



3-23-2021

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Recommended Citation

Lachman, Gary (2021) "Mystical Experience and the Evolution of Consciousness: A Twenty-first Century Gnosis," *Journal of Conscious Evolution*: Vol. 17, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/cejournal/vol17/iss1/3>

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Mystical Experience and the Evolution of Consciousness: A Twenty-first Century Gnosis

Gary Lachman¹

Abstract: This article addresses three ideas: mystical experience, the evolution of consciousness, and gnosis. There are different interpretations of these ideas, so I begin by saying how I intend to understand them. *Mystical experience* I see as a wider, broader, deeper perception of things and their relations than our usual limited view allows. It provides an ‘unitive’ and ‘participatory’ form of consciousness, in which the usual ‘subject/object’ divide has dissolved. The *evolution of consciousness* is the notion that our present consciousness is not consciousness per se, but has been arrived at over time. This suggests that there have been other forms of consciousness before it. As Barfield and others have suggested, earlier peoples not only had different ideas about the world than we have, they also saw a different world than we do. This suggests that the consciousness of people of a future time may also differ from ours. Gnosis I see as the cognitive character of mystical consciousness, the ‘knowledge content’ provided by its immediate, direct, non-discursive perception of reality. These ideas are discussed in some length in the present essay.

Keywords: Mystical experience, evolution of consciousness, gnosis

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As my title suggests, I want to talk about three central ideas: mystical experience, the evolution of consciousness, and gnosis. There are different interpretations of these ideas, so it may be good to begin by saying how I intend to understand them. Mystical experience I see as a wider, broader, deeper perception of things and their relations than our usual limited view allows. It provides what I call an ‘unitive’ and ‘participatory’ form of consciousness, in which the usual ‘subject/object’ divide between consciousness and ‘the world’ has dissolved. The evolution of consciousness is, as the philosopher of language Owen Barfield remarked, “the concept of man’s self-consciousness as a process in time.” That is to say, our present consciousness is not consciousness per se, but has been arrived at over time. This suggests that there have been other forms of consciousness before it. As Barfield and others have suggested, earlier peoples not only had different ideas about the world than we have, they also saw a different world than we do. Their consciousness differed from ours, which suggests that the consciousness of people of a future time may also differ from ours. Gnosis I see as the cognitive character of mystical consciousness, the ‘knowledge content’ provided by its immediate, direct, non-discursive perception of reality.

It was while researching material for my book *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus*, about the legendary founder of magic, that I noticed some similarities between accounts of mystical experience and gnosis of the Hermetists of Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era, and more recent modern accounts. The figure of Hermes Trismegistus, or ‘Thrice Greatest Hermes’, is an amalgam of the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek god

Hermes, brought about by the religious syncretism of the Graeco-Egyptian culture of Alexandria in the first, second and third centuries after Christ. Exactly when the fusion of these two gods appeared in the form of the legendary sage Hermes Trismegistus is unclear – I look at some suggestions in my book – but as Frances Yates shows in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, for centuries he was considered an actual, real person, contemporaneous with Moses or perhaps even older, who received a ‘divine revelation’ at the dawn of time. Hermes Trismegistus was, that is, privy to a mystical experience that provided him with a gnosis about the true relations between man, the cosmos, and God.

As Yates shows, Hermes Trismegistus and the Hermetic texts he was thought to have written – collected in what is known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* – had an enormous impact and influence on the Renaissance, and for some time Hermes was considered as important as Christ. His prestige, alas, declined in the early 1600s. In 1614 the humanist scholar Isaac Casaubon determined that the books of the *Corpus Hermeticum* could not have been written, as their devotees believed, in some misty antediluvian past, but were most likely a product of the Greek philosophy, early Christianity, and Egyptian mythology that characterized Alexandria in the early centuries of our era. Post-Casaubon, Hermeticism lost its high standing in western consciousness and went, as it were, ‘underground’. It became a kind of reservoir of ‘rejected knowledge’, in the historian James Webb’s phrase, along with other ‘occult’ and ‘magical’ philosophies jettisoned by the rise of science.

