THEOLOGY of LAW

Why does Iain McGilchrist matter?[1]

by Dr David McIlroy

Iain McGilchrist is a psychiatrist, neuroscience researcher, philosopher and literary scholar. He is a polymath, best described as a natural philosopher. A former fellow of All Soul's College, he has a glittering academic and professional career. His 2009 book *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (*"TMHE"*) is a masterpiece. In it, McGilchrist shows how there are two ways of attending to the world: one which seeks to take it apart and to manipulate it and the other which embraces it in its wholeness and connectedness. These two ways of attending to the world are typical of the left and right hemispheres respectively. He has expanded on this thesis in a monumental follow-up work, *The Matter With Things* (*"TMWT"*).

McGilchrist's basic contention is that the two hemispheres of the brain have two different ways of perceiving the world (*TMWT* pp.17-32, p.104). The right hemisphere looks at the world holistically, responding to its flow.[2] The left hemisphere looks at the world analytically, seeking to break it down into things that can be manipulated (*TMWT* p.21). The optimum way to use our brain's potential to connect with reality is for the right hemisphere (the Master) to apprehend some part of the world, for the left hemisphere (the Emissary) to seek to comprehend that part, and for the results of the left hemisphere's analysis to be re-integrated into the right hemisphere's vision. After the parts have been examined, "There is … a need for effortful *recomposition* to make the whole comprehensible. (*TMWT* p.331).

In McGilchrist's own words,

> "all that is to be known must initially 'presence' to the right hemisphere (we have no other access); then be transferred to the left hemisphere so as to gain expression

[1] I am enormously grateful to Dr McGilchrist for his generosity in giving me time to ask questions to clarify my understanding of his work.

[2] "Flow is an irreducible, not an emergent, element in the universe." (*TMWT* p.648).

through re-presentation; and that re-presentation returned to the right hemisphere where it is either recognised for its consonance with the initial presencing and subsumed into a new *Gestalt*, or rejected." (*TMWT* p.1229).

McGilchrist's argument is that healthy individuals, groups, and societies approach the world first via the right hemisphere, reacting to what is found there to form an impression of how everything links together; then the left hemisphere looks in detail at elements that can become objects of human action in isolation, and then the results of the left hemisphere's inspection are returned to the right hemisphere where the individual elements are reintegrated into a more profound understanding of the whole. In unhealthy individuals, groups, and societies, the move to isolate and manipulate is the primary move, and the left hemisphere creates a feedback loop that fails to acknowledge the reality of that which can be embraced but cannot be grasped, that which must be accepted but cannot be captured in words.[3]

Already in *The Master and His Emissary,* McGilchrist was arguing that in modernism, the left hemisphere had triumphed resulting in "an excess of consciousness and an over-explicitness in relation to what needs to remain implicit; depersonalisation and alienation from the body and empathic feeling; disruption of context; fragmentation of experience; and the loss of 'betweenness'." *(TMHE* p.397). "Ultimately there is nothing less than an emptying out of meaning." (*TMHE* p.398).

McGilchrist's 1,578 page follow up, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World* ("*TMWT*") is the most devastating demolition of reductive materialism since Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*.[4] At *TMWT* p.1165, McGilchrist states: "It seems to me that the reductionist account is contrary to scientific findings, unreasonable, counterintuitive, and shows a complete refusal to exercise intelligent imagination".

McGilchrist's claim is that in modernity the West has "systematically misunderstood the nature of reality" (*TMWT* p.3) as a result of succumbing to "the reductionist view that we are – nature is – the earth is – 'nothing but' a bundle of senseless particles, pointlessly, helplessly, mindlessly, colliding in a predictable fashion, whose existence is purely material,

[3] "The left hemisphere simply ignores, dismisses, and ultimately denies the existence of, anything it can't pin down and measure." (*TMWT* p.295). "Since the left hemisphere uses language to label, this often involves a belief that changing the label will change the reality. The left hemisphere takes truth to be what is says on the piece of paper." (*TMWT* p.863).

[4] Oxford, OUP: 2012.

and whose only value is utility." (*TMWT* p.5). McGilchrist nicknames this reductionism "nothing buttery".

Things have gone wrong because the left hemisphere believes that its comprehension of the part is total. "The awareness coming from the right hemisphere can embrace that of the left, but not the other way round." (*TMWT* p.1314). The left hemisphere makes at least two fatal mistakes: it regards its representation or analysis of the part as definitive in place of attending to the part itself and it treats the part in isolation from its relationship with other parts of the flow of reality. Instead of humbly submitting the results of its analysis to the right hemisphere, the left hemisphere becomes stuck in a feedback loop. The world as created by the left hemisphere becomes a totalising narrative, a metaverse, from which broader reality (especially those aspects which cannot be reduced to language, measured or manipulated are excluded (*TMWT* p.26, pp.43-45)).[5] "The left hemisphere adopts a theory, and then actually denies what doesn't fit the theory." (*TMWT* p.172).[6]

In late modernity, we have mistaken the map, the theoretical schema created by the left hemisphere, for the reality of the lived world that our right hemisphere connects us with (*TMWT* p.317, p.573). The "consequences … are far-reaching – indeed devastating." (*TMWT* p.305). Our lives are "lived" under the shadow of the "dead hand of mechanism, scientism,[7] and bureaucracy" (*TMWT* p.329).[8] Analytical philosophy and the dominance of the machine metaphor in science[9] have created "a tradition in which most academics now are so thoroughly schooled that they can't see that there is a problem, let alone how to escape it." (*TMWT* p.347).

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[5] "The left hemisphere is both unreasonably willing to jump to conclusions (and stick to them), and inclined unreasonably to put in doubt the basics of existence." (*TMWT* p.375).

[6] At *TMWT* p.398-9, McGilchrist reports the experience of an American woman whose brother had been taken to the morgue. When she kissed him, she felt that he was still warm and that he had a pulse. When she drew a nurse's attention to these vital signs, the nurse replied: "That's odd, but you needn't worry about it, dear, because it says here on this chart quite clearly that he's dead."

[7] "… science cannot possibly fulfil the burdensome role of sole purveyor of truth. This is not a failing of science. Good science is aware of its limitations. Scientism, the belief that science will one day answer all our questions, is not." (*TMWT* p.407).

[8] One manifestation of this is "the triumph of procedure over meaning in every walk of life." (*TMWT* p.351). The left hemisphere is "a little like a high-ranking bureaucrat, protected from the world which he or she must administrate: adept at knowing and observing the rules, but knowing little if anything about life as it is lived there. All that it leaves to the right hemisphere." (*TMWT* p.371). McGilchrist expands on his critique of bureaucracy at *TMWT* p.1286.

