Reviews

IAIN MCGILCHRIST. *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World.* 2 vols. Perspectiva Press, 2021, 1,500 pages. [Reviewed by JULIEN TEMPONE-WILTSHIRE, University of Tasmania. Email: <Julien.Tempone-Wiltshire@utas.edu.au>.]

> We cannot constrain anyone who is unwilling to follow the new direction of a question; we can only extend the field of vision of the asker, loosen his prejudices, guide his gaze in a new direction: but all this can be achieved only with his consent.
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> —Friedrich Waismann

The world needs more thinkers capable of offering the breadth and depth of view that Iain McGilchrist offers. His latest work, *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, begins from a substantialist view of the world built from materialist science to arrive at an elegant account of the world as process. McGilchrist defends an account of the world *as process* set against a substantialist account of a world *of things*—hence the titular epithet: *The Matter With Things*.

In exploring how our brains contribute to shaping our mind's construction of reality, McGilchrist draws together the domains of neuropsychology, epistemology, and metaphysics. How we can come to know, and the nature of what it is that is known, are subjects inextricable from the equipment we rely upon in our exploration. His contention is that today there is an urgent need to transform how we see the world and thus what we make of ourselves. As such, his ambition is to disclose a way of looking at the world that diverges significantly from the manner of seeing that has dominated human civilizations for millennia and that, he contends, has produced systemic misunderstandings of the nature of reality. Here one cannot help but be reminded of Gregory Bateson and his statement that most of the problems in the world are caused by the difference between how nature is and how people think. To this end, in

The Matter With Things, McGilchrist takes the reader on a tour de force of the world of ideas and into a landscape not of a material world composed of "things," but rather discloses the more fundamental "process" quality of the world.

His argument is a significant development of his earlier seminal work *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009). In this work, he began from the premise that the two hemispheres of the brain have divergent means of attending to the world and that if our civilization is to survive, it is necessary that we learn to adopt a radically different view of reality. In this foundational work, McGilchrist not only characterized the ways of attending but additionally proffered his own theory for how brain lateralization may have far reaching cultural ramifications, shaping the societies we have inherited and the consequent history of multiple civilizations. In his more recent work, he turns beyond mere *characterization* of hemispheric function and toward an exploration of the way in which how we attend to the world *constructs* the world we encounter. Here he goes further to suggest that we have been deeply misled in how we view the world by the left hemispheric aspect of our brains, which is adept at manipulating the world in order to bend it to our purposes.

This work is more speculative, more philosophically informed, and more courageous than McGilchrist's previous works, and because of this, the reader receives insight into the mind of a brilliant polymath. In our moment of hyper-siloed specialization, we would do well as a species to pay attention to such truly synergistic and transdisciplinary thought. His ambition is philosophically audacious: to explore the ramifications of hemispheric lateralization for our understanding of the world as we experience it, and, in the process, to reveal the manner in which nature is concealed from us and our models of nature distorted by this very hemispheric lateralization. Meanwhile, his methodical approach is epistemically tenacious—the book contains 1,500 pages of densely cited empirical studies from across scientific domains. Yet such a dappled transdisciplinary approach is critical to the nonlinear complexity-based and intersystemic theory he wishes to propose. Perhaps the unique contribution of this work is the view of the world McGilchrist eloquently elucidates, one that seems more complete and less partial than any typical text with a neuroscientific basis. The particular synthesis he offers of philosophy and science rings as a kind of long-awaited response to Schrödinger, who suggested that isolated knowledge obtained by a group of specialists in a narrow field has

in itself no value whatsoever. McGilchrist remarks, however, that *what you find* is a product of *how you attend*, thus the siloed nature of disciplinary knowledge renders any attempt to understand the world "as a whole" a near pointless exercise. Yet McGilchrist rises to this challenge from the vantage of a person who has *earned* wisdom and not merely *accumulated* knowledge.

McGilchrist is concerned with offering an understanding of the nature of reality via the mental-neurological equipment we bring to bear in our quest to understand reality and to proffer a "best guess" at what reality is probably like, given this equipment. To summarize his argument simplistically: the brain is divided into two hemispheres, a left hemisphere designed to *ap*-prehend, and thus manipulate, the world and a right hemisphere designed to *com*-prehend it, to see it all for what it is. The natural tension he identifies is that those brain mechanisms intended to *simplify* the world in order to subject it to our control mitigate our ability to truly *understand* it. As he notes, this problem is compounded in that "we take the success we have in manipulating it as proof that we understand it" (22). To exert power over and to coerce the world to our will is, McGilchrist contends, evidence not of our *understanding* the world but rather an action motivated by precisely our *failure* to understand the world.

