pure experience as the sole basis of reality."[14] This pure or direct experience is also McGilchrist's focus and understood to be captured by the right hemisphere. This is evident throughout *The Matter with Things*, where he seeks to re-appraise truth and reality not as we have re-presented them through the left hemisphere, but as a process, an unfolding event, a dynamic reality, and act of participation and embeddedness with the cosmos, which is reality as captured by the right hemisphere. Doing so, McGilchrist points at the shortcomings of Western science and logic, inviting the reader to expand beyond Western epistemologies. The title *The Matter with Things* is itself a criticism of the Western mind's overemphasis on

10. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 78.

11. Nishida also builds on our faculty of attention as the centerpiece of consciousness: "The focus of consciousness is at all times the present, and pure experience coincides with the sphere of attention" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 5–6).

12. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 130.

13. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 17.

14. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. xxx.

the conscious subject standing in opposition to objective matter, distinct, separate, and graspable by our intellectual faculties. In alignment with Nishida, who held that "material phenomena are abstractions from phenomena of consciousness,"[15] McGilchrist advances that our focus on material "things" clouds a truer understanding of reality as unitary and mediated by consciousness.

If discrete and isolated things are ultimately artefacts of the mind, then McGilchrist invites his readers instead to consider a world primarily consisting of relations, with the relata being but a derivative of the relationships through which it exists. Considering the world as experienced by the right hemisphere leads to an inversion of perspective, revealing that many common assumptions of our ordinary experience are not the rule but rather its exception, or in other words, a "limit case" of the more fulsome reality that is clouded and simplified by the left hemisphere.[16]

Consciousness and the Brain Hemispheres

As now appears obvious, a major departure from Nishida is that McGilchrist situates this twofold posture towards the world in our brain's left and right hemispheres. It shouldn't go unnoticed that Nishida had concerns with neuroscientific explanations of consciousness, as the brain was felt to be a distraction from conscious experience as its own point of origin.[17] To an extent, McGilchrist shares this view and makes explicit that he does not believe consciousness to be a product of the brain. Akin to Nishida, he understands consciousness to be an organizing principle of the cosmos, or "nature coming to know herself,"[18] with our experience being then a localized, embodied expression of this all-encompassing consciousness. The brain's role here is rather that of a conduit for conscious experience. McGilchrist thus uses the analogy of a television set transmitting content that lay

15. Nishida's statement is worth highlighting: "We believe that there are two types of experiential facts—phenomena of consciousness and phenomena of matter—but actually there is only one: phenomena of consciousness. Material phenomena are abstractions from phenomena of consciousness that are common to us all and possess an unchanging relation to each other.… The noumenon is something we imagine because of the demands of our thinking" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 43).

16. McGilchrist lays out a long series of examples from this inversion of perspective, of which I am sharing a few: the "thing" or object is a limit case of the world existing in relations; static is a limit case of motion (and in fact, we know from physics that there is fundamentally nothing in the universe that is static); literal meaning is a limit case of metaphors, where rather than having a one-to-one correspondence, metaphors hold all possible meanings; the actual is a limit case of what exists in potentiality; simplicity is a collapsed take on complexity; a straight line is a limit case of a curve, linearity of the non-linear, and discontinuity of continuity (see McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 7–8).

17. "Scientists reduce this individuality to the constitution of the brain, but I consider it an expression of the infinite unifying power of reality" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 137).

18. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1111.

beyond it, however he prefers permission to the notion of transmission.[19] This way, he seeks to emphasize agency in conscious experience, with the brain behaving as a medium of resistance, a filter to the broader field of consciousness. This altogether unconscious process therefore permits consciousness to take a shape differentiated from the whole, akin to a vortex taking form within a stream.[20] This is an idea that stands in close resonance to the concept of the will—the mind's unifying activity—which is used by Nishida to designate the unconscious process whereby experience is unified in consciousness.[21] This activity, which also places central importance on feelings, seems analogous to the activity of the right hemisphere.[22]

To McGilchrist then, the fact that the brain plays an essential role in mediating and shaping consciousness and experience makes it an inevitable object of investigation. As he highlights, his experience with stroke patients has been an illuminating piece of evidence, with cerebral lesions often transforming one's entire being-in-the-world, affecting perception as well as our sense of proportion and selfhood. Furthermore, he observed that strokes affecting the left and the right hemispheres can yield very distinct outcomes. Whereas one's experience of the world is relatively preserved so long as the right hemisphere is spared,[23] lesions of the right hemisphere can profoundly alter or distort experience, as if reality has been severed from the mind.