[9] "The brain is often compared to a computer. This metaphor is one of the scourges of our time." (*TMWT* p.372). See also *TMWT* p. 410 "… the machine model remains only a model, a form of metaphor. … even at the relatively lowly level of explanation it has exhausted its potential, something that was obvious in physics some time ago, and is becoming increasingly obvious in the life sciences." At *TMWT* p.474, McGilchrist ventures the supposition that: "one element in the model's popularity is that it encourages the sense that we can easily understand what life is and learn to control it – Faustian fantasies, in other words, of omniscience and omnipotence that reductionists quite rightly dislike when they see them attributed to a God (I share their qualms)."4

At one level, *TMWT* is the "unfolding and differentiation" of McGilchrist's "single great thought" (*TMWT* p.859) that our left hemisphere dominated worldview is having a multitude of nefarious ramifications. But it is also McGilchrist's attempt to integrate a lifetime of insights into a coherent overall framework. The result is a work of such depth and subtlety that any attempt to summarise it risks descending into caricature or parody. An important claim McGilchrist makes is that "We cannot know anything without attending to it, and the nature of that attention alters what we find" (*TMWT* p.1129). This, of course, means that my reading of McGilchrist is partly determined by the questions I brought to his text and the context of my life in which I am reading his work.

With that warning in place, eleven key features of McGilchrist's worldview can be drawn out of the summary he offers on *TMWT* p.1329:

1. Relationships are ontologically primary, foundational; and 'things' a secondary, emergent property of relationships.
2. Matter is an aspect of consciousness, not consciousness an emanation from matter.
3. Individuation is a natural process, whose aim is to enrich rather than to disrupt wholeness.
4. Apparent opposites are not as far as possible removed from one another but tend to coincide.
5. Change and motion are the universal norm, but do not disrupt stability and duration.
6. Nothing is wholly determined, though there are constraints, and nothing is wholly random, though chance plays an important creative role.
7. The whole cosmos is creative; it drives towards the realisation of an infinite potential.
8. Nature is our specific home in the cosmos from which we come and to which in time we return.
9. The world absolutely cannot be properly understood or appreciated without imagination and intuition, as well as reason and science: each plays a *vitally* important role.
10. The world is neither purposeless nor unintelligent, but simply beyond our full comprehension. The world is more a dance than an equation.
11. At the core of the world is something we call the divine, which is itself forever coming into being along with the world that it forms, and by which, in turn, it too is formed.

The remainder of this review essay will reflect on these eleven aspects, taking them roughly in turn (but postponing consideration of the second aspect almost to the end), before considering the extent to which McGilchrist's natural philosophy fits with the classical Christian worldview.

McGilchrist's First Feature of Reality: The primacy of relationships

A left hemisphere view of things regards each thing in isolation and as "nothing but" itself. McGilchrist dismisses this reductionist 'nothing buttery' as inadequate to our experience of the world and inconsistent with the findings of quantum physics (*TMWT* p.5).

McGilchrist, like Wordsworth, sees wonder, connectedness, and significance in nature. Speaking of his experience of the natural world, he writes: "nothing 'super' needed to be added to the 'natural' for it to invoke wonder." (*TMWT* p.1215). "In short, creation and the mystery of what lies behind it become *sacred*; and the disposition that sees it thus is what is meant by a religious disposition. It is a disposition that perceives depth." (*TMWT* p.1217).

McGilchrist's view of nature has similarities to that of Henri de Lubac, who famously argued that there is no *natura pura*, that nature is always already everywhere laden with God's grace.[10]

Nothing in nature exists in isolation, "everything exists *only in relation*" (*TMWT* p.846). Although at points McGilchrist entertains the possibility that things and their relations are equally fundamental,[11] his preferred view is that "relationships must be primary, since entities *become what they are only through their situation in the context of multiple relations.*" (*TMWT* p.1006) and "things are secondary properties of phenomena that emerge out of the web of experience, as 'objects' that attract our focussed (left hemisphere) attention. … an object is … what presents itself as useful to grasp." (*TMWT* p.885). "Relationships are prior to *relata* (*TMWT* p.459, p.1006).[12]

The primacy of relationships leads to McGilchrist's eighth feature of reality: human beings are part of nature. Instead of thinking of human beings in opposition to their environment, we urgently need to rediscover that we are part of the world, and to re-form our attention to the

[10] Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946) 2nd edn (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991).

[11] At *TMWT* p.1307, McGilchrist says: "Relations are not secondary to *relata*, and it may be argued that *relata* may be secondary to relations, as the nodes in a web are secondary to the intersection of the threads …"

[12] The primacy of relationships does not come at the expense of individuality. For McGilchrist, "A good relationship is one in which each party is maximally fulfilled as a differentiated individual, without this in any way detracting from the relationship" (*TMWT* p.393-4).

world in ways that nourish and sustain it in its relationships with us and us in our relationships with it.

Religion is, for McGilchrist, a key way of emphasising the importance of relationships. "A religious cast of mind sets the human being and human life in the widest context, reminding us of our duties to one another, and to the natural world that is our home; duties, however, that are founded in love, and link us to the whole of existence. The world becomes ensouled. And we have a place in it once more." (*TMWT* p.1283).

McGilchrist's Third Feature of Reality: the Particular and the General

Our world is one in which there is a high degree of regularity but also an amazing amount of individuation. Every fingerprint and every snowflake are unique. Individuation and connectedness produce a creative tension. Things are recognised for what they are not because they are identical with other things, but because of their resemblance to a pattern. "Everything is part of one whole, connected to every other part by a matter of degree. But everything is also absolutely unique" (*TMWT* p. 843). "If there were no general patterns at all, there would not be uniqueness, but mere chaos." (*TMWT* p.844).

Thus, McGilchrist concludes: "The claim that All is One is well-intentioned, but, it seems to me disastrous, because it is just *half* a truth. … the other equal truth is All is Many." (*TMWT* p.875). "Whatever exists in time and space is *ipso facto* unique; though in it and through it one sees the general and the timeless, not as separate but as another facet of the same entity." (*TMWT* p.879).

McGilchrist's Fourth Feature of Reality: the Reconciliation of Apparent Contradictions

The dialectic between the One and the Many is an illustration of McGilchrist's fourth feature of reality, that two superficially contradictory perspectives can be held in tension with one another, but ultimately reconciled by integrating one into the other. Thus, McGilchrist sees reality as exhibiting a kind of *exitus – reditus* movement, with "the ultimate priority of the principle of union over that of division, despite the necessary part played by division at one stage of the process." (*TMWT* p.847).[13]

At times McGilchrist appears to verge towards Manicheism. "For *everything* there is an optimal amount, and it is rarely if ever zero or infinity. Even what appears evil may cause

[13] "This primacy of union over division, however necessary division might be, is reflected in the fact that one can move from an extended whole in space or time to parts (though losing almost everything on the way), but not from the parts to the whole." (*TMWT* p.978).

some good, and what seems good cause some harm. If it is true that every devil has his angel, it is also true that every angel has his devil." (*TMWT* p.598). The title of chapter 20 of *TMWT*, "The *coincidentia oppositorum*" continues this impression.