In the *Poimandres*, generally regarded as the

first book of the Corpus Hermeticum, Hermes Trismegistus recounts a mystical experience of Nous, or the Divine Mind, that provides him with true knowledge about man's origin and place in the cosmos. Similar revelations are experienced by other figures in the Corpus Hermeticum and at this point it may be good to expand on my definition of gnosis given above. Gnosis is a Greek word meaning knowledge, but it refers to a knowledge different from – or at least arrived at differently – than another kind of knowledge, what the Greeks called episteme. Episteme refers to the kind of knowledge arrived at through reason and experience. It is what we usually refer to when we speak of knowledge. It is from it that the philosophical discipline of epistemology derives, the study of how we know what we know. That $2+2=4$, that water is composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, and that the earth circles around the sun, are items of knowledge that fall under episteme. They have been arrived at through observation and thought, through discursive reasoning and step-by-step logic.

The kind of knowledge provided by gnosis is different. A dictionary definition of gnosis give us “immediate knowledge of spiritual truths.” A more forceful definition is the one I use above: an immediate, direct, non-discursive, perception of reality. In this sense gnosis is as immediate and direct an experience as being thirsty and drinking cold water on a hot day. What one knows in gnosis isn't arrived at by argument, logic, or empirical – that is, sensory – observation. It can't be taught in schools as the knowledge associated with episteme can, but the means of arriving at gnosis can and has been taught, not in universities, but in groups devoted to esoteric, that is, inner practice. The central aim of the devotees of Hermes, whether in

Alexandria two millennia ago or among esotericists today, is to achieve gnosis. To be sure, the Hermetists of Alexandria were not the only ones interested in gnosis. As their name suggests, their contemporaries, the Gnostics – early Christian sects that flourished before the rise of the ‘official’ church – also pursued it. But although there are similarities between the Gnostics and the Hermetists there are also great differences and to simplify matters I will focus here only on the Hermetic gnosis. What is an experience of gnosis like? In Book XI of the Corpus Hermeticum Nous gives Hermes some idea. “Command your soul to go anywhere, and it will be there quicker than your command,” he says,

Bid it go to the ocean and again it is there at once...Order it to fly up to heaven and it will need no wings...and if you wish to break through all this and to contemplate what is beyond, it is in your power...If you do not make yourself equal to God you cannot understand him. Like is understood by like. Grow to immeasurable size. Be free from every body, transcend all time. Become eternity, and thus you will understand God. Suppose nothing to be impossible for yourself. Consider yourself immortal and able to understand everything: all arts, sciences and the nature of every living creature. Become higher than all heights and lower than all depths. Sense as One within yourself the entire creation...Conceive yourself to be in all places at the same time: in earth, in the sea, in heaven; that you are not yet born, that you are within the womb, that you are young, old, dead; that you are beyond death. Conceive all things at once: times, places, actions, qualities and quantities; then you can understand God.

As you might suspect, the experience of gnosis, what Florian Ebeling in *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus* calls “omnivision,” can be powerful, perhaps

overwhelming, and in another Hermetic work, the Asclepius, Hermes offers some words of caution. He tells us that to receive gnosis one must be “entirely present, as far as your mind and ability are capable. For the knowledge of God is to be attained by a god-like concentration of consciousness.” This is necessary because such knowledge “comes like a rushing river tumbling in flux from above to the depths beneath. By its headlong rush it outruns any effort we make as hearers, or even as teachers.” Without “attentive obedience,” such knowledge will “fly over you and flow round you, or rather it will flow back and mingle again with the waters of its own source.” Gnosis, then, provides knowledge, but it is a knowledge that is difficult to hold on to.

It was while reading these Hermetic descriptions of gnosis that I recalled similar accounts of mystical experience from the early twentieth century. In his book *Cosmic Consciousness*, published in 1901, the Canadian psychologist R.M. Bucke describes an experience he had which seems remarkably similar to the Hermetic gnosis. It took place while on a visit to London. After an evening reading poetry with friends, Bucke was returning to his hotel in a hansom cab. All of a sudden he felt “wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud.” Bucke thought there must be a great fire outside but then realized that the source of the illumination was himself. Bucke describes his experience in the third person:

Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe [my italics]. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendour which has ever since lightened his life...Among other things...he saw and knew that the Cosmos is no dead matter but a living

Presence...[and] he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in the previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught [my italics].

Much else that Bucke wrote about his experience tallies with the Hermetic vision. Here I want to concentrate on the cognitive aspect of it, and the warnings that Nous gives Hermes and others about the difficulty in retaining the knowledge it provides.

Bucke’s experience convinced him that the human race was evolving into a different form of consciousness, what he called “cosmic consciousness”, and he examined history for earlier examples of it. His book *Cosmic Consciousness* traces this new form of consciousness through figures like the Buddha, Christ, Plotinus, up to the poet Walt Whitman in Bucke’s own time. It was immensely popular and received a new lease on life in the 1960s when it became a required text in the psychedelic movement. And at least two of its early readers determined to have experience of cosmic consciousness of their own.

