

From Ancient Greece to the Present Day; How the Development of the Modern Mind Distanced Us from Genuine Dialogue

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of the modern mind from ancient Greece to the present day, aiming to show how a shift to rationally-devised ways of knowing has contributed to an inability for people in the modern West to see themselves in dynamic relation to, and in genuine dialogue with, each other.¹⁰

As I begin to type words on this page to convey my ideas, I am struck with the realisation that I am entering into a relationship with each person who reads them; connecting in a space with others where ideas, opinions and judgements naturally form. As I ponder this, I am left wondering how my words and ideas will be received; embodying my own research into the conditions which may be conducive to people being able to hear each other's true and authentic voice as a facilitator in conflict resolution.¹¹

Will my words, and the true meaning of what I wish to communicate, be genuinely heard? Will I be met in a place of receptivity and openness which will allow my true and authentic voice to speak?

I am reminded of a passage in Theodore Zeldin's *An Intimate History of Humanity*, wherein he highlights the Chinese political philosopher, Han Fei Tzu (280-236 BCE), who stated that the obstacle to communication was "not knowing the heart" of the person one spoke to, "thereby to fit my wording into it." A controversial character, Han Fei seemed to know what could facilitate better conversation and dialogue with others, but he was unable to do it.¹² (1995, p. 41)

Two thousand years later, in today's contemporary western culture, human to human connection is increasingly fragile as witnessed in continuing wars and violence. Deeply curious about this, my whole life has been dedicated to exploring conflict, and why modern culture appears unable to communicate, dialogue and build lasting relationships with each other.

¹⁰ Here I am distinguishing the Western mind from the Eastern and Oriental ways of knowing which are less applicable to our own native traditions

¹¹ I am drawing here upon Prosser who states he has been "attracted and influenced by religious existentialists such as Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, Karl Jaspers, etc" and that their "central idea is that existence is communication – that life is dialogue...Communication is dialogue, and dialogue, I-Thou meeting, is not just in the sense of two people talking, but of real efforts at mutual understanding, mutual acknowledgement, and mutual respect" (1985, p. 227)

¹² Cognitive scientist Susan Brennan defines conversation as "a joint activity in which two or more participants use linguistic forms and nonverbal signals to communicate interactively. Dialogues are conversations between two participants (although the terms *dialogue* and *conversation* are often used interchangeably)" (2013, pp. 202–205). For the purpose of this paper I shall use the terms interchangeably.

Considering the challenges that western contemporary culture faces on a daily basis, in this paper I explore the idea of growing ‘distance’ from one another since the time of ancient Greece, and how this distance might have contributed to our current worldview which guides the way that we currently act within the world. I will also offer an alternative worldview, which suggests a way of seeing and being in the world that could facilitate deeper relationship and dialogue with each other. Indeed, my aim in this paper is to bring to the foreground a different approach to our place in the world which currently lies hidden behind a materialistic philosophy.

Moving into a less familiar epistemology,¹³ I explore the implications of ‘genuine dialogue,’ which I am defining as *whole, deep, moving and evolving*, with a ‘relational quality’ - in line with Wood’s view which states that “Genuine dialogue depends less on self-expression and other transmissional aspects of communication than upon responsiveness” (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2003, p. xvi). Suggesting that depth and movement are part of genuine dialogue, Wood quotes Bakhtin who states that; “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (Anderson et al., 2003, p. xvi)

Differing Worldviews

As human beings we simultaneously experience two worlds; an external life of ‘observable phenomena’, separate from each other and distinct (a world of ‘parts’), and an inner life of feelings, emotions, the intuition and imagination (through which the ‘wholeness’ of life can be accessed). Indeed the divided nature of our reality has been highlighted and explored in various ways throughout history; from the poet and scientist Goethe declaring that ‘two souls, alas! Dwell in my breast’,¹⁴ to Schopenhauer’s description of two completely distinct forms of experience,¹⁵ to Scheler defining the human being as a citizen of two worlds,¹⁶ and Bergson referring to two different orders of reality.¹⁷