However, just as the left and right hemispheres of the brain are asymmetric (*TMWT* p.836), so too McGilchrist sees an asymmetry in the *coincidentia oppositorum* (*TMWT* p.833) and in the foundations of physical reality (*TMWT* pp.1028-35). McGilchrist advocates for balance, harmony, and complementarity, but not for symmetry. "Small imbalances, differences among sameness, at all levels in nature make it work, starting with the initial inequality of matter and antimatter." (*TMWT* p.833). In a similar way, "I experience both good and evil as real, and see them as necessary opposites; but while evil can, goodness knows, locally overwhelm good, it cannot subsume good into itself. The goodness of loved can embrace its opposite; the evil of hate cannot." (*TMWT* p.1300). The tension between asymmetric opposites is creative, perfect symmetry is inert.

McGilchrist's Fifth Feature of Reality: Change and Motion are what Give Things their Identity

The left hemisphere worldview gets stuck in superficial paradoxes: for it, something either has to remain static or it becomes a different thing. McGilchrist argues that: "in the deep … structure of reality opposite truths do actually coincide, and we must therefore accept both." (*TMWT* p.641). In part, this is because, he thinks "many, if not all, logical paradoxes can be seen as arising from the left hemisphere's attempt to analyse something that is better grasped as a whole by the right hemisphere." (*TMWT* p.642). "[W]e need to resist choosing one truth only and ignoring the other; rather, we must see how the greater truth may hold both together." (*TMWT* p.1231).

The right hemisphere worldview can embrace paradox, seeing how different perspectives can be integrated into a deeper vision. Our own experience of growing up and growing old is that we are the same person even as our life extends through time and the cells in our body are replaced. McGilchrist's view, following Balbir Singh, is that "What we ordinarily call a thing is itself a process, a ceaseless coming to be and passing away."[14] This means that being is not a static quality but a continuous presencing. "If one espouses a view of the world as a flow, not as a collection of things; then all that exists is not just, inertly, being, but always 'be-coming'; and time and movement is bound up in that very concept." (*TMWT* p.934).

[14] Balbir Singh, *Indian Metaphysics* (Humanities Press, 1987) 10, quoted in *TMWT* p.993.

Heraclitus is the Greek philosopher most associated with emphasising change over statis. For McGilchrist, "Heraclitus points not to change only, but as much to permanence: flow which ever changes but ever remains. There is no *succession of things* involved in this change, because they always flow, *interpenetrating* one another." (*TMWT* p.953). "Flow, then, is not primarily about change, since it is equally about persistence" (*TMWT* p.954). "[C]hange is accentuated when one sees '*things* that flow'; persistence when one sees the flow itself." (*TMWT* p.954).

Nicholas Wolterstorff once said that there has never been a satisfactory philosophy of time. McGilchrist sees time as "a way of precipitating out into infinitely various actuality the undifferentiated oneness from which the universe began" (*TMWT* p.888). "Time, for the right hemisphere, is not something distinct from being, from reality flowing: it is always thus a *becoming*, never a something become." (*TMWT* p.902). "Time is the coherence-giving context in which we live." (*TMWT* p.906).

McGilchrist's Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Features of Reality: This is a Participatory Universe

McGilchrist strongly affirms Wheeler's famous pronouncement: "This is a participatory universe."[15] (quoted in *TMWT* p.1057). The world for us is the world as we experience it. This world is not wholly our creation (as the left hemisphere is apt to think) but neither it is unresponsive to our attention.

McGilchrist consistently defends the position that "there is something other than the contents of our own minds to which each of us aims to be true – and the right hemisphere is, on any account we can advance, a better witness to that reality than the left." (*TMWT* p.882). "[W]e do actually deal with reality and know it, just with an aspect of it that *we partly call forth ourselves by our approach*." (*TMWT* p.1052).

Through our consciousness, our focus of attention, our response to the real world:

> "… this is how we bring *all* our world into being: all human reality is an act of co-creation. It's not that we make the world up; we respond more or less adequately to something greater than we are. The world emerges from this dipole. We half perceive,

[15] J.A. Wheeler, "Information, physics, quantum: The search for links", in. Wojciech Hubert Zurek (ed.), *Complexity, Entropy, and the Physics of Information* (Redwood City, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

> half create." (*TMWT* p.765). "… we are social beings who co-create one another and the world." (*TMWT* p.874).

"The nature of the attention that we bring to bear on the world, and the values which we bring to the encounter, change what we find; and in some absolutely non-trivial sense, change what it is. At the same time, the encounter … changes who we are." (*TMWT* p.1330-31). This is something we share with all other creatures. "In organisms there is never just action without both *inter*action and *mutual construction.*" (*TMWT* p.451).

The openness of the universe to our participation is the concomitant of McGilchrist's sixth feature of reality. The insights of quantum physics reveal that in nature, nothing is wholly determined, though there are constraints, and nothing is wholly random, though chance plays an important creative role.

For McGilchrist, the world has the contours of structure which make free action possible. This involves God, who could wholly determine everything, drawing back in order to create something other than, and in relationship with, God. Thus, "for the cosmos to be at all, both the principle of love (*chesed*), and the power of restraint (*gevurah*), are required." (*TMWT* p.1260). God has to allow the other to be in order for the other to respond in genuine love. "What does love mean, to the lover or the one that is loved, if it is compelled?" (*TMWT* p.1262). "The existence of human free will is the ultimate expression of *tzimtzum*, the 'standing back' of God." (*TMWT* p.1257).

McGilchrist's participatory view of the universe reinforces his claim that relationships are primary. "The idea that God is love, or even the 'word' (*logos*), suggests that ultimately what is primary is relationship: a word exists only in the betweenness of utterance and audition, which has the same structure as love. Love is an experience always in process, never a thing or anything like a thing." (*TMWT* p.1237).

Love is fundamental to the shape of the universe.

> "One way of thinking of this (it is hardly original) is that a divine principle of love needs something Other to love, since love is essentially directed outwards; that that Other must be free to respond, since a love that is compelled is not love; and that this necessarily means that the Other must be free to reject the love that is proffered. This seems to me necessarily true, if such a divine principle of love exists." (*TMWT* p.1301).

So love is key to our lives. “We are temporarily material entities, capable … of playing a part in creation itself … We are embedded in the cosmos that gives rise to us … What is wonderful about us is not our pitiful lust for power, … but precisely our capacity to be vulnerable, to wonder, and to love: which alone makes what we most value possible.” (*TMWT* p.1330).

