

FCR 1976-82

**The two hemispheres of the brain
(KM, DN, NG)**

Dr. Roles was convinced that a lot of the difficulty we found in our search for understanding and consciousness, was due to using the wrong side of our divided brain to achieve results.

One of the earlier examples he quoted was at a Meditation meeting (78/24), the story of the King of the Crows and the Young Swan, where the crow, full of his ability to run rings round the gentle swan in flight, had eventually to be rescued by the swan from drowning. The crow representing the dominant left hemisphere (in this case the personality) and the swan the more emotional and considered approach of the right hemisphere (essence). 'Meditation should be done by the swan and not the crow' is how Dr. Roles finished the story.

A recent publication by Ian MacGilchrist (*The Master and his Emissary*) deals with the brain functions of the two hemispheres. The book title is based on a story by Nietzsche in which a spiritual master engages emissaries to look after the more distant parts of his domain. But the cleverest and most ambitious of these viziers began to see himself as the master, and became contemptuous of his real master, with the result that the Master was usurped and the domain eventually collapsed in ruins.

MacGilchrist believes that both hemispheres are involved in all mental processes and states, but though they should co-operate, they have for some time been in a state of conflict. This was played out in the seismic shifts that have characterised the history of Western culture, and that at present we are in the hands of the 'vizier'. And the Master who gave the people peace and security, is led away in chains, betrayed by the emissary.

Do we see evidence of this in the world around us, and in our own psychology, or is it a case of where we focus our attention?

The following quotation is from a recent paper (10/10):

In the eight-fold yoga path of Patanjali, the sixth stage that has to be mastered before meditation can be commenced is Dharana, single pointed attention. HH has told us the story of the arrow maker, which comes from the Srimad Bhagavatam in which is described the attention of the arrow maker: 'Thus when the Chitta, the consciousness, is completely fixed on the Atman, one no longer sees anything inside or outside, just as the arrow maker who was so absorbed in the arrow, that he did not see the king himself, who was passing right next to him.'

However in the same paper, HH speaks of the nature of attention in a Realized Man:

The attention of the Realized man is very free; it is not hard or close fixed, it is freely moving; whereas the attention of the learner has to be very appropriate; he must pull himself together to attend to the subject.

McGilchrist says that ‘There is evidence of left hemisphere dominance of local narrowly focused attention. The right hemisphere is dominant for broad, global and flexible attention.’ We would say that we have to be awake and aware of ourselves, so that we may use the attention appropriate to the activity in hand: the two halves of the brain working together.

In a paper on Attention (79/22), Dr. Roles wrote as follows:

Perhaps the practice of attention has already shown you that, such as we are, we can only directly attend (through the dominant hemisphere) to those parts of our machine which are manifested in the outer world. But even this can lead to a considerable ‘no claim bonus’ in the improved functions of the quiet inward-looking half to our nature, so we get a number of pleasant surprises. We have demonstrated this in relation to two of our principle functions, the *moving* and *instinctive*.

Examples of this we may have noticed in ourselves, when we remember, could be: ‘only saying what is necessary’; the hasty comment or the unnecessary word can be stopped before affecting the lives of others. ‘Unnecessary physical movements’; these can be reduced, and those that are required performed in a more efficient and relaxed manner. One remembers when at a large meeting at Colet, Helen Wright said to Dr. Roles: ‘but can I not even think about what I am going to give you for lunch, as I am driving in?’ The doctor replied ‘not even that, just attend to your driving.’

We know that both PDO and FCR considered the awakening of conscience in the individual as being the first aim of the Work. And in relation to the hemispheres Dr. Roles wrote as follows (78/32):

For today we know that the awakening of conscience belongs to the realm of the private individual world and the inner quiet hemisphere which can’t communicate in words; the dominant left hemisphere knows little about it, doesn’t like it, and always describes in terms of *general* morality (which means trying to force others to see things our way – in the so-called religions or politics or economics). So in the matter of conscience we should keep our talkative personality from spoiling this wonderful weapon which is meant to be used for the growth and improvement of Essence and the direct route to Self-Realization.