However, since the time of the Scientific Revolution our culture has come to overly value the ‘fragmented’ (part-driven) experience of reality, within which the skills of rational thought and the intellect thrive.¹⁸ As a result of this approach to life, everything we encounter becomes either one thing or another; different things *distinguished* from one another, with each thing *outside* the other, and all things *separate* from one another. In recognising the world around us in this way, “we, too, are separate from and outside of the things we see. We find ourselves side by side, together with, and separate from, the things we recognise. This is the familiar spectator awareness” (Bortoft, 1996, p. 13), entailing *objective observation* which naturally requires abstraction and fragmentation, encouraging rationality and emotional withdrawal/distance from what is being studied.

¹³ As outlined in phenomenology, Goethe, and the discourse of holistic science, which all recognise the dynamic relation of the ‘whole’ and ‘part’

¹⁴ Goethe, Faust, Part I, line 1112

¹⁵ Schopenhauer, Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, I, ii, §19, 1960, vol. 1, pp 163-4

¹⁶ Scheler, 1976, ‘Die Formen des Wissens und die Bildung,’ p.95

¹⁷ Bergson, 1908, ‘De la multiplicité des états de conscience: l’idée de durée,’ p.74

¹⁸ Precise dates for the Scientific Revolution are disputed, however according to traditional accounts it began in Europe at the end of the Renaissance period and lasted until the mid 18th Century. The scientific method prioritises mathematically precise, logical, rational, quantitative thinking.

While the worldview of abstraction and fragmentation still remains prevalent today, this way of perceiving is only one side of the story. For the past 400 years, this worldview and its limitations have been investigated in a plethora of different ways by many scientists and philosophers – including Goethe, Bohm and Bortoft – who, in parallel with contemporary scholars across the discourses of holistic science, deep ecology and eco-psychology/philosophy assert that life/nature is not fragmented or competitive, but deeply interconnected, relational and co-operative.¹⁹

At the forefront of research into the limitations of the materialist, literalist viewpoint, neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist states that as the brain has developed, it has become left-side dominant. This hemisphere of the brain has a propensity for logic, objectivity and abstraction, whereas the right hemisphere's skills of the imagination and intuition have become underused and devalued.

I propose that a reading of McGilchrist's grand metaphor of epistemological duality in the light of human relationship could provide meaningful guidance to understand, and participate in, genuine/transformational dialogue, and in the next part of this paper I shall return to the era of the Pre-socratics; a time when McGilchrist's idea of 'necessary distance' between people emerged, which he suggests is a point where "we have been sufficiently detached to be looking at one another, but not yet so detached that we are inappropriately objective about, or alienated from, one another" (2009, p.303).

By understanding how the modern mind, and subsequently modern culture, has developed to participate in, and see, the world, it may be possible to move beyond rationally-devised ways of relating to each other into a place where the potential for genuine/transformational dialogue lies.

McGilchrist's Thesis

Based on a vast body of experimental research, McGilchrist argues that the left and right hemispheres of the brain have differing insights, values and priorities, with distinct 'takes' on the world. While both hemispheres have now been proven to be involved in everything that human beings do and have considerable ability to perform any task, the striking difference between them is that each hemisphere *goes about their tasks* in different ways; i.e., it is *how* the two hemispheres *approach* their tasks that is different in each case; the left hemisphere's thinking is decontextualised and tends towards logic; dealing efficiently with abstraction, it extracts things from their context and categorises (2009, p. 50). In contrast the "right hemisphere deals preferentially with actually existing things, as they are encountered in the real world." (2009, p. 50) It is concerned with interconnectivity, and with the *relation between* things. It is deeply imaginative and intuitive; a rich world of symbols, feelings and metaphor.

McGilchrist suggests that the *kind* of attention we pay to the world actually changes it. Indeed, he highlights the importance of our disposition to the world and one another "as being fundamental in grounding *what it is that we come to have a relationship with*, rather than the other way round."²⁰ He continues to say that, "The kind of attention we

¹⁹ These discourses unite science, philosophy, psychology and ecology, positing that humans are an intrinsic part of, and inseparable from, nature – a 'w-holistic' view. I shall be highlighting a selection of these views later.