An ‘engineering God or a detailed plan’ are ideas that McGilchrist explicitly rejects (*TMWT* p.1179). “The grounding consciousness is not deterministic. It has none of the characteristics of an omnipotent and omniscient engineering God constructing and winding up a mechanism. It is in the process of discovering itself through its creative potential …” (*TMWT* p.1099). McGilchrist is emphatic that “the beautiful colours of the flowers and birds, and all the other beauties of nature, were [not] created by an engineering God for human delight. (*TMWT* p.1148). Instead, “we, as they, are the manifestations of an intrinsically beautiful cosmos” (*TMWT* p.1164).

McGilchrist’s rejection of an engineering God means the embracing of Aristotelian / Thomist teleology, of final causes, of what McGilchrist calls “intrinsic purpose”.

> “If you understand purpose to mean extrinsic purpose, you invent an engineering God who made the universe as an infinitely complex mechanism to serve some unknown end of his own. Such a God is just a projection of he left hemisphere’s fantasy of endless power to manipulate – a divine left hemisphere, detached from the cosmos and running the show according to a foreordinated plan. … If, like me, you can’t … believe in such a God, you might jump to the conclusion that this infinitely complex ‘mechanism’ has simply no purpose. But that is just to make the same error, that of conceiving purpose only in extrinsic terms: as if the only alternatives were the purposes of an engineering God, or a cosmos without purpose.” (*TMWT* p.1169).

Instead, McGilchrist argues: “things are better thought of as being attracted towards certain goals, rather than pushed blindly forwards by a mechanism from behind.” (*TMWT* p.1190). “Nature’s purposiveness includes and is predicated on the freedom of her creatures” (*TMWT* p.1186). Once we have accepted that human beings are not the only things with intrinsic purpose, then we realise that we are part of nature, that we belong in and with nature (McGilchrist’s Eighth Feature of Reality).

McGilchrist's Ninth Feature of Reality: Understanding the World requires more than the use of Science and Reason

Because of the left hemisphere's blindspots, "the right hemisphere is a more reliable guide to reality than the left hemisphere. … it has a greater range of attention; greater acuity of perception; makes more reliable judgments; and contributes more to both emotional and cognitive intelligence than the left." (*TMWT* p.1285).[16]

McGilchrist is dismissive of narrow, unfeeling, ratiocination. Reason is important, but is limited and never entirely separable from emotion (*TMWT* p.167, p.549, p.579).[17] Explicit reasoning needs to be counterbalanced by intuition (the synthesis of experience with unconscious reasoning) (*TMWT* p.256, p.554) and imagination (*TMWT* p.549).[18] "[R]eality is neither undiscoverable, nor discoverable by the intellect alone, but by the whole embodied being, senses, feeling, intellect and imagination." (*TMWT* p.576). "Human cognition is never just abstract and mechanical, but must be personal as well. As such, it involves not just calculating and categorising, but feeling and judging, and that this is *essential* to our humanity." (*TMWT* p.873).

"Some things can only be experienced or understood when they are not put to analysis. This is not because analysis defeats them, but because they defeat analysis." (*TMWT* p.565). Therefore, the left hemisphere fails to take proper account of them: "by focussing too much on reason we miss all the things that can't be reasoned about, or precisely expressed – only alluded to." (*TMWT* p.1265).

Reliance on ratiocination rather than experience therefore opens the way to radical doubt because, as Bryan Magee points out: "direct experience which is never adequately communicable in words is the only knowledge we ever fully have"[19] (quoted in *TMWT* p.1196). In denigrating this, the left hemisphere approach fails to recognise that "there is a distinction between something beyond our means of grasp and something beyond our means of knowing." (*TMWT* p.1205).

Because of the interconnectedness, the richness, and the multi-layered nature of the world and our experience of the world, "metaphor … is fundamental to how we understand the

[16] In *TMWT* p.857-8, McGilchrist criticises the left hemisphere for first artificially separating things, and then artificially aggregating things, imposing and organising them into categories by an act of cognition, rather than adopting the right hemisphere approach of seeing existing individual entities both as wholes and in context.
[17] "Reason is not opposed to feeling, but dependent on it." (*TMWT* p.740).
[18] "I take imagination to be our only means of approaching reality of any kind, *a fortiori* that of God. It is certainly not a guarantor of truth – there isn't any; but its absence *is* a guarantor of failure – failure to properly understand truths of any kind, including those of science." (*TMWT* p.1270).
[19] Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher: A Journey through Western Philosophy* (Phoenix: 1998) p.98.

world." (*TMWT* p.757). McGilchrist approves of Aristotle's observation in *De arte poetica* that "a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars".[20] "All understanding whatsoever is, at bottom, metaphorical." (*TMWT* p.632). Elsewhere he says: "It's metaphors all the way down".

Our dependence on metaphors reveals our need for myths and for metaphysics. "Just as there is no option to think without metaphor, there is no such thing as not having a myth" (*TMWT* p.1330). "[U]ltimate meaning will *always* lie beyond what reason can conceive or everyday language express." (*TMWT*, p.569). "The beauty and power of art and of myth is that enable us … to contact aspects of reality that we recognise well, but cannot capture in words." (*TMWT* p.631). Thus, "the most fundamental truths, of both a physical and psychical nature, can ultimately be expressed only in terms of poetry." (*TMWT* p.387).

McGilchrist's Tenth Feature of Reality: Reality is Bigger than we can Grasp

Therefore, in order to find our home in the world, we need to approach the world as something to be embraced rather than manipulated. We need to assume the connexion with the world that we are going to find. McGilchrist insists that "belief is dispositional, not propositional" (*TMWT* p.1262) and that "a true understanding requires a certain disposition of the mind towards its object. … True understanding … already *presupposes* a connexion, rather than being the prerequisite of such a connexion." (*TMWT* p.1127).

The view from nowhere, and the God's-eye perspective, are not open to us (*TMWT* p.612). Our knowledge of the world is always situated, contextual and partial. The reason that we cannot pin down the "meaning" of the world, is not because it *has* no meaning, but because there is "a plenitude of meaning, beyond simple articulation" (*TMWT* p.390). There are things, (like love, sunsets, and even the joy of being in a good bookshop) which we cannot reduce to writing not because they have no meaning but because they are overflowing with meaning.

McGilchrist writes:

> "if we lose the sense of just how much we do not know, we lose understanding of even the little that we *do* know." (*TMWT* p.775). "mystery [does not] betoken a lack of meaning – rather a superabundance of meaning in relation to our normal finite vision." (*TMWT* p.1258).

[20] Aristotle, *De arte poetica* XXII.10, §1459ª6-8.

Nicholas Cusanus made the point in the fifteenth century that infinity "is intrinsically unknowable because there is no comparison" (*TMWT* p.1259). "Uniqueness brings everyday language to a standstill. Anything truly unique cannot be expressed in such language, which is why whatever is profound, personal, or sacred, if it is to be expressed in words, can be so expressed only in poetry, the language of the right hemisphere. In poetry, language subverts its normal tendency to precision and becomes rich with ambiguity, with potential meaning again; and through the rifts created in the enclosing veil of language the light once more streams in." (*TMWT* p.867).

