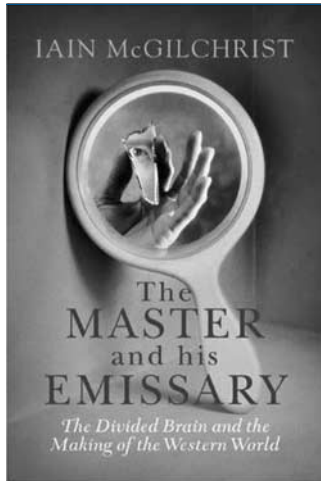


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge, Femi Oyeboode
and Rosalind Ramsay



The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

By Iain McGilchrist.
Yale University Press. 2009.
US\$38.00 (hb). 608 pp.
ISBN: 9780300148787

McGilchrist has written a book of breathtaking scope – a journey not just through the neurosciences but also philosophy, literature, the arts, archaeology and anthropology – in an attempt to answer whether the lateralisation of cerebral function has influenced history. The breadth of the source material is dazzling, from basic neuroscience experiments to Russian poetry – translations are helpfully provided for those of us who are not polyglots – and the actual writing is, at times, superlative. But is what he says true?

Some may argue that it does not matter whether or not it is true. McGilchrist himself appears ambivalent. He opens with a desire to tell a story and concludes that he would not be unhappy if his thesis was eventually demonstrated to be a metaphor. Many in psychiatry might agree, and I suspect some will have a reverential approach to this work, but the more I read the more concerned I became. The credibility of this book is its foundation in neuroscience. We are interested because McGilchrist talks eruditely and, we hope, from a position of knowledge, about the scientific framework on which he based his more artistic interpretations. However, this foundation does not seem entirely sound and many of the conclusions presented go far, far beyond the available data. The impression of knowledge existing where there are only gaps is a recurrent theme.

McGilchrist has a tendency to acknowledge the limitations of the data, and then swiftly ignore them, selecting only those findings which support his thesis. Some readers may also consider that much of the neuroscience is anthropomorphised: is the off–on binary relationship of two neurons really the same as antagonism at a human relational level? The response, of course, is that this is one of the basic questions of the book. To an extent the question is a tautology: history is a product of the human brain and therefore it can only be shaped by the brain's structure and function. However, the book only serves a purpose if it can demonstrate that there has been a unique contribution to the shaping of history as a direct result of functional asymmetry and in this case the contribution of neuroscience was definitely not proven.

Much of the evidence cited was not from the neurosciences but from other disciplines. The arguments were, again, beautifully expressed but opinion among those better able to judge the content appeared deeply divided. Mary Midgley was an

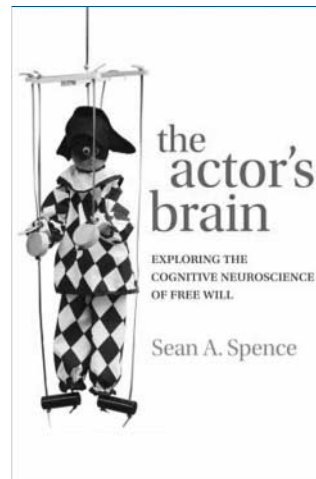
enthusiast,¹ although also appeared to accept the science, but A. C. Grayling was much more cautious and less convinced.²

Where did this leave me? Certainly with a deep sense of discomfort. Was this, as Mary Midgley suggested, because the book forced me to ask new questions? I do not think so. I did have ignoble reactions but they were mainly in the domain of envy at McGilchrist's skill as a writer and the breadth of his reading. The disquiet came from a growing concern, not at the questions being asked, but at a growing belief that the book was in fact another pop science misrepresentation of intra-hemispheric differences, albeit exquisitely packaged and persuasively presented. It left me asking an altogether different, perhaps overly Calvinistic, question – was it, as we say in Edinburgh, 'all fur coat and nae knickers?'

- 1 Midgley M. The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World by Iain McGilchrist. *Guardian*, 2 January 2010.
- 2 Grayling AC. In two minds. *Literary Review*, December 2009/January 2010.