William James, the American philosopher and psychologist, read Bucke’s book and wrote about it in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James had already been intrigued by accounts of what was called the “anesthetic revelation,” in a series of magazine articles recounting the effects of nitrous oxide. James decided to experiment with nitrous oxide himself; his ostensible reason, he tells us in his essay, “On Some Hegelisms,” was to better understand the philosophy of Hegel.

Under the gas, James experienced a “tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination” in which “truth

lies open to view in depth upon depth of almost blinding evidence.” James felt an “immense emotional sense of reconciliation” as “every opposition...vanishes in a higher unity in which it is based.” James recognized that we are “literally in the midst of an infinite, to perceive the existence of which is the utmost we can attain.”

James had a similar experience without the use of nitrous oxide, triggered by nothing more than a conversation. In *A Suggestion About Mysticism*, James recounts that while conversing with a friend, he was suddenly “reminded of a past experience; and this reminiscence, ere I could conceive or name it distinctly, developed into something further that belonged with it, this in turn into something further still, and so on, until the process faded out, leaving me amazed at the sudden vision of increasing ranges of distant facts of which I could give no articulate account [my italics].” James calls the mode of consciousness he experienced “perceptual, not conceptual”. He was seeing facts so quickly that he had no time to identify them. His “intellectual processes could not keep up the pace.”

During his nitrous oxide experiment, James tried to capture some of the insights that rushed over him. Yet James discovered later that “sheet after sheet of phrases dictated or written during the intoxication...which at the moment of transcribing were fused in the fire of infinite rationality” had dwindled to nonsense. The many sheets of paper he covered contained gnomish dictums such as, “What’s a mistake but a kind of take? What’s nausea but a kind of - ausea?”

Another reader of Bucke also had difficulty holding on to the content of cosmic consciousness: the Russian philosopher P.D. Ouspensky, best known as a disciple of G.I.

Gurdjieff, but an important thinker in his own right. Ouspensky repeated James’ nitrous oxide experiment and encountered the same difficulties. As he relates in “Experimental Mysticism,” in *A New Model of the Universe*, Ouspensky discovered that he had entered a world of total unity, a world, as he says, “without sides.” One could not speak of any characteristic of this world, Ouspensky saw, without speaking of all of them: everything was related to everything else, and to speak of one thing meant to speak of everything. Like James, Ouspensky tried to capture some of his revelation in words. During one experiment he jotted down an insight: “Think in other categories.” During another he had what the German-Jewish cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin called a “profane illumination.” Sitting on his sofa smoking a cigarette, Ouspensky looked at his ashtray.

Suddenly I felt that I was beginning to understand what the ashtray was, and at the same time, with a certain wonder and almost with fear I felt that I had never understood it before and that we do not understand the simplest things around us.

The ashtray had “roused a whirlwind of thoughts and images” and contained an “infinite number of facts” – much like those James had encountered. Everything connected with smoking and tobacco “roused thousands of images, pictures, memories” which overwhelmed Ouspensky. Ouspensky wanted to capture some of the “profane illumination” overcoming him and grabbed a pencil. The next day he read what he had written: “A man can go mad from one ashtray.” As in James’ case, the content of Ouspensky’s experience was not ‘supernatural’. It consisted of ‘facts’ that he could have acquired in the usual, normal way of episteme, that is, step-by-step. What was

unusual was the number of ‘facts’ and the speed with which they were presented to him. We can say if in our usual mode of acquiring knowledge, it comes to us sequentially, in James’ and Ouspensky’s case it came simultaneously: ‘allatonce’ rather than ‘one-thing-at-a-time’.

Mystical experiences are often said to be “ineffable,” and there are many other accounts of being flooded with a waterfall of knowledge. Jacob Boehme, the seventeenth century Bohemian cobbler whose unwieldy texts of spiritual alchemy influenced, among others, Hegel (providing, perhaps, an explanation why William James needed nitrous oxide in order to understand him), said of his own mystical experience, triggered by a glint of sunlight on a pewter dish, that he saw and knew more in one quarter of an hour than if he had spent years at a university. Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist who in his mid-fifties became a religious philosopher, said of his conversations with angels, that they can “convey more in a minute than many can say in half an hour” and that their speech “is so full of wisdom that they with a single word can express things which men could not compass in a thousand words.” Swedenborg also experienced that same difficulty in retaining what the angels told him as James and Ouspensky had in their experiences of cosmic consciousness. James, Ouspensky, and Swedenborg were all highly intelligent men, but in each case the amount of information and the speed with which it was conveyed to them proved too much for them to follow.