McGilchrist's speculations about God are therefore apophatic. God is the surplus in creation that cannot be encapsulated, that resists formulation, and that refuses all attempts at reduction. "There can be no certain truth in speaking of the divine. But there is resonance, and the test is whether it answers to experience." (*TMWT* p.1250).

McGilchrist endorses the *via negativa* and the mystical theology of, in particular, Meister Eckhart (*TMWT* p.1212). McGilchrist calls Eckhart, "The greatest of the mediaeval mystics … associated with what has been called a 'metaphysics of flow'." (*TMWT* p.1236). He quotes McGinn,[21] who writes that Eckhart saw "God as *negatio negationis* is simultaneously total emptiness and supreme fullness." (*TMWT* p.1255).

Our fundamental calling is to experience, to *enjoy*, rather than to understand. The metaphor McGilchrist repeatedly reaches for here is that of a dance. "[Thomas] Fuchs sees that our lives as social beings must belong to something that is best expressed as a dance or a piece of music, if we are to enmesh, engage, connect" (*TMWT* p.969).[22] "Life, in its essence, is a making new: a wholly superfluous, super-abundant, self-overflowing – an exuberant, self-delighting process of differentiation into ever more astonishing forms, an unending dance, in which we are lucky enough to find ourselves caught up" (*TMWT* p.853). We are to go with the flow, to connect with our partners, to follow the harmonies.

McGilchrist's Second Feature of Reality: Consciousness is Prior to Matter

McGilchrist's emphasis on experience leads to his affirmation that consciousness is prior to matter. The left hemisphere worldview thinks that material things are simple and can be understood in their totality, but that consciousness is a mystery which must be explained

[21] B. McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart,* (Herder & Herder, 2001), 84, 93-94.
[22] T. Fuchs, 'Temporality and psychopathology', (2013) 12 *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 75-104.

away as either an illusion, an epiphenomenon or as somehow magically emerging from matter. A major theme in *TMWT* is that no things can be fully understood apart from their relationships to everything else in the universe, with the consequence that our understanding of matter is necessarily partial and incomplete. Matter is therefore far more complex than is commonly assumed, and that the best explanation is that "matter appears to be an element within consciousness that provides the necessary resistance for creation; and with that, inevitably, for individuality to arise." (*TMWT* p.1049).[23] McGilchrist's claim that matter is the creation of consciousness, rather than vice versa, has similarities with the idealist philosophy of Bishop Berkeley (*TMWT* p.77).

Given the total failure of the materialistic worldview to explain consciousness and, McGilchrist would argue, its fundamentally mistaken account of matter, McGilchrist argues that it is more consistent with experience, more powerful as an explanation of the nature of the world, and therefore more reasonable, to regard consciousness as equally fundamental, or even as prior, to matter (*TWMT* p.394).

McGilchrist insists that the metaphysical questions are the most important questions of all, and that they cannot be answered from within a left hemisphere framework (hence the inability of scientism to make sense of the questions).

> "For me, and for many philosophers historically, the deepest question in all philosophy … is why there should be something rather than nothing. And close on its heels comes the question why that 'something' turns out to be complex and orderly, beautiful and creative, capable of life, feeling and consciousness, rather than merely chaotic, sterile, and dead." (*TMWT* p.1193).

McGilchrist's answer to the second question is that the best explanation for the qualities of the matter of the universe is that it is the product of a cosmic scale mind.

> "But if the material cosmos is an emanation or projection of a grounding consciousness it will as a matter of course have the necessary, apparently fine-tuned, conditions to come into existence; it will naturally have the qualities of order, beauty and complexity because it issues from a consciousness that, like us, is attuned to and gives rise to such elements; it will naturally produce conscious beings, and the conscious beings will naturally be able to speak its language, since they are generated

[23] Aquinas would disagree, seeing angels as immaterial individuated beings: *Summa Theologiae* I.50.1.

> by it. Of course this does not answer the unanswerable question, why there is something rather than nothing." (*TMWT* p.1098).

Speaking of the relationship between the mind and the body, McGilchrist writes: "During life it is possible that the spiritual and physical are entangled, neither *causing* the other, neither *depending* on the other for its existence, but their entanglement certainly depending on the co-existence of each" (*TMWT* p.916). Thus,

> "we find the soul not by turning away from the body, but by embracing it in a way that spiritualises the body; and we find the sacred not by turning away from the world, but by embracing it, in a move that sanctifies matter. The soul is both in and transcends the body, as a poem is in and yet transcends mere language …" (*TMWT* p.1014).

McGilchrist's Eleventh Feature of Reality: God is becoming with Nature

If consciousness is prior to matter, then the universe is a product of Mind. McGilchrist does not endorse pantheism, the idea that, as Roger Scruton puts it when commenting on Spinoza, 'the distinction between the creator and the created is not a distinction between two entities, but a distinction between two ways of conceiving a single reality' (*TMWT* p.1248).[24] Instead, he prefers pan*en*theism, because it "permits something further: the possibility that God has a relationship not just with the divine self, but with something Other; and this, it seems to me, is the drive behind there being a creation at all." (*TMWT* p.1248).

McGilchrist is clear that God is both wholly transcendent and wholly immanent (*TMWT* p.1231, 1248). As for God's transcendence: "God is above all not a thing alongside other things – even one equipped with ultra-special powers. God simply *is* – in a use of the verb that requires that we understand God both to *have* Being and to *be the ground of* Being at one and the same time." (*TMWT* p.1201).

Beings participate in being. On this point, McGilchrist endorses classical theism:

> "According to the classical tradition, represented … by Aquinas, there is an infinite difference between created being, the being of the world, and divine being, the being that God himself is. …. To exist, … is to have a share in being … given by God, … it

[24] R. Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1986), 78.

> is a revelation of God. … God gives himself in a certain respect in creation; in giving the world being, he is giving what he *is*, even if he is giving it so perfectly generously as to give it *away*, to make something truly *other* than himself."[25]

Moreover, "to say that God gives himself definitively, and even in a certain sense perfectly, in creation does not at all mean that the created world, even taken as a whole and in all of its mysterious depth, *exhausts* the meaning of God. God infinitely transcends the world, and so the world in its natural reality falls radically short as a revelation of God."[26]

Therefore, "God is certainly greater than but *includes* the universe" (McGilchrist, quoting Keith Ward,[27] *TMWT* p.1232). "God … can say 'yes'. And to say 'yes' to everything includes *saying 'yes' to 'no'* – limitation – which may explain the existence of sin." (*TMWT* p.1254).