19. As he explains: "Built into the idea of the brain as permissive, or filtering, is, once again, the idea of resistance. Sculpting occurs through an impediment to the otherwise free flow of whatever it may be—in this case, consciousness" (McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things,* p. 1091).

20. Vortices in a stream is one of McGilchrist's analogies for conscious experience: "Individual consciousness is never truly separate from the whole—much as vortices in the stream, or waves in the sea, are visible, measurable and truly distinguishable, but not separate, from the body of water in which they arise.… To see the eddy as a separate entity from the river, or the wave as something "additional to" the sea, causes the self to become unstable: either wholly localisable or lost in the whole, not part and whole together" (McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1103–4). This analogy is echoed in Nishida's own writing: "Viewed from within the great unity of consciousness, thinking is a wave on the surface of a great intuition" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 16).

21. As Nishida explains of our unifying principle, or "will": "The aforementioned subjective unifying activity is always unconscious, and the object of that unification comes forth as the content of consciousness" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 66).

22. "Contrary to popular belief, true reality is not the subject matter of dispassionate knowledge; it is established through our feeling and willing.… If we were to remove our feelings and the world from this world of actuality, it would no longer be a concrete fact - it would become an abstract concept" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 49). It is interesting to note a parallel with McGilchrist, who demonstrates that feeling is predominantly an experience of the right hemisphere, with its anterior insula much more involved in somatosensory experience compared to that of the left hemisphere.

23. It is important to note here that our abilities to understand and express verbal language, in most individuals, are located in the left hemisphere and are typically impaired when those areas—Broca's and Wernicke's areas—are lesioned. While immensely impairing from a functional point of view, creating manifest deficits in language, it must be emphasized that these lesions do not distort our perception of reality, so long as the right hemisphere remains intact.

That such striking asymmetry exists between our brain hemispheres is the starting point of McGilchrist's philosophical investigation. From the observation that this asymmetry is consistently found across the animal domain—and documented as far back as 700 million years ago in ancient anemone species—his answer takes from evolutionary theory, and a vast body of paleontological, anatomical, and behavioral research. Through multiple and converging evidence, he posits that living organisms need to exert two opposing but complementary ways of experiencing the world—a focused and a widespread attention—in near simultaneity. A narrow and focused attention facilitates precise grasping of the immediate environment, and therefore the consumption of nutrients and prey, but makes one vulnerable to be preyed upon; therefore, survival requires that a broad attention be simultaneously deployed to exert vigilance and awareness of the surroundings. These two kinds of attention—narrow and broad, partial and whole, left hemispheric and right hemispheric—thus fundamentally balance each other. This complementarity is observable through many instances; for example, birds examine their environment with the left eye (associated with the right hemisphere's broad attention), and when detecting a prey, will shift to the use of their right eye (associated with the left hemisphere's focused attention).

This twofold way of attending to the world enables a dialectical process, of which there is also empirical evidence. In temporal order, sensory information is mediated first through the right hemisphere, then to the left hemisphere, and is relayed back and forth through the corpus callosum, a white matter bundle connecting the two brain hemispheres. Experience thus takes shape through an iterative process of synthetic perception (by the right hemisphere), followed by differentiation (by the left hemisphere), and then re-synthesis (again by the right hemisphere). Attention and experience thus first appear broad and unitary and are then magnified into focus and broken down into parts by the left hemisphere, where they are represented into schema and abstract representations. It is this simplified model of the world by the left hemisphere which increases our ability to grasp and manipulate the environment with precision. The right hemisphere then re-contextualizes this information into a synthetic unity, restoring its wholeness, or gestalt, enabling perception to again conform to a dynamic and relational world and correspond with reality.[24] This dialectic between differentiation and synthesis closely matches Nishida's dialectical understanding of the world: "the whole first appears implicitly, and from it the content develops through differentiation; when that development