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The Actor's Brain. Exploring the Cognitive Neuroscience of Free Will

By Sean A. Spence.
Oxford University Press.
2009. £39.95 (hb). 456pp.
ISBN: 9780198526667

The Actor's Brain is a fresh, thought-provoking journey into a millennial theme. The author's aim is to provide the reader with neuroscientifically driven insights into whether free will is 'just an illusion'. To do so, he chooses to address the control of action and behaviour, rather than focusing on thought processes. The book is a blend of theoretical issues and scientific data which bridges the disciplines of philosophy, psychology and medicine. Relevant examples and evidence are expertly selected and delightfully interwoven throughout.

The book is well-illustrated and adorned with relevant quotes. It covers immense subject ground. After a clear and intriguing introduction, the reader is taken along a gently guided path that describes the basic physical framework for action and the consequences of its breakdown. These are followed by a discussion of more psychologically based conditions that can be considered to exemplify 'higher level' failures in the exertion of free will. Later sections cover the neuropsychology of deception and controversial issues relating to moral judgement. Although the hard science featured in early chapters may prove challenging for readers from

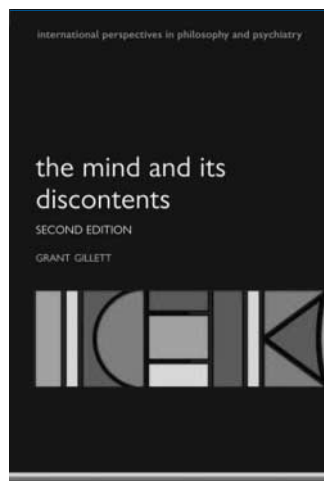
a less scientific background, the captivating subject matter makes this book well worth pursuing.

Spence's consideration of physical, psychological and social constraints on the expression of free will is both entertaining and informative. It prompts some interesting conclusions, such as how abnormal behaviour may be considered to result from an over- or under-expression of free will, and how un-willed automatisations may ironically 'free' the mind by leaving the conscious cortical workspace available. Examples of action and will in conflict could be considered to provide possible evidence for the existence of free will (or at least its independence from action), but it is clear that even if there is a will, there may not always be a way.

This book inspires many intriguing questions. If the brain and body break down, free will cannot be expressed; does this mean that a will is not present? To what extent can we be sure that 'the contents of consciousness are themselves the products of neural activity'? Or that the pleasure that drives human behaviour is purely conscious? Although Spence may not provide a definitive answer to the questions posed, this fascinating book illuminates the ways in which we conceptualise free will and how those assumptions affect human behaviour.

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The Mind and Its Discontents (2nd edn)

By Grant Gillett.
Oxford University Press.
2009. £34.95 (pb). 448pp.
ISBN: 9780199237548

Professor Gillett is having an extraordinary life. One version emphasises simultaneous practice as a neurosurgeon, medical ethicist and philosopher – all at the highest level – resulting in election to Fellowship of the Royal Society of New Zealand, his home. Another version, sketched in the autobiographical postscript to this book, tells of an author inspired and liberated by writing, at length, about the philosophy of psychiatry.

The early chapters are the most difficult for those psychiatrists who have not studied philosophy to degree level or beyond. Gillett draws on (later) Wittgenstein to focus on rules and meanings as the essence of mental content, and intersubjectivity as a distinctive feature of human forms of life. He supports a neo-Aristotelian conception of the psyche as a mode of functioning in which

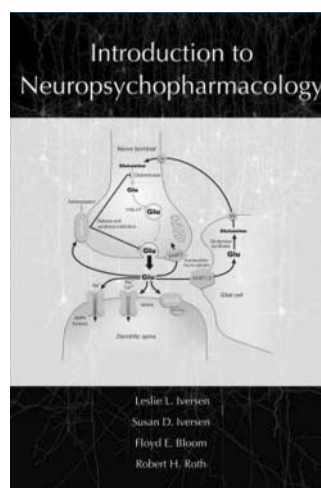
meaning becomes incarnate in lived human life. Finally, Heidegger and Lacan are flagged as the philosophers who can offer a nuanced account of the development of mental life, and its disorders, as a response to lived experience. This takes Gillett to formulations such as 'Being-in-the-world-with-others' or 'the imago enunciated under the name of the father'. Although strongly endorsing these choices from the philosophical canon, I had some concern about how little exposition of the writings of Heidegger and Lacan is actually offered.