McGilchrist sees Christianity as offering an account of how mind can come to inhabit and to express itself in matter. He writes: "The extraordinary power of the Christian mythos lies in its central idea of incarnation – the intimate relationship between consciousness and matter, and the core idea of panentheism." (*TMWT* p.1267). Panentheism is the view that "all things are *in* God, and God *in* all things" (*TMWT* p.1231). For McGilchrist, following Alfred North Whitehead, this is expressed in the idea that God is Becoming.

> "God, truth, and infinity are all processes, not things; comings into being, not entities that are already fixed. … Ultimately Being and Becoming are aspects of the same thing. …However, as usual, there is an asymmetry: they are not equal. In the philosophy of Whitehead, the divine is Becoming, and Becoming is even more fundamental than Being." (*TMWT* p.1241).

McGilchrist's panentheism draws on a number of thinkers, including Jürgen Moltmann: "In the panentheistic view, God, having created the world, also dwells in it, and conversely, the world which he has created exists in him" (*TMWT* p.1267).[28] McGilchrist's panentheism rejects any notion of creation as a machine or God as a clockmaker who simply winds up the clock and then lets it tick away by itself.

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[25] D.C. Schindler, *Love and the Postmodern Predicament: Rediscovering the Real in Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 158.
[26] D.C. Schindler, *Love and the Postmodern Predicament*, 162.
[27] Keith Ward, 'The anthropic universe' 2006: www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/scienceshow/the-anthropic-universe/3302686.
[28] Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Fortress Press, 1993), 98.

McGilchrist is a theist rather than a deist. His God is continuously co-creating in the unfolding universe rather than having departed the scene. In a way similar to Moltmann's account of the Holy Spirit as the holistic Spirit, McGilchrist suggests "that whatever creative energy underwrites the unfolding of the phenomenal universe is continually active and involved in that universe; that the future is tended towards, but not closely determined; rather it is open, evolving, self-fulfilling." *(TMWT* p.1172).

McGilchrist poses his own wager, with an express nod to Pascal:

> "if God is an eternal Becoming, fulfilled as God through the response of his creation, and we, for our part, constantly more fulfilled through our response to God; then we are literally partners in the creation of the universe, perhaps even in the *becoming of God* (who is himself Becoming as much as Being): in which case it is imperative that we try to reach and know and love that God. Not just for our own sakes, because we bear some responsibility, however small, for the part we play in creation …" (*TMWT* p.1263).

Therefore, like Moltmann, McGilchrist's account seems to make God co-dependent on the world, but in our conversation McGilchrist affirmed that God's suffering does not overwhelm God as it might overwhelm a human sufferer, and that God's suffering with creation is voluntary.[29]

Panentheism is what McGilchrist thinks is part of the best explanation for the world as it presents, or better, presences itself to us. "While invoking God does not … answer our questions, it is part of a picture – a *Gestalt* – that makes more sense to me as a whole than a *Gestalt* that avoids the divine." (*TMWT* p.1259). McGilchrist's openness to God is part and parcel with his rejection of materialism, determinism and the metaphor for the universe as a machine or a clock. "… [I]f the nature of reality is not already fixed, but rather, evolving, participatory, reverbative, it is both rational and important to open your mind and heart to God, in order to bring whatever it is evermore into existence." (*TMWT* p.1263).

As we have seen, McGilchrist's natural philosophy shades into a natural theology in which qualified affirmations about the divine can be offered. McGilchrist's God is "that which underwrites, timelessly and eternally, whatever is: in other words, the ground of Being." (*TMWT* p.1194).

[29] This is still some distance from the classical Christian account defended by Thomas G. Weinandy in *Does God Suffer?* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

God is "a co-ordinating principle in the universe which is evidenced in order, harmony and fittingness; a principle that is not only true, but the ultimate source of truth." (*TMWT* p.1206). But McGilchrist acknowledges: "I have … no final answers to any of the big questions. … I believe the concept of God to be fraught with difficulties. … I am merely indicating that … there is almost certainly more here than we have words for, or can expect ever to understand using reason alone." (*TMWT* p.1195). Thus, "What the term 'God' requires of us is not a set of propositions about what cannot be known but a disposition towards what must be recognised as beyond human comprehension." (*TMWT* p.1207).

Consistent with his apophaticism, McGilchrist does not want to be dogmatic in his assertion of panentheism. "We should resist the temptation to take it as gospel – which is why I talked about a 'speculative' theology of panentheism. There are no certainties here." (*TMWT* p.1248).

A Theological Evaluation of McGilchrist's Vision

McGilchrist writes as a psychiatrist and a philosopher open to religion, not as a theologian. He is a natural philosopher, a sincere, erudite, and profound seeker after truth, whose philosophy shades into natural theology.

A theological evaluation of McGilchrist's work seeks to discern the extent to which it is a valuable prolegomenon to Christian theology and where there are aspects of McGilchrist's vision that need supplementing, revising or rejecting from a theological perspective.

He himself says of Christianity, "The Christian religion is unusual for its metaphysically complex creed, which unfortunately leads straight into the territory of the left hemisphere. … Although as a teenager I therefore tended to dismiss its tenets as incomprehensible and possibly nonsensical, with living I have come to see them as intuitive insights, misrepresented to me as if they were something to evaluate like a chemistry experiment." (*TMWT* p.1268).

McGilchrist offers a powerful vision which has many elements that Christians can embrace. In his insistence that the left hemisphere is wrong when it reduces something to "nothing but" the product of its analysis, he is echoing Herman Dooyeweerd's insistence that every thing, event, or experience is a whole which cannot be understood in its totality using any single approach or mode of analysis.[30]

[30] He illustrates this with the example of buying a box of cigars: H. Dooyeweerd, tr. R.D. Knudsen, ed. A.M. Cameron, *Encyclopedia of the Science of Law: Volume 1* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 13-21, 24.

His insistence on the interrelatedness of all things and the primacy of relations (*TMWT* p.6) is strongly redolent of the revival in trinitarianism in the twentieth century (across figures as distinct from one another as Colin Gunton, Paul Fiddes, and Jürgen Moltmann).[31] McGilchrist is excellent in explaining how differentiation can occur without division, so that the Son is not the Father but the Son and the Father are nonetheless united as the Godhead.

What McGilchrist offers is a natural philosophy-theology that is open to the possibility of the Trinity.[32] Nonetheless, like all natural theologies, although McGilchrist can posit the existence of God and rule out certain possibilities of what God is like, there is a hole at its centre. Orthodox Christianity claims that the hole left by natural theologies is a Jesus-shaped hole. Before turning to the Christological deficit in McGilchrist's philosophical-theological speculations, it is important to highlight other areas of convergence and divergence with classical Christian theism.