24. Consistent with this function of processing the world as a whole, the right hemisphere has distinct structural differences from the left: it is more integrated through intra-hemispheric white matter fiber connections, is noted to process information more rapidly, has a superior reserve of working memory to hold information together in duration, and is superior to the left hemisphere in both sensory awareness and perceptual accuracy.

ends, the whole of the reality is actualized and completed—one entity has developed and completed itself."[25]

The World as Mediated by the Left and the Right Hemisphere

Both Nishida and McGilchrist suggest that our experience of the world is twofold, and that this double posture exists in complementary. But what are the distinct qualities of each mode of experience, and how do they mediate the world? To Nishida, pure experience is closest to (or indeed coincides with) ultimate reality, and as we have seen, is achieved through unconscious activity of the will and feelings. Our subjective experience, in contrast, is reflective and seems to fit a pragmatic or analytic purpose: "[in] both conduct and knowledge, for example, when our experience becomes complex and various associations arise to disturb the natural course of our experience, we become reflective."[26] This is echoed by McGilchrist when he states "[the] right hemisphere is more identified with the unconscious mind and the left hemisphere with the self-reflexively aware mind." A pragmatic handling of the world and an accurate perception of it are the two modalities of experience that together enable us to "simplify the world to deal with the necessities of life and build foundations of civilization, and also live in and belong to the world and understand its complexity."[27]

Each mode of experience mediates a different way of attending to and participating in the world. To help put things into perspective, the type of attention and mode of experience of each hemisphere can be summarized as in TABLE 1. This comparison makes obvious two deeply contrasting ways of engaging with reality. However, we can note that our experience is never quite so polarized. Our subjectivity is neither obliterated in the whole, nor fixated on the parts. The two modes of experience operate in synergy and in dialectical fashion, with the qualities of each hemisphere blending so that our engagement with the world stands in between abstract appraisal and embodied participation, and in between a personal, perhaps solipsistic consciousness and that of all-encompassing, overarching reality. To express this, McGilchrist speaks of our position in the world as that of a betweenness, which is like a piece of music being heard: it exists neither only in the outside world, nor within ourselves, but through the coinciding of both.[28]

25. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 52.

26. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 16.

27. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1107 and p. 31–2, respectively.

28. "There is a dialogue between our own consciousness and the aspects of the world we experience. For example, listening to music is a betweenness. Is it just out there, on its own? Clearly not. Is it, then, just in my brain? Clearly not. It exists only when outer and inner come together: that is, it lies in the betweenness. Experience—mind—is always a betweenness. And I believe all reality is like this" (McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1063).

Experience of the Left Hemisphere	Experience of the Right Hemisphere
World is a representation, simplified; facilitates manipulation and instrumentalization of the world	World is presented as it is; enables accurate contact with, and understanding of the world
World is inanimate, discontinuous, static, devitalized	Perceives unity, continuity, movement and flow
Things are isolated, discrete, fragmentary, mechanistic, put together from parts and pieces	Grasps the world as whole, including center, periphery and background
Attention is focused on details, locality, central aspects, and foreground	Attention is wide, things are embedded in broad surroundings, and perceived as integrated, unified
Sees sameness and familiar features	Appreciates difference and contrasting features
Narrows things down with certainty	Suspends judgment, preserves nuance/ context
Information treated as explicit, decontextualized; Unable to appreciate metaphor, myth, humor, irony, and non-verbal language	Sensitive to the implicit, metaphorical, intuitive; appreciates depth, music, poetry, emotions
Compatible with analytical/reflective thinking	Compatible with gestalt appreciation

TABLE 1: Experience of the left and right hemisphere as schematized by Iain McGilchrist.

It is worth noting that Nishida and McGilchrist both saw the mark of this active synthesis in works of art, exemplifying our ability to both intuit and realize oneness in performance. That great creative works are called forth by one's synthetic ability of the right hemisphere, or pure experience, is suggested by Nishida who, for instance, commented that "when Mozart composed music, including his long pieces, he could discern the whole at once, like a picture or a statue."[29] And indeed McGilchrist adds, quoting the poet Yeats: how can we know the dancer from the dance?