²⁰ In line with my own view, McGilchrist believes that something "exists apart from ourselves, but that

pay actually alters the world: we are literally partners in creation.” (2009, p. 5)

Having established his position, McGilchrist points out that the development of the human brain would have therefore left its mark on the world that Western culture brought about, and duly discovers evidence in sixth century BCE Greece when “a radical change in the way we think about the world seems to have occurred.” (2009, p. 266) At this time there was an extraordinary flowering of both science and the arts which he believes, “stems from the achievement of a degree of distance from the world.” (2009, p. 266)

In what McGilchrist terms ‘necessary distance’ (2009, p. 5), this development demanded “increased independence of the hemispheres, allowing each hemisphere to make characteristic advances in function, and for a while doing so in harmony with its fellow” (2009, p. 6). He goes on to argue that from this point in our history, a relentless growth in our self-consciousness occurred, which over the centuries has led to increasing difficulties in co-operation, and I suggest, difficulties in dialogue and relating to others.

A Movement in Consciousness²¹

In addition to McGilchrist, there are a number of scholars who speak in favour of a shift in consciousness in ancient Greece - including Jean Gebser, Julian Jaynes and Jean Pierre Vernant. Indeed Gebser sees the ancient Greeks as foundational in the development of what he terms a new ‘mental’ structure of consciousness, which emerged from the previously ‘mythic’ structure.²²

Evidence for a movement from ‘mythic’ to ‘mental’ consciousness can be suggested by looking at Homer’s epic poems (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*: circa 900 - 700 BCE) which had little description of the expressive face (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 283) and which did not appear to show an introspective sense of subjective self-awareness (Jaynes, 2000, p. 69).

At this point in history, McGilchrist posits that the right brain appeared to be slightly more dominant, with its characteristic trait of seeing itself in relationship with, and inextricably connected to, the world. Indeed, he points out that Homeric man does not *perceive* a body or mind which are separate, referencing the work of Michael Clarke’s (2000) *Flesh and Spirit in the Songs of Homer*:

we play a vital part in bringing it into being.” (2009, p. 5) His position is closer to Schopenhauer’s belief that the world exists ‘between’ something independent of the mind and the mind that apprehends it.

²¹ When referring to consciousness, I am referring to a *state of awareness* as an embodied reality (i.e., one’s own existence, sensations, thoughts, etc). This paper will not explore the scientific question of the origin of mind which followed on from the theory of evolution, or, more specifically, the origin of consciousness in evolution.

²² Gebser’s ‘mythic’ consciousness is “typified by a symbolic (ritual) world... the ego is more individuated, but not to the extent of the self-consciousness mental structure.” (Purdy, 1988, p. 172) ‘Mythic’ consciousness is polar, with *complementary* aspects like ying and yang, male and female; whereas similar pairs of terms from the ‘mental’ consciousness are *dualities* (opposites) rather than polarities. In ‘mental’ consciousness, time and space become objectified – apart from the self (Purdy, 1988, p. 172). Gebser identifies five basic structures of consciousness: archaic, magical, mythical, mental and integral. He is fluid with his dates for the shift from ‘mythic’ to ‘mental’ consciousness, suggesting that the movement began around 1225 BCE, coming into perfect expression with the Greeks around 600 BCE, however not becoming prevalent in Europe until around 1250 CE.

[...R]ather this thought and consciousness are as inseparable a part of his bodily life as are movement and metabolism. The body is indistinguishable from the whole person (2009, p. 263).

Similarly, Vernant talks about the body and its meaning in archaic Greece as follows:

The fact is that in the archaic period Greek ‘corporeity’ still does not acknowledge a distinction between body and soul, nor does it establish a radical break between the natural and the supernatural. Man’s corporeality also includes organic realities, vital forces, psychic activities, divine inspirations or influxes (1991, p. 29).