A Thomist view of God rather than a Scotist one

McGilchrist sees God as a force of good to which we are attracted, rather than a despot whose arbitrary rules we disobey at our peril.[33] He therefore lines up with Aquinas against the voluntarism of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. McGilchrist endorses Aquinas's view of

> "God as an infinite potential, attracting things to their fulfilment. Yet in doing so God is not seen as determining, engineering or controlling, though neither is God merely passive. From this perspective, God is seen as the ultimate good who attracts all things to their flourishing, the possibility that is most fulfilling for them, but does not *compel* them to take that path: they have the freedom to respond for better or for worse. This is like a lover, who by virtue of love draws whatever emerges in the

[31] Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); P.S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2000); J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1980) tr. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1981).

[32] The metaphor for the Trinity which McGilchrist says he finds himself, and which was shared with him by a Franciscan, is that of a book: "What is the book? Is it what was present in the mind of its writer? Or the tangible volume on the table in front of me? Or what goes on in the mind of the receptive reader? Clearly it is each and all." (*TMWT* p.1266 footnote 251).

[33] "Kant believed not in moral values because there was a God, but in God because there were moral values: not in a rule-engendering Nobodaddy in the sky, that we had better obey, but in an ultimate moral force in the universe to which we are intrinsically attracted." (*TMWT* p.1124). Whether McGilchrist is right in his exegesis of Kant is another question.

loving relationship towards a greater fulfilment in love, but cannot in any way enforce such an outcome." (*TMWT* p.1242).

An over-reliance on a single analogy

In other respects, however, McGilchrist departs from classical Christian theism. McGilchrist treats the inseparable but asymmetric relationship between the left and right hemisphere as a microcosm reflecting the macrocosmic relationship between the universe and God. Despite his affirmations of divine transcendence, McGilchrist's conception of the relationship between creation and God appears to place God in peril. For McGilchrist, just as the two hemispheres of the brain exist in asymmetric co-dependence so do God and the creation. Although creation is less than God, in some sense God needs the world and is created by the world whilst at the same time creation is dependent on God's origination and on God's creative power constantly at work within it. Whilst this is very close to Jürgen Moltmann's account, and may be claimed to have salutary effects in the fight against global warming, it is anathema to classical Christian theism.

In this regard, McGilchrist has not heeded his own warnings. He is right to stress that there are two problems with using anything in the world as an analogy for the relationship between the world and the divine: "a single, simple analogy can never be right. (There are, separately, problems in finding analogies of any kind whatsoever to something that is utterly *sui generis*)." (*TMWT* p.1225). McGilchrist at this point adds a footnote to Nicholas Cusanus 1985: I, 1 §4 "the infinite, qua infinite, is unknown; for it escapes all comparative relation." God, because God is infinite, because God is not a thing, because God is unique, cannot be captured or controlled by any analogy. God can only be approached on God's own terms. Christianity affirms that God has revealed truths about God-self in creation, in God's dealings with the people of Israel, and supremely, uniquely, in the person and work of Jesus Christ. At this point, the mistake McGilchrist seems to have fallen into, is one typical of the left hemisphere, treating his account of the human brain as a microcosm to which the macrocosm of creation must necessarily conform.

Open theism?

McGilchrist regards the affirmation of God's goodness to be inconsistent with the ways in which some parts of the Christian tradition have understood what it means for God to be omnipotent. McGilchrist's rejection of determinism and his insistence on the participatory nature of the universe might seem to make him an open theist. McGilchrist's view seems, however, to be closer to Molinism.[34]

With regard to the trilemma created by the triad of omnipotence, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, McGilchrist writes: "For what it is worth, I do not believe in a God of love who is also omnipotent and omniscient." (*TMWT* p.1251).

> "… but I also think that God is not '*not* omniscient', and not *'not* omnipotent'. It's that the terms just don't apply. … if there is to be veritable creation, creation must be *not* wholly under the creator's control. We are thinking in the wrong way if we think like this about God. For neither power nor knowledge is only of this kind.
>
> God is not in a left hemisphere sense, but in a right hemisphere sense, all-knowing and all-powerful. Knowledge, as understood by the right hemisphere, is a process of openness and receptivity in which two entities progress ever closer to one another through experience. *Kennen,* not *Wissen*. In this sense, God alone has knowledge of everything, whereas we have knowledge of only that limited part of reality that we can encounter. If God were to know everything, in the sense of 'knowing the facts', God would be importantly limited, because then Creation could no longer be truly free and with that the possibility for love – which depends on the free will of a true Other – would be lost. …
>
> And power? Power as understood by the right hemisphere is *permissive*: creative power, the power to allow things to come into being, precisely by underwriting the existence of a creative field, but *not* interfering and manipulating within it. Not making things happen according to *fiat*, but allowing things to grow." (*TMWT* p.1252).

For McGilchrist, whatever else we postulate about God must be consistent with God having a relationship of love with God's creation, in which the love of God's creatures for God is

[34] Molinism is defended by William Lane Craig in 'The Middle-Knowledge View' in James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy eds., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 119-43..

theirs in a meaningful sense. Christian theologians commonly affirm that this means that God uses the power God has in the service of God's love. McGilchrist raises the intriguing question: what does prioritising God's love mean for the knowledge that God has, or that God uses, in service of that love?

A process theology

McGilchrist proudly describes himself as a process philosopher, and prepared to endorse my suggestion that he is a Whiteheadian. In McGilchrist's view, "Process theology is a natural counterpart or companion to panentheism, since it, too implies that God is in everything without being reducible to the sum of everything: the spring and that which comes forth from the spring." (*TMWT* p.1234). He defines process theology as:

> "…put very simply, the belief that the divine is misconceived as purely a static entity outside time (though that is an accepted aspect of divinity), and is, at least in some important aspects, better seen as a process within time, an eternal Becoming rather than merely an eternal Being – though it is that, too." (*TMWT* p.1234).

McGilchrist's theism is expressed in a decisively process theological mode. In the Coda to Part III, McGilchrist says: "I have … suggested that whatever creative energy underwrites the unfolding of the phenomenal universe is continually active and involved in that universe. This … is true to a Whiteheadian vision: that of the world and a creative dynamism forever bringing one another into being." (*TMWT* p.1308).

McGilchrist cites frequently from a wide selection of works in Whitehead's corpus, most notably: *An Enquiry Concerning The Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919), *The Function of Reason* (1929), *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929), and *Modes of Thought* (1938). McGilchrist is persuaded by "Whitehead['s] view [that] God's interaction with the cosmos is dialectical, in that God and the world fulfil each other and bring each other into being." (*TMWT* p.1240).[35] He endorses Whitehead's view that

> "God is the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands. Christianity is, above all, the religion that speaks of vulnerability and love, in the image of a God that

[35] A.N. Whitehead, ed. D.R. Griffin and D.W. Sherburne, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, (Macmillan, 1929), 208.