When the Right Hemisphere Breaks Down: Some Clinical Examples

If Nishida's conception of reality is indeed aligned with McGilchrist's, then a unique contribution of the latter is the mass of neuroscientific evidence, which opens a new corridor of phenomenological query. Therefore, through a comprehensive review of people's experience after right hemispheric lesions, McGilchrist has been able to scrutinize what happens when this betweenness is lost, or in other words, when one becomes confined to the left hemisphere's representation

29. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 31.

of the world. Detailed here is thus a brief clinical phenomenology of conscious experience when synthesis and unity break down into fragmentation.[30]

Disorders of Perception (Time, Space, and Movement)

Lesions of the right hemisphere can produce dyschronia, a loss of proportion with time and chronology. For instance, a person may be unable to discriminate the passing of time, experiencing a minute as a few dozens of seconds, or an hour as a few dozen minutes. Their recollection of chronological events can be off by many years. Following a loss of depth, space can also be experienced as flattened and schematic. Drawings of patients may typically show stick-figures for persons, sticks for trees, and for a flower, a circle with lines representing petals. Sense of proportions can also be impacted, leading to severe alterations which, alike Alice's predicaments in Lewis Caroll's novels, were labelled the "Alice in Wonderland Syndrome." Hence, one's world may be perceived as smaller (micropsia), larger (macropsia), too close (pelopsia), or too far (teleopsia). Minute asymmetries may become grossly distorted, leading one to perceive people as older than they are. Appearance can become fragmented and distorted like in a Picasso painting or, as with the matchstick figure, perception of others can become one-dimensional. The perception of motion can also break down, with the world then experienced mechanistically and without fluidity. Some patients' experience has become like a time-lapse photography, whereas a series of snapshots are seen in lieu of a continuous movement. The world may be experienced as slowed down or sped up. For instance, objects within one's central field of view may be experienced in slow motion, with the periphery (for example, traffic on a road) in fast motion. In some cases, a person's movements themselves are perceived to occur in slow motion, if not in a full stop, effects which are not unlike those utilized in the movie *The Matrix* (1999).

Disorders of Judgement

Following right hemisphere damage, our experience of the world may become stuck and fixated within the representations of the left hemisphere. Relying only on one's self-referential modelization of reality, an individual can become stubbornly convinced, in fact delusional, that their perspective is right, as they suddenly lack any evidence of the contrary. This can lead to sometimes absurd interpretations of the world, such as was the case with a patient who damaged his car exiting the garage and exonerated himself through the logic that "my friend changed the size of my garage without telling me." This phenomenon is

30. The clinical terms and examples are taken from McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, Chapters 3 (Perception) and 4 (Judgment).

comparable to that of confabulation—*ad hoc* justifications of circumstances that rely on rationalization of one's fixated belief, rather than evidence—found in certain illnesses such as the Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome and, it follows, in right hemisphere lesion. For instance, in a famous experiment of individuals with a callosotomy (a severance of brain hemispheres by dissection of the corpus callosum, a sometimes necessary procedure to eliminate intractable cases of epilepsy), a person must explain a choice made through the right hemisphere (a choice offered to them only through the field of view of that hemisphere) by means of a discordant context that was only seen from the left hemisphere's field of view. A participant for instance selected a shovel to match with a snowy winter scenery perceived through the right hemisphere, whereas his left hemisphere was shown an image of a chicken. Asked to explain their choice, and relying on language faculties (located in the left hemisphere's Broca area), the participant gave the peculiar, yet confident interpretation that the shovel should serve to clean up a chicken coop.

Disorders of Corporality (Asomatognosia)

Stranger still are interpretations that the left hemisphere has put forward to account for deficits in the body or sense of the self (asomatognosia) that result from damage to the right hemisphere. As an example, it is fairly common when lesions occur in the somatosensory areas—processing information about the body and bodily sensations—that there results a loss of sensation, if not complete paralysis to the body part mapped in the damaged area. When this area is in the left hemisphere, one preserves full insight of their weakness or paralysis. However, in lesions of the right hemisphere, one's relationship to the body part may literally cease to exist, which is thought to result from the left hemisphere's inability to piece the part back to the whole. Confabulating, the left hemisphere may seek to explain this deficient body part as being foreign or alien, or as belonging to somebody else.[31] This confusing experience has led patients to request for the "foreign limb" to be removed. In one such case, a patient for instance explained they wanted their arm removed, convinced that it belonged to their mother. The failure to recognize one's own body parts, or rather, their relationship to our personhood, is also illustrated in an instance where someone could not recognize their wedding ring worn on the left hand (mapped unto the lesioned right hemisphere), yet would instantaneously recognize the ring were it worn on the right hand (mapped unto the preserved left hemisphere).