Vernant continues this observation by clearly distinguishing his own modern, ‘rational’ consciousness from that of the ancient Greeks by stating:

It is I who am distinguishing between these different spheres [*the author previously outlines the different spheres to mean the world of nature, the social world, the human world and the supernatural world*] because they do appear separate to us today, but the religious thought of the Greeks made no such clear-cut distinctions between man and his internal world, the social world and its hierarchy, the physical universe and the supernatural world or society of the Beyond made up of the gods, the daemons, the heroes and the dead (1980, p. 94).

However, around the sixth century BCE, both Jaynes and McGilchrist pinpoint a change of awareness in the Greek mind which created a space for one person to be able to perceive ‘the other’.²³ Jaynes’ terms this ‘mind-space’, while McGilchrist defines the opening of this space as ‘necessary distance.’ While both definitions involve the idea of *space* or *distance*, this new way of seeing the world starts to become particularly obvious in Greek art:

It is only with the continuing evolution of greater distance from one another that we start to focus on the uniqueness of ourselves and others as individuals, which is largely what is expressed in the face (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 283).

McGilchrist argues that the development of an ability to see more objectively, to stand outside of the natural frame of reference, occurred as a result of the separation of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, and that this growing ‘necessary distance’ from the world gave the ancient Greeks the opportunity to see things they previously could not have appreciated (2009, p. 262).

By standing back from the animal immediacy of our experience we are able to be more empathic with others, who we come to see, for the first time, as beings like ourselves (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 22).

²³ While McGilchrist and Jaynes agree there is a connection between the hemispheres of the brain and a shift of consciousness in the archaic Greek era (i.e., to be able to objectify and detach from phenomena), Jaynes’ thesis states that this ability is a result of a *merging* of the two hemispheres of the brain which had previously been separate. In stark contrast, McGilchrist argues that this ability occurred because of a *separation* of the hemispheres.

Indeed the philosopher Owen Barfield argued that “human consciousness needed to detach itself from participation with nature, in order to gain more space, more play between itself and its world.” (Baring & Cashford, 1993, p. 436) With this movement came the ability to make specific distinctions between objects and the ability to perceive ‘the other’ as separate, making it “possible to see oneself as a self like other selves, to stand back and observe” (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 259).

According to McGilchrist, the flowering of the left hemisphere happened in tandem with the right, enabling the ancient Greeks to develop their rational capabilities, but at the same time, continue to see life and divinity in all of nature. For many centuries, from ancient Greece to the Renaissance, the idea of living nature helped to maintain a healthy bond between humanity and the world around it.

However, evidence of a left-brain dominated worldview appears with “...the rise of modern science” (Delio, 2015), when in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a new analytical spirit emerged, prioritising mathematically precise quantitative thinking, objective observation, categorisation and fragmentation, and “[...] became the basis for new political theories, as well as theories for the human mind, knowledge and behaviour from that time onwards” (Hayward, 1991, p. 62).

While two thousand years of history is far too rich to delve into more deeply within this paper, what I have attempted to demonstrate is a movement towards a left-brain way of seeing, being and knowing the world; creating our modern reality of ‘fragmentation’ and a clear sense of *distance* from ‘the other.’

Indeed, physicist Bohm spoke of the ‘fragmentation of human consciousness’, suggesting that the way we now think *about* things assumes that we are separate from them. (2002, pp. intro, p.xii) While Jung, writing in the mid twentieth century laments; “The centre of gravity of our interest has switched over to the materialistic side [...]” (1967, p. 20)

In the 21st century, reality is reduced to parts – fragmented and rationalised; becoming, as McGilchrist states, a metaphor for the problems which face our world today. In parallel, economic activist Charles Eisenstein talks of our time as the “Age of Separation” and states that it is “separation that has generated the converging crises of today’s world” (2013, p. xx).

A Way Forward?

It can therefore be suggested that the fragmentation, separation and distance that left-hemisphere dominance has yielded, has contributed to a myriad of problems in Western contemporary culture. Inherent within these problems, I suggest, lies our inability to dialogue effectively with one another and form deep, lasting relationships.