The view of the world that calls for overturning, the view motivated by such a failure to understand the world, to McGilchrist's mind, is what he terms the school of "nothing-buttery." This school operates from the foundational assumption and tacit belief in reductionism: the belief that we, life, and the cosmos are "nothing but" a bundle of material entities, and, consequently, all phenomena may be understood solely by reference to their constituent parts. He takes the reductionist view as not only mistaken but actively harmful to the natural world, human psychology, morality, and our spiritual or existential understanding. He suggests such metaphysical reductionism derives from a predominantly left-hemispheric perception of reality. McGilchrist begins by characterizing the prevalent reductionist, materialist, scientistic, and mechanistic pictures of reality and draws on empirical studies to demonstrate the linkages with left-hemispheric dominance. In contrast, he suggests the right hemisphere understands and perceives the world as a "whole," that is, never the same as, or reducible to, the sum of its parts, and that in fact there are no genuine "parts" as such—rather, parts are merely artifacts of a certain way of looking at the world.

The following sections of the work pursue the various paths and modes we have used historically in constructing our understanding of the world. He focuses on the four quadrants of science, reason, intuition, and imagination and draws upon neurobiological research findings to suggest that, contra popular opinion, the right hemisphere offers contributions of greater significance than the left hemisphere across all of these domains. He suggests we are mistaken if we fail to draw upon all four of these modes of thought, and he grounds this suggestion in the contributions of the distinct hemispheres of the brain. This foray across modes of knowing allows McGilchrist to prepare the way for the final section of his book, in which he considers the "stuff" of reality.

What is the stuff of reality, for McGilchrist? The best guess he comes to is process. There is inadequate space in this brief review to encapsulate the rich, empirically well-developed challenge McGilchrist offers to the prevailing substantialist ontology. In brief, it is worth noting that McGilchrist offers an intriguing and provocative attempt to overturn the reductionist, essentialist, commonplace metaphysics that accords primacy to "things" rather than to "relationships." His contention is that this metaphysical picture arises as a natural by-product of the manner in which the left hemisphere conceives the world; a misconception, in brief, arising out of hemispheric bias. His broader suggestion is that the left hemisphere functions to "re-present" what first "presences" to the right hemisphere. In this way, the world we live in today is a *re*-presentation of the world, rather than the world in itself. As he suggests, this *re*-presentation possesses the qualities of a virtual image: "an infinitely thin, immobile, fragment of a vast, seamless, living, ever-flowing whole" (32–33). Yet, given our left-hemispheric bias, we do not see as primary what is *truly* present but are prone to mistake reality for its re-presentation—which is actually a diminished derivative of it.

McGilchrist goes beyond the ambition of merely redressing the reader's *factual* belief in a world built primarily out of "stuff." Rather, he wishes to induce a *perspectival* shift in the reader to a view of the world as *process*. Quoting Tim Maudlin, McGilchirst, too, suggests that the world is not merely a set of separately existing localized objects, externally related only by space and time—but rather hemispheric lateralization discloses the possibility that something deeper, and more mysterious, knits together to form the fabric of the world. His contention is that in order to see the universe as it is, it is necessary to surrender the tendency

to conceptualize our observations in terms of the "things" of the universe that may be said to exist, but rather to afford metaphysical primacy to the "relationships" existing between those things. Such a right-hemispheric reconceptualization of the world holds that "relationships" are primary; they don't merely *connect* preexisting things—rather we are dealing ultimately with, and thus require a metaphysics of, relations, events, and processes. As he writes: "'Things'" is a useful shorthand for those elements, congealed in the flow of experience, that emerge secondarily from, and attract our attention in, a primary web of interconnexions. I have nothing against things, provided we don't see them as primary" (31). In relation to this overarching critique of substantialist ontology, the final section of McGilchrist's work considers the coincidence of opposites, the problem of division and union, the nature of time, space, matter, consciousness, value, purpose, and the sense of the sacred. The value in his contribution to these subjects involves foremost his reflections upon how these concepts may be understood in relation to hemispheric lateralization and that the systemic left-hemispheric dominance in our thinking has led to a cultural tendency to prioritize the more myopic, less adequate versions of reality proffered by the left hemisphere.

McGilchrist touches upon most of the history of ideas in this work and summons the reader to step outside of the re-presentation of the world and encounter the world as it first "presences" to the right hemisphere. Neither philosophy nor empirical data can compel one to a point of view. Nonetheless, McGilchrist's account carries the reader to a view that has the capacity to fundamentally change the world in which one lives. We ought to salute McGilchrist for his ambition to offer one way by which to transmit us to a process view of reality.

HANK KEETON and YU FU (Translators and Commentators). *Dao De Jing: A Process Perspective*. Anoka, MN: SeeingTao and Process Century Press, 2019. 295 pages. [Reviewed by ADAM C. SCARFE, University of Winnipeg, Canada. Email: <a.scarfe@uwinnipeg.ca>.]

This is a profoundly beautiful volume. It provides an eloquent and poetic rendering of the *Dao De Jing* through the lens of Whiteheadian, process-relational philosophy. The text of this ancient Daoist classic is typically attributed to a single individual, Laozi ("Old Man"), who is thought to have been a keeper of archives at Chou and wrote it in order that he be allowed to leave and to proceed through the Han-Ku Pass by its keeper, Yin Xi. However, the *Dao De Jing* is perhaps more accurately