31. This later case reflects the phenomenon of somatoparaphrenia, a condition whereby one believes a body part to belong to someone else, a hallmark of right hemispheric lesions in the parietal cortex.

Disorders of Selfhood and Identity

As our sense of self is not static but exists through duration and despite change (both of which cannot be appreciated by the left hemisphere), identity is accurately ascribed through the right hemisphere's ability to perceive things in unity and continuity. If the world is experienced mechanistically as the sum of fragmented parts, which is the domain of the left hemisphere, then reality can appear uncanny or unreal. For instance, when the fusiform gyrus, which recognizes facial features, is lesioned in the right hemisphere, one may become unable to piece together the gestalt of a face and to recognize someone, a condition known as prosopagnosia.[32] Right hemisphere lesions thus can present with syndromes of misidentification. Hence, in Capgras Syndrome, given the person is unable to situate others in their wholeness or personhood, then a person which they know very well may now be believed to be an impostor or impersonator of that person. The opposite may happen as well, and in Fregoli Syndrome, all identities are flattened and misattributed to a single person, leading someone to believe everyone they encounter is the same person. This disorder of identification can apply to oneself as well, and in a way reminiscent of the cases of individuals feeling their limb to be dead or alien, one may experience themselves to no longer exist. In Cotard's Syndrome, again associated with right hemispheric damage, one's inability to appreciate themselves as a organic whole leads them to confabulate that they must be dead, resulting in some individuals asking to be buried.

As might be striking to some readers, the patterns of misidentification highlighted so far are not unlike those found in psychosis or schizophrenia,[33] often involving a warping of perspectives, a loss of proportions, and misassembled chronology, which can lead to bizarre, but nonetheless fixed false beliefs about the world (otherwise known as delusions). The inability to appreciate change or the broader context makes one's world incongruous, which often evokes suspiciousness or frank paranoia towards situations or people which will not fit an otherwise self-referential, flattened, or static representation of the world. For instance, a paranoid delusion that commonly develops to account for a misplaced object is that one's home must have been broken into; or, in the case related above where someone damaged their car exiting the garage, someone was accused of having secretly tampered with the garage in their absence.

To summarize then, this strange phenomenology of right cerebral lesions, more than a mere exhibit of neuropathology, can serve as a testimony to our

32. This type of experience was features in Oliver Sacks's clinical account of prosopagnosia, "The man who mistook his wife for a hat," where indeed Dr. P., a person who suffered one such lesion, and despite having no issues with visual perception, attempted to grab his wife's head, mistaking her face for a hat.

33. For interested readers, McGilchrist has a full chapter devoted to the relationship between schizophrenia and right hemisphere dysfunction.

hemispheres' world-defining features. As made evident, we rely on the right hemisphere's unifying attention to situate the world in its full context, and realize that the left hemisphere, unable to do so, can only offer a simplified but inevitably distorted version of reality. While McGilchrist is able to expand on this contrast through clinical phenomena, the limitations of our representational take on reality were nonetheless obvious to Nishida, who spoke of our reflective thinking as "that which is contradictory and conflicted,"[34] lest subjected to greater synthesis through the will's unifying activity.[35]

The World Adrift: Nishida's Good Conduct and McGilchrist's Crisis of Morality

Each modality of experience—unitary and reflective—has its distinct advantages. In closing this essay, one last distinction that is worth exploring is that of morality and the good, as for both Nishida and McGilchrist, our active engagement with reality, pre-conceptual and undistorted, conveys a moral dimension that is lacking in the other mode of experience.