However, developments in discourses including holistic science, eco-philosophy and deep ecology are challenging the literal, ‘world-as-machine’ interpretation of reality; inviting us to see a different world of interconnectedness, ‘wholeness’, purpose and meaning as fundamental properties of matter. Eisenstein sees these developments as heralding a new era which he has called the ‘Age of Reunion’ (2013, p. xxiii).

Indeed, Gebser identifies this age as ‘integral’; a new emerging consciousness which integrates the “abstracted (fragmented) world of the mental-rational into wholeness” (Purdy, 1988, p. 172). In parallel, McGilchrist points to how this new consciousness could be achieved by stating:

It seems that, the work of division having been done by the left hemisphere, a new union must be sought, and for this to happen the process needs to be returned to the right hemisphere so that it can live. (2009, p. 199)

Rather than a fixed and static view of the world, such a process of reintegration and co-operation is suggestive of *movement*; a fluid process which is continually open to being (re)formed. Through the movement between right and left hemispheres, it is possible for life to be seen as dynamic and responsive; opening up possibilities for deep relationships and genuine dialogue.

Genuine Dialogue for Transformation

While dialogue “implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object” (Hooks 1989), the concept of dialogue is broad, with scholars emphasising ethical (Buber), literary (Bakhtin) and even political (Freire) aspects. However, one distinct commonality is the idea that genuine or transformative dialogue is inclusive, unconstrained and honest (Gillespie, Reader, Cornish, & Campbell, 2014). In addition, Wood states that “central to dialogue is the idea that any utterance or act is always responding to and anticipating other utterances and acts.” (2003, p. xvi) Moving this idea further, I propose that genuine dialogue also implies an evolving and dynamic experience which entails a movement into a deep, imaginative, reflexive space of understanding the ‘Other’; beyond status, power, and lines of responsibility.

In support of this, Bohm, fascinated by the breakdown in communication between Einstein and Bohr, explored how it might be possible for people to enter into dialogue in open and creative ways (2011, p. 77). For Bohm, genuine dialogue occurs when people realise what is going on in each other’s minds by suspending their conclusions and judgements (2004, p. 30). In a similar vein, Wood talks about the ‘responsiveness’ of genuine dialogue which “arises out of and is made possible by qualities of thought and talk that allow transformation in how one understands the self, others, and the world they inhabit.” (2003, p. xvi). What Bohm and Wood appear to be suggesting is the necessity of moving into a space where it may be possible to intuit what it might ‘be like’ to be the other person.

This is very similar to the phenomenological method of Goethe for whom the imagination was a crucial part of the development of a deep, intuitive and holistic relationship with the phenomena of his study, requiring a fundamental shift of attention within everyday experience. Goethe’s goal was to enter into a relationship, or dialogue, with an ‘object’ (he studied plants and the phenomena of colour) by actively studying it as clearly and deeply as possible; without the blinkers of established theories, classifications and pre-formed mental models.²⁴ He then deepened his understanding by actively remembering/reliving the experience through his imagination, inwardly recreating what he originally observed in order to come to know the phenomena better.

²⁴ Goethe called this ‘exact sensorial perception’.

²⁵ ‘Hearing’ and ‘listening’ without preconceived ideas, labels or judgement, Goethe would see each phenomenon of study *as it actually presented itself to him*. By cultivating openness, curiosity, and interest through his imagination, and paying attention to thoughts and feelings, he slowly brought forth words to describe what he perceived; using the skills of both left and right hemispheres of the brain in a reciprocal relationship.

Inspired by Goethe, philosopher of science Henri Bortoft (1938-2012), developed the idea of ‘downstream’ and ‘upstream’ ways of seeing. The former refers to our current analytical way of perceiving the world, which leads us to see things from the standpoint that *we already know how to know*. Starting from a set of entities already taken as given, from there our knowledge of any phenomenon can only go ‘downstream’ into more and more abstraction. ‘Upstream’ ways of seeing involve accessing the intuitive/imaginal mode of consciousness (through the suspension of judgements and preconceived ideas) where it is possible to enter into a dynamic experience where one can “catch things in their coming-into-being” (*The Form of Wholeness: Henri Bortoft on Multiplicity and Unity*, 2013).