Reading these accounts I was reminded of something Aldous Huxley said in *The Doors of Perception*, his own account of a mystical

experience under the influence of the drug mescaline. Trying to understand the effect of the drug, which made him see as “Adam had seen on the morning of his creation,” Huxley recalled an idea proposed by the philosopher Henri Bergson. Bergson argued that the brain’s function is essentially eliminative. That is, rather than let information into consciousness, its job is to filter out the mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge available at any time, allowing only that bit of it that is practically useful to us to reach our conscious awareness. Mescaline and other drugs worked, Huxley believed, by turning off this filtering mechanism, this “reducing valve,” and allowing the taps of knowledge to gush. Huxley quotes the philosopher C.D. Broad who paraphrases Bergson: “Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe.” This sounds very much like the “omni-vision” of the Hermetic gnosis. Readers who feel that knowing everything that is happening in the universe would be a good thing should read the story “Funes the Memorious” by Jorge Luis Borges, in which the main character is paralyzed by precisely that gift. Funes is aware of everything that is happening and can remember everything that has happened with such clarity and detail that it prevents him from acting.

We need to filter out most of the information available to us, Huxley says, in order to focus on that small selection of it that “will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet.” We do not need to know how beautiful the tiger is that is about to eat us, just as we do not need to know the make and model of the car that is about to run us down. We just need enough information about them in order to avoid them. Other ‘irrelevant’

knowledge would inhibit our ability to act quickly, and so we have developed the ability to scan the world and reduce it to symbols that we react to, rather than living things that we respond to. So from Bergson's and Huxley's points of view, we can say that we start out with a kind of consciousness associated with "omni-vision" or "cosmic consciousness," but evolution – or whatever intelligence is behind it – purposefully limits the amount of knowledge available to us.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, the old adage tells us. But too much can also harm us. As T.S. Eliot remarked, "humankind cannot bear too much reality," and in at least one sense he was right. Ouspensky feared for his sanity over an ashtray. James and Huxley came to similar conclusions about their own mystical experiences: that they inhibited the will and reduced consciousness to a state of indifference. Under mescaline Huxley looked at a sink full of dirty dishes and felt they were too beautiful to wash, a conclusion reached by many other less sober devotees of psychedelics. Huxley came to the conclusion that if everyone took mescaline, there would be no wars but there would be no civilization either, as no one would bother to create it. After his nitrous oxide experience, James concluded that "indifferentism is the true outcome of every view of the world which makes infinity and continuity to be its essence." If all is one, as his nitrous oxide experiment revealed, why do one thing rather than another? Why do anything at all? In both cases the will is severely inhibited. So there seems good reason why evolution or whatever is behind it has limited the amount of gnosis we enjoy.

I should mention here that practically all mythologies posit an earlier time when

mankind was closer to the gods than we are now. There are different versions of some kind of fall from grace. In the beginning we were at one with nature, the cosmos, the divine – we shared in something like cosmic consciousness. Then something happened and we had to leave the garden. In my book *A Secret History of Consciousness* I look at different esoteric philosophies of consciousness, and practically all of them suggest that at an earlier time in our evolution, our consciousness was much more 'mystical' than it is now, and that for some reason it changed into something like our own consciousness. As pleasant as this earlier form of consciousness may have been, we seem to have been driven to leave it behind. For good or bad we have bothered to create civilization.

Yet there is a problem here. The editor in our brain that limits the amount of knowledge accessible to us does his job too well. The reason the Hermetists of Alexandria and William James and P.D. Ouspensky – not to mention numerous others – sought out gnosis or cosmic consciousness is that they recognized that there is something wrong with our consciousness. It is too narrow, too focused on survival, on dealing with the world, too focused on creating civilization. It doesn't see the wood for the trees. It doesn't stop to smell the roses, and more times than not doesn't notice the roses at all. It is so good at eliminating any knowledge about the world irrelevant to surviving in it, that it is unable to enjoy living in it, rather like a miser who spends all of his time protecting his wealth but who never uses it. As children we experience something like the earlier mystical consciousness, but as the poet Wordsworth tells us, as we grow older "shades of the prison house begin to close" and we lose the earlier "freshness of a

dream.” Our focused consciousness has become such a habit that we are unable to relax our vigilance and appreciate the qualities and aspects of the world that, while irrelevant to ‘dealing’ with it, make dealing with it worthwhile: beauty, mystery, awe, grandeur.