Two chapters summarising and building upon the anti-psychiatry literature are followed by a chapter on the unconscious, in which psychoanalytic theories of trauma are sketched. The nine chapters that follow discuss the philosophical questions raised by various psychiatric disorders: 'Anorexia poses the question "What is desire?" just as mania poses the question of well-being, schizophrenia the question of rationality, psychopathy the question of moral action and multiple personality disorder the question of identity'. This proves a novel and rewarding approach. However, for the psychiatrist reader there is too much exposition of the familiar here, including an incomplete literature review on the aetiology of anorexia nervosa, and an overlong chapter on multiple personality disorder (I have still never seen a case!). The chapter on psychopathy was impressive and should be required reading for trainees in forensic psychiatry.

Overall, a great achievement and a substantial contribution to the (ethically) right theorisation of psychiatry. More Heidegger and less textbook psychiatry exposition for the third edition please.

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Introduction to Neuropsychopharmacology

By Leslie L. Iversen, Susan D. Iversen, Floyd E. Bloom and Robert H. Roth.
Oxford University Press.
2009. £30.00 (pb). 558pp.
ISBN: 9780195380538

Reviewing this book was not easy. The four authors are undisputed giants of neuropsychopharmacology, and their *Biochemical Basis of Neuropharmacology* is correctly regarded as a classic text. They wished to relinquish much of the academic minutiae they admit to cherishing, to produce a simpler introductory text suitable for a wider readership: the challenge being to write a single volume addressing the differing needs of medical students, postgraduates in neuroscience and behavioural sciences,

house officers and fellows. This is a tall order and sadly I do not believe they have been successful – the book is certainly more specialised than is needed by medical undergraduates or for those preparing for the Royal College of Psychiatrists MRCPsych examinations.

Many parts are written in an engaging, humorous and mellifluous style, and some sections are excellent, such as the early consideration of conditioned behaviour and long-term working memory, an account of the characteristics of receptors, and later chapters on recreational psychoactive drugs. However, psychopharmacology novices will find other parts clunky and hard to follow, with accounts that are needlessly discursive and paragraphs that can occupy a whole page. Furthermore, the explanatory notes to some figures confuse rather than clarify, and certain tables are spread over two pages, losing their subheadings in the process.

There are many instances where the text is surprisingly current, for example when describing the potential use of D-cycloserine to facilitate the extinction of conditioned fear, and yet others are curiously out of date. The authors could not anticipate the withdrawal of the CB-1 receptor antagonist rimonabant by the European Medicines Agency; but the anti-depressant nefazodone, described as ‘currently on the market’, was withdrawn in North America and Europe over 5 years ago. The occasional use of proprietary names seems inappropriate, and careful readers will bristle to see that ‘Remeron’ is given as

the trade name both for ‘mitrazepam’ (a drug that seems not to exist) and for mirtazapine. There is an inconsistency of approach which could have been removed by judicious subediting, for example when the anticonvulsant vigabatrin is listed as having few toxic effects, then described as having both central nervous system and visual toxicity four pages later.

What is more puzzling is the scant attention given to the pharmacological properties and therapeutic uses of lithium – surely one of the most important drugs in psychiatric practice – which merits less than one page, and the limited consideration of anticonvulsants as mood stabilisers, mentioned only in passing. It was also disappointing that there was no concluding chapter, where the authors could draw on their experience and expertise to speculate on future developments in neuropsychopharmacology and potential new drug targets. There is a much better book lurking within, and this could have been released so easily. The authors could perhaps have relinquished more, but the publishers should certainly have worked harder.

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The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World

Alan Carson

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