Within this context, it can be suggested that Bohm, Wood, Goethe and Bortoft are arguing for the cultivation of a different kind of relationship with others; a different kind of seeing which is characteristic of the right hemisphere; enabling a person to enter into a deep and immediate, reflexive experience of what it might ‘be like’ to be the other person, involving the imagination as an *organ of perception*.²⁶ In this way, it may be possible for a space to open up where people can meet “more or less outside the framework of the social hierarchy and social conventions, ‘without rank’, as it were” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 97)

If we now apply this way of meeting another person in genuine dialogue, utilising the inherent characteristics of the left and right hemisphere, we allow ourselves to be guided into a living experience; moment-by-moment, sensing of the unfolding meaning of a person’s expressions and their words – becoming an integral part of their striving to give expression to their actual lived experience. This deep sensing of what is taking place in the dialogue, oscillating between listening carefully and noting the felt movement of the other person, becomes the source of the next question, the next interaction; rather than a pre-existing scheme of opinions, judgements and facts. This means that it is more likely for the other person to be *truly heard* and, I posit, forms the basis of genuine dialogue.

Echoing this thought, Buber (1970) speaks about “imagining the real of the other,” suggesting an understanding of human meeting human at a deep level of understanding and recognition; existing relationally, rather than individually. It could be said then, that the heart of genuine dialogue lies in the relation between self and other, or, between left and right hemisphere. In this way dialogue becomes a form of deep human meeting; an act of creation through a deep experience of connectedness which facilitates transformative change in relationships between parties through self-

²⁵ Goethe called this ‘exact sensorial imagination’

²⁶ In parallel with the philosopher Henry Corbin, I am differentiating the word ‘imaginary’ (i.e., something which today is equated with the unreal/something outside the framework of being and existing), from the imagination as an *organ of perception* which mediates between the physical world and the domain of abstract thought; imaginative consciousness. (Corbin, 1971)

realisation, trust and connection.

As a result of this union, it could be suggested that that two modes of perception have merged. Rather than Jaynes' 'mind-space' or McGilchrist's 'distance' being a space which distances or separates, it can instead become a gateway of transformation into genuine dialogue and authentic relationships.

Final Thoughts

This paper has aimed to explore the development of the modern mind from ancient Greece to the present day, showing how a shift to rationally-devised ways of knowing might have contributed to an inability for people in contemporary Western culture to *really hear* one another, or *genuinely dialogue* with one another in *authentic relationship*. I have also aimed to show how it is possible to regard phenomena from another perspective; one which integrates the rational mind with imaginal consciousness.

Indeed, Hillman laments that "failures in our loves, friendships, and families often come down to failures of imaginative perception," (1997, p. 124). While the power of the imagination has become disregarded in the modern world, when engaged with in the right way, the imagination, as an organ of perception, can become a means of deepening our experience of reality; accessing a way of being that lies beyond the literal view of the world, reconnecting us to the lived world of embodied experience and deep, nourishing, reciprocally-rewarding relationships where it is possible to actively imagine the position of 'the Other' and enter into genuine dialogue.

The reciprocal, dynamic and continually unfolding characteristics of genuine dialogue can allow differences to exist without trying to resolve, overcome or synthesise them; placing emphasis on the process of *deep listening* - creating new ways of understanding self, other, the social, symbolic and material world (Anderson et al., 2003, p. xviii)

In this way, genuine dialogue becomes a living process; making it possible for people to be transformed into *beings who come into being in the process of dialogue* - whether that dialogue takes place between our left and right hemispheres, with each other, or with the world at large.

By learning to move into the dynamic movement of the simultaneity of the 'whole' and the 'part', maybe, just maybe, it will become possible to *truly hear*, and in Han Fei's words, 'know the heart' of another in genuine dialogue; supporting us to better deal with conflict and other global challenges.

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