Ultimately, through its most keenly focused application – science – we arrive at conclusions that are paradoxically inimical to life, or at least to a meaningful life. From a variety of sources the general assessment of existence stemming from science is that it is meaningless, the result of less than nothing exploding for no reason some 15 billion years ago. We ourselves, it tells us, are accidental products of this cosmic accident. There are, of course, scientists who do not subscribe to this view, but the dominant outlook is, I believe, summed up in the physicist Steven Weinberg’s remark that “the more the universe seems comprehensible the more it also seems pointless.” So our over-efficient survival tactic has allowed us to flourish in a world that it ultimately perceives as meaningless. And while not ascribing all of the twenty-first century’s problems to this conclusion, it can be seen, I believe, that much of the alienation, anomie, apathy and widespread nihilism that characterizes our culture has its roots in the bottom-line assessment that our existence, and that of the entire universe, is without purpose or aim. And science of course is not the sole bearer of this message. The existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, a vociferous critic of science, voices it as well: “It is meaningless that we live,” he tells us, “and it is meaningless that we die.” The laser-beam of ‘survival consciousness’ has enabled us to become the dominant species on the planet and sent us out exploring the stars. But the truth it has discovered is that there’s really no

point to any of it.

Yet as we’ve seen, the ‘knowledge content’ of mystical experience, of gnosis is precisely the opposite. It presents us with a world positively dripping with meaning, too much for us, at our present level of consciousness, to make much use of: Ouspensky’s ashtray is a case in point. We seem to be stuck between two extremes. Too much meaning incapacitates the will; not enough meaning gives us nothing to will for. In our own lives we swing back and forth between these extremes. We work all week and on the weekend allow ourselves to relax, usually using alcohol or other inebriants to get our overzealous efficiency consciousness to take a break. A glass of wine muzzles our perceptual watchdogs and we feel a warm, hazy sense that things are much more interesting than we usually believe. While the effect lasts we enjoy a vague sense that life is good. We are perceiving more ‘meaning’. Hence the popularity of alcohol.

It would seem that what is needed is a way of relaxing our ‘survival consciousness’ so that we can appreciate the ‘irrelevant’ but meaningful aspects of reality, but without incapacitating our ability to act. A book published in recent years suggests the possibility of this, and I’ll close this essay with a brief look at it. The book is *The Master and His Emissary* by Iain McGilchrist, and it is important because it reboots the discussion around the differences between the left and right brain. The idea that the left brain is a scientist while the right is an artist is by now a cliché, and it is precisely for this reason that most ‘serious’ neuroscientists abandoned investigating the differences between the two cerebral hemispheres some decades ago. Contrary to popular belief, that has the left dealing with language, logic, and time, and

the right handling patterns, intuition, and space, it turned out that both sides of the brain are involved in everything we do. Scientists, eager to disassociate themselves from ‘New Age’ and ‘pop’ psychology, said that the differences between them, if any, weren’t important. McGilchrist disagreed, and, as a neuroscientist as well as a professor of English, he is well placed to do so, having a foot in each camp as it were. His argument is complex and demanding but in a nutshell it is this: the difference is not in what each cerebral hemisphere does, but in how it does it. Both sides of our brain do the same things, but they do them differently.

The right brain, McGilchrist tells us, is geared toward presenting the whole, which it perceives as a living, breathing Other. Contrary to conventional neuroscience, which sees the left as dominant and the right as a kind of dispensable side kick, the right brain is older, more fundamental, and is the ‘Master’ of McGilchrist’s title. It is concerned with patterns, relationships, the connections between things, and with their immediate ‘is-ness’, the *Istigkeit* of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart – who, incidentally, Huxley draws on when describing his mescaline experience. Its job is to present reality as a unified whole; it gives us the ‘big picture’, the forest and not the individual trees. It’s concerned with implicit meanings, that can be felt, but not pinned down exactly. When in our warm, hazy mood of well-being, we reflect that life is good, more times than not we can’t say exactly why. We just know it is. Poetry, metaphor, images are some ways in which we try to communicate what the right brain shows us.