For Nishida, pure experience is synonymous with active synthesis with reality. It is a state of consciousness contingent with the unity of true reality, yet requires moving beyond the dualistic and reflective activity of the thinking self.[36] Bringing us closest to truth, pure experience is contingent with the actualization of our true personhood: "the true personality comes forth when a person… forgets his or her self," and merges into unified consciousness, "the original state of independent, self-sufficient consciousness, with no distinction among knowledge, feeling, and volition, and no separation of subject and object. At this time, our true personality expresses itself in its entirety."[37] In *An Inquiry of the Good*, Nishida understands this return to pre-conceptual primacy of unity as meeting a fundamental demand of the universe, that is, unity. Again, to Nishida, our role in this process is not passive. Humans become creative agents through the unifying activity of their will, and therefore participate in this harmony: "the good is primarily a coordinated

34. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 16.

35. Of note here, Nishida's comment on analytic thought parallels McGilchrist's understanding of the left hemisphere's view of reality as "collapsed," with true reality more closely approximated by art and intuition: "The world described by physicists, like a line without width and a plane without thickness, is not something that actually exists. In this respect, it is the artist, not the scholar, who arrives at the true nature of reality" (p. 49). Further, Nishida adds that "By taking this way of thinking to the extreme, we arrive at the idea of nature in the strictest sense as construed by scientists. This idea is the most abstract and most removed from the true state of reality" (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 68).

36. Nishida sometimes refers to this reflective self as the "small self" or "small consciousness." This stands in contrast to the True self, whose consciousness is unified with the world rather than cleaved into subject/object, or reflective experience (Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 166).

37. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 130.

harmony.… Our conscience is the activity of consciousness that harmonizes and unifies the activities." This "good," the moral horizon in Nishida's early work, is embedded in the dialectic between human consciousness and reality. Through this dialectic, one's true personality and true reality are together realized in harmony. This way of participating in the world, Nishida termed "good conduct" or "perfect conduct." Fundamental in this process, conceptual thinking plays a role in further differentiating reality, to be subsequently united in greater synthesis. Nonetheless, it is important to note that in this good conduct, Nishida ultimately gives primacy not to thinking, but to feelings, and particularly, the feeling of love: "Love is fundamentally the feeling that seeks unity" and "[in] this regard, good conduct is love."[38]

The aforementioned dialectic of consciousness and reality, through which humans and the universe together actualize themselves, is a theme as well in McGilchrist's writings: "I believe that what exists is a locally differentiated, but ultimately single, field of potentiality, which is constantly actualising itself." Further, that our "good conduct" takes shape in enabling greater harmony through feelings of love bears a strong resemblance with the right hemisphere's way of attending to the world, which "creates the disposition of humility, love, and reverence." To McGilchrist, our mode of attention—or which brain hemisphere predominates in what circumstances—is fundamental to our conduct, since "[by] paying a certain kind of attention, you can humanise or dehumanise, cherish or strip of all value." Choosing our posture towards the world, to both Nishida and McGilchrist, is therefore a moral choice. To McGilchrist, morality is thus the providence of the right hemisphere. Clinical research supports that the right hemisphere is more involved in inhibition from impulsive or reckless behaviors, enables prosocial behaviors, and promotes social and emotional understanding. It is the experiential realm that supports ethics, social responsibility, and a sustainable future. The fundamental problem of our times, therefore, is to McGilchrist that we have increasingly privileging the posture of the left hemisphere, dismissing in the process the experience of the right hemisphere: "We have been seriously misled, I believe, because we have depended on that aspect of our brains that is most adept at manipulating the world in order to bend it to our purposes…. The problem is that the very brain mechanisms which succeed in simplifying the world so as to subject it to our control, militate against a true understanding of it."[39]

Importantly, McGilchrist's concern is not just that we risk losing touch with morality and our ability to intuit the good. Rather, the risk is that we end up deluding ourselves with a misleading view of morality, or a notion of the good that was

38. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 128 and p. 164 and 134, respectively.
39. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1104 and 1146, p. 21, p. 1317, and p. 3, respectively.