Dr. Roles was very interested in the memory function of the two hemispheres, as the following extracts from meeting reports indicate:

. . . the scientific interest in the alerting mechanism in the bilateral symmetry of the brain, has brought the knowledge that the two halves have quite different memory mechanisms. While we know a lot about the ‘dominant hemisphere memory’, practically nothing is yet known about the potential memory of the silent inward looking hemisphere or of the two working in harmony together. This should be a most valuable direction for our Society’s researches. [79/13]

Dr. R. Peter Fenwick, now, this question of memory. I do think, don't you, that it would be a thing that trained observers of themselves could study with good effect. For instance, although a lot is known about the memory of the dominant hemisphere – quite different forms of short term memory – very little is known as yet, about the potential memory of the inner, silent hemisphere which can't say anything about it, there is no language. Even less is known about the memory of both together when working in consciousness and harmony. So I think it's a very worthy object to study, wouldn't you say?

PF. Of the synthesis of the memory of the two hemispheres, nothing is known nor is it studied; but the fractionation of the two is being studied.

Dr.R. I would like first to have some more data on what has been proved about some of the capacity for memory of the silent hemisphere. And then the integration of the two together must be actually studied by putting something into practice – Meditation and so on". [79/14]

Current research appears to indicate that 'insight', whether mathematical or verbal, the sort of problem solving that happens when we are precisely not concentrating on it, is associated with activation in the right hemisphere (the double helix revelation comes to mind). And that insight is also a perception of the previous incongruity of one's assumptions, which links to the right hemisphere's capacity for detecting an anomaly.

Could this be a form of memory? Or is it just another of the right hemisphere's attributes, to go with imagination, creativity, capacity for religious awe, music dance, sense of humour, empathy, and so-on.

We know the two halves of the brain are designed to function together, as they are joined at the base by millions of nerve fibres that connect similar areas in each hemisphere. And that many fibres also stop interference between the two halves. It is further said that the right pays attention to the left, but that the left attends only to the virtual world it has created. We also know from our own experience, that when we are 'carried away' (identified) in conversation or activity, it is the left side of the brain that has captured the scene. Similarly we know that left side Meditation is impossible. Rather we need to withdraw from all language and thought, into the emotional understanding of the quiet hemisphere – until that also becomes still.

Iain McGilchrist speaks in his book of the functions of the Frontal Lobes of the brain neocortex, which grows forward from the rest of the cortex, forming 35% of the human brain. He says that these mediate most of the sophisticated activities that mark us as humans, such as planning, perspective taking, self-control, and so on. Also our ability to 'stand back', to think and plan, and that they allow us to betray or trust. Through them, he says, we learn to take another's perspective and control our own immediate needs and desires. Also making it possible to 'stand back' from oneself.

For us this may be associated with the function of Buddhi (discrimination) in the Shankaracharya's system.

Dr. Roles seemed to think that what the Western System called 'formatory thinking' was located in this frontal area of the brain. He said in 1979:

It is always possible to recognise 'formatory thinking' since it can only count up to two: 'communism and facism', 'labour and capital', and so on. Also that we owe most of our current catch-words to this. And popular theories in all times in history.

Both hemispheres being subject to it in their own separate ways. The right giving way to primitive superstitions and defective thinking; the left to 'rigid logic' which does not see its limitations. [79/22]

This paper concludes with a quotation from Iain McGilchrist's book, with much of which Dr. Roles would have probably agreed:

The individual life was seen in the past as more than just a line leading to – what? Its shape had the qualities of a circle: *in my end is my beginning, and in my beginning is my end*. Like many complex and apparently paradoxical dispositions to the world, this belief is better expressed in music than in words. Guillaume de Machaut's rondeau *Ma fin est mon commencement, est mon commencement ma fin*, written in the mid-fourteenth century, is not only remarkable for its beauty, but images its spiritual meaning in the form of the piece . . . The text expresses a truth about life in this world as well as in the next, death being a gateway to life; for our relationship with the world leads us constantly back to what was already known, but never before by us understood, circling and searching our origins.

This reflected the shape of the cosmos, the universe, and ultimately of the Divine. The idea that God is a sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.

[*The Master and his Emissary*, p 448]

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