The left brain, on the other hand (literally, as the left brain controls the right side of the

body and the right brain the left), is geared toward breaking up the whole which the right presents into bits and pieces which it can manipulate. Its job is to analyze the big picture presented by the right, and reduce it to easily manageable parts which it can control. Where the right is open to ‘newness’ and appreciates the ‘being’ of thing-in-themselves, the left is geared to representing reality as something familiar, and sees things in terms of their use. It has a utilitarian approach to reality, whereas the right just accepts things as they are. It focuses on discreet, individual, self-contained parts: the trees, not the forest. It is concerned with explicit ‘facts’, which it communicates in precise detail in very literal prose.

The right needs the left because its picture, while of the whole, is fuzzy and imprecise. The left needs the right because while it can focus with dazzling clarity on discreet bits, it loses the connections between things. The right can lose itself in a vague, hazy perception of the whole. The left can lose itself in a narrow, obsession with the part. One gives us context, the other detail. One looks at a panorama, the other through a microscope. One presents everything ‘allatonce’; the other bits and pieces ‘one-at-a-time’. One gives us a world to live in, the other the means of surviving in it.

It can be seen, I think, that the left brain is geared toward acquiring knowledge step by step; it is involved in episteme. The right, it seems, has more to do with gnosis. It can also be seen that the left brain, with its focus on utilitarian aims and purposes, has more to do with the kind of eliminative function that Bergson speaks of, while the right would be more involved with the kind of ‘irrelevant’ knowledge that is eliminated. The farmers who see a tree as something in the way of

their fields and to be got rid of, see it with their left brains. Poets, like Wordsworth, who are sent into mystic reverie gazing at it, see it with their right. A tree can be something ‘in the way’, but it can also be beautiful. I would say that when Hermes Trismegistus, R. M. Bucke, William James and P.D. Ouspensky experienced gnosis and cosmic consciousness they somehow shifted their left brain focus to the right. They switched from the brain that cut out everything irrelevant to survival to the brain that let everything in.

McGilchrist argues that throughout history the two brains have been in a kind of rivalry punctuated by brief periods when they worked together. Neither he nor I am saying that we should jettison left brain or ‘survival’ consciousness in favor of the right. Both are necessary and we wouldn’t have them if they weren’t. But he does argue that there has been a gradual shift in emphasis toward valuing the left over the right, and that we are increasingly creating a left-brain dominated culture that is slowly squeezing out the input from the right. The fact that the most respected intelligences of our time – scientists – tell us that the universe is “pointless” seems evidence of this. Breaking down the whole into bits and pieces in order to understand and manipulate it (technology), we lose sight of the connection between things, the implicit meaning that the right brain perceives but which it is unable to communicate to the left, in a language it can understand. Poets, mystics, artists can feel this whole and try to communicate it, but the left brain only acknowledges ‘facts’ and dismisses their entreaties as well-meaning moonshine.

So where does this leave us? For one thing, recognizing that the kind of consciousness

associated with mystical experience and gnosis is rooted in our own neurophysiology, and cannot be dismissed as delusion, mere emotion, or madness allows us to approach the question of gnosis in a way that the proponents of episteme cannot ignore, even if they do not agree with it. If, as McGilchrist argues, the right brain holistic perception is fundamental – is, as he calls it, the Master – then we can begin to see how the left brain analytical perception rose out of it, developed as an evolutionary aid to survival. (It is, perhaps, the source of the ‘ancient wisdom’ of the Hermeticists and other mystery traditions.) We can see that our present left-brain oriented consciousness is not, as mentioned earlier, consciousness per se, but has antecedents in earlier forms of consciousness. And if we recognize, as many have, that this utilitarian focused consciousness, while working wonderfully as a tool for survival, has been gradually eliminating the kind of right brain perceptions that give life a sense of meaning, we can see that this imbalance needs to be redressed. McGilchrist points to several periods in history when, as mentioned, the two worked together, with remarkable results: Classical Greece, the Renaissance, the Romantic Movement. And in our own experience, we can find moments when this happens too: moments of insight, ‘peak experiences’, creative moments when the big picture and the detail come together, when the particular seems to express some universal, and when the whole cosmos seems to reside in our own imaginations. (Poets may receive inspiration from the right brain, but they need the left in order to capture that inspiration in words.) McGilchrist argues that the times in western history when a creative union between the two hemispheres of the brain were reached were triggered by the

urgent need for them to work together. Crisis, he says, can bring about the completion of our 'partial mind', as the poet W.B. Yeats expressed it. We are not, I submit, short of crises. Let us hope McGilchrist is right and that the evolution of consciousness, spurred by the challenges before us, unites our two sides in a creative gnosis for the twenty-first century.