distorted to fit the left hemisphere's simplified model of reality.[40] As the clinical examples shared above highlighted, in order to optimize its grasp on the world, the left hemisphere can produce aberrations of judgment and, mistaking its model of the world for the world itself, will be stubbornly convinced of its own truth unless a synthetic relationship with reality is restored by the right hemisphere. Despite excelling in analytic thought, the left hemisphere lacks insight into its deficits. McGilchrist therefore cautions that our societies are gradually enclosing themselves in delusions or chimeras of thought that have justified the exploitation of nature and of others, as well as the supremacy of protocols and algorithms at the expanse of truly ethical behavior. We risk conflating reality with a convenient simulation of reality: a world that is abstracted, virtual, flat, static, schematic, fragmentary, and ultimately distorted. Moral behavior, in contrast, requires one to hold space for ambiguity, to resolve the trivial contradictions harbored in dualist thinking, and to seek instead unifying perspectives that enable us to comprehend the world in its complexity, all of which require the gestalt perspective of the right hemisphere. That contemporary societies have instead become increasingly modelled by our left hemispheric view is made evident when we examine the ever-expansive authority of bureaucracy.[41]

From this perspective, today's moral quandary rests on a loss of balance in our way of relating to the world. This imbalance is of course not the result of a collective stroke to the right hemisphere, but rather, a gradual consequence of increasingly relying on social and economic prerogatives that dismiss the broad and unitary perspectives of the right hemisphere. McGilchrist draws various parallels between the left hemisphere's drive for control and an increasingly narrow vision fixated on short term gains, mechanistic ordering of the world, and bureaucratic control, "[substituting] quantity for quality - and 'productivity' for creativity."[42] Losing perspective of the whole, and therefore unable to fully appreciate our interdependence and interconnectedness, McGilchrist identifies three fundamental dimensions of our existence that are now eroding: our relationship with Nature, giving way to despoliation of the planet; our search for wisdom, manifest in a disregard for ancient cultures and extinction of the way of life of indigenous people; and our

40. "[My] point is not just that the right hemisphere is superior to the left hemisphere with regard to ethics. That is the case: but there is a more important point. According to the left hemisphere's model of reality, it is the author of all its experience, so that goodness, like truth, is its own invention" (McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1146).

41. McGilchrist compares the left hemisphere's world as a bureaucrat's dream, "a world composed of static, isolated, fragmentary elements that can be manipulated easily, are decontextualized, abstracted, detached, disembodied, mechanical, relatively uncomplicated by issues of beauty and morality… and untroubled by the complexity of empathy, emotion, human significance" (McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 31).

42. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1313.

relationship with the divine, giving way instead to hedonism and a worshiping of the individual. This erosion of our existential foundations, McGilchrist argues, is giving rise to a global mental health crisis with worsening depression, anxiety, and loneliness. He thus concludes: "far more of us than ever before in the history of the world live divorced from Nature, alienated from the structures and traditions of a stable society, and indifferent to the divine.… We exist in the world, of course, but we no longer belong in this world.… We have unmade the world. This is entirely new in the history of humanity and it is impossible to exaggerate its significance."[43]

In closing, we can appreciate through McGilchrist's cautionary work that Nishida's intuition around true reality and his emphasis on "good conduct" are just as relevant today as they were a century ago. His emphasis on the primacy of pure experience, not only in terms of ontology but also from the perspective of moral behavior, can be seen as an invitation to restore balance in our situation in a world where analytical prowess has fulfilled many promises of progress and development, but also paved the way to increasing self-absorption and short-sightedness towards the whole. The peril can be seen as that of a species progressively more alien to the innate demands of the universe—to actualize ourselves in greater unity with reality—and to the feelings of love that seek and enable harmony. Nishida perhaps did not go so far in his caution against the analytic mind, but he nonetheless foresaw risks of estranging oneself from pure experience, or of cleaving reality excessively. As he wrote, "Falsehood, ugliness, and evil always arise in our viewing abstractly just one aspect of things while we are unaware of the whole, and in being partial to just one facet of reality and thereby going against the unity of the whole."

As both thinkers understand it, however, through a dialectic between reflective experience and reality, or between the left and right hemispheres, we are ultimately able to navigate the world with the right proportion and wisdom. Behind today's apparent contradictions there always lies the possibility of a greater unity. As Nishida reminds us: "[that] which is contradictory and conflicted is the beginning of a still greater systematic development; it is the incomplete state of a greater unity.… Behind this contradiction and conflict is a possible unity."[44]

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43. McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, p. 1312 and p. 1310, respectively.
44. Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, p. 143 and p. 16, respectively.