> cared for creation in such a way as to be unable not to suffer in and alongside it. Whitehead … thought Christianity had erred by presenting God as a divine ruler, whose outstanding characteristic is power: he preferred what he called 'the brief Galilean vision of humility', characterised by love. There are hemispheric implications here, too, that are too obvious to need pointing out." (*TMWT* p.1243).[36]

Process theology is not classical Christian theism, and the theological problems it raises may outweigh those it solves.[37] But the greatest lacuna in McGilchrist's natural philosophy-theology relates to questions of Christology.

A Jesus-shaped Hole

The book of Hebrews opens with strong affirmations of the uniqueness and indispensability of Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-4). Numbering those affirmations in the order in which they appear in the text: Jesus is (i) the Son of God, (iii) through whom God the Father made the universe, (iv) and through whom the universe is sustained, (v) who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being, (ii) Jesus is the heir of all things, (vi) the one who has provided purification for sins, (vii) and the one who, having completed his work of redemption sits at the Father's right hand in heaven.[38] As a consequence, (viii) Jesus is far, far more than a messenger (angel) from God.

Of those eight affirmations, McGilchrist's philosophy can easily accommodate (iii) and (iv). The historicity of Jesus, and the capacity of God to become incarnate as a human, so that God has a history of the sort affirmed by (vii) is also something McGilchrist could easily accept. The challenges Jesus presents to McGilchrist's philosophy are fourfold. First, Jesus' unique status as (i) the Son of God and (viii) as far more than a messenger. Second, (ii) the idea that Jesus is the exact representation of God's being; so that to see Jesus is to see the Father and to understand our relationship to Jesus is to understand our relationship to God. Third, (vi) the need for our sin to be purified, for God to enter into the world God had created in order to deal once and for all with the evil which was opposed to God and which was preventing the world from being in right relationship to God and from being all that it was meant to be. Fourth, the idea of Jesus as the heir of all things, the one for whom all things were made and in whom all things are fulfilled. In short, Jesus challenges McGilchrist's understanding of

[36] A.N. Whitehead, *Process and* Reality, 351.
[37] For a recent discussion of those problems in the broader context of debates about anthropology and the status of law, see D.W. Opderbeck, *The End of Law? Law, Theology, and Neuroscience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021).
[38] The Roman numerals refer to the order in which these points are made in verses 1 to 4.

Incarnation, Revelation, Atonement, and Fulfilment. Oliver O'Donovan's theology is a convenient contemporary foil to show how McGilchrist's natural philosophy-theology is incomplete.

Incarnation

McGilchrist understands creation as an act of self-limiting by God. Christianity goes further, insisting that God's ability to self-limit extended to the Son of God being born into a working class family in Palestine under Roman occupation. McGilchrist is open to that possibility, but baulks at the claim that the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was a unique event. McGilchrist favours Schelling's idea that God has not incarnated just once, but "is always incarnating itself in the evolving cosmos." (*TMWT* p.1240).

The Incarnation as a unique event is God coming to earth on God's own terms. The definitive revelation of God in Christ secures the unity and the ordering of creation, provides the focal point of history, and illuminates both the character of God and the meaning of creation in ways that go beyond what is otherwise present to human minds.

Jesus, the Word of God, becomes matter in order to reveal God to human beings. The revelation comes not in the form of a philosophy in which all the loose ends about existence and causality are tied up but in the shape of a man, a person who calls us to enter into relationship with himself. Jesus shows us God the Father by showing us himself, he talks about the God not by making technical or scientific statements but through metaphors and parables which feel like poetry. Jesus gives us not *savoir* but helps to *connaître* God by reminding us, through his actions, what God does.

Yet, even more than this, the one through whom the universe was made, becomes material, comes to earth, is made flesh, in order to conquer death and to redeem matter from corruption. It is this, Athanasius insists in his definitive work *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*,[39] was the reason for the incarnation: "The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body."[40] "Naturally, therefore, the Saviour assumed a body for Himself, in order that the body, being interwoven as it were with life, should no longer remain a mortal thing, in thrall to death, but as endued with immortality and risen from death, should thenceforth remain immortal."[41]

[39] Athanasius, *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*, tr. and ed. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co Ltd, 1953), chapter 1 §8-§9, chapter 4 §20-§21.
[40] Athanasius, *St Athanasius on the Incarnation*, chapter 4 §22.
[41] Athanasius, *St Athanasius on the Incarnation*, chapter 7 §44.

Revelation

Like McGilchrist, O'Donovan would strongly affirm that there is a natural ordering in the world, that things are meant to fit together in a certain way, that the interrelatedness of all things means that both their correct ordering and their disordering are of cosmic significance. Like McGilchrist, O'Donovan affirms that "humankind finds its dwelling within a broader universe of fellow creatures, from which the concept of humanity is 'actually inseparable'."[42]

But O'Donovan, like most Protestant and many Catholic proponents of natural law, finds that ordering to be obscure. The wisdom traditions across the world, to which McGilchrist refers frequently, provide some degree of illumination of their ordering, but remain discordant and fragmentary.

The incarnation of Jesus, however, provides a definitive revelation of God, a revelation which goes beyond the uncertainties of apophaticism and the pseudo-certainties that misuse of the *via negative* offers. Jesus insisted: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The anxieties and (mis-)apprehensions of apophaticism are replaced by the assurance that there is no God behind God, that the revelation of God in Christ is reliable though not exhaustive, that what can be known about God is not complete but it is enough.

Jesus claimed that he was "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:9). Jesus is "the Way". He is the guide on our search for reality. Jesus is "the Truth". He is the goal of our search and the one in whom creation in its diversity, conflicts, contradictions and loose ends finds its centre, its redemption and its resolution. Jesus is "the Life". He is the mediator of creation, the one by whose Spirit everything flows, and the one who opens up his relationship to God the Father in order that we may participate in it.

Such revelation is relational (Jesus shows us that, in McGilchrist's words, "truth is a *relationship*." (*TMWT* p.384)), dispositional ("Follow me") and in Jesus' teaching, metaphorical more often than propositional. Jesus' parables are extended metaphors, many beginning "The Kingdom of heaven is like …" As revelation, the movement is from the infinite to the finite, from the ineffable to that which can be signified in imagery, in words, and in actions.

Jesus, the Word of God, becomes matter in order to reveal God to human beings. The revelation comes not in the form of a philosophy in which all the loose ends about existence and causality are tied up but in the shape of a man, a person who calls us to enter into

[42] Samuel Tranter, *Oliver O'Donovan's Moral Theology: Tensions and Triumphs* (London, T&T Clark, 2022), 51.

relationship with himself. Jesus shows us God the Father by showing us himself, he talks about the God not by making technical or scientific statements but through metaphors and parables which feel like poetry. Jesus gives us not *savoir* but helps to *connaître* God by reminding us, through his actions, what God does.

Yet, even more than this, the one through whom the universe was made, becomes material, comes to earth, is made flesh, in order to conquer death and to redeem matter from corruption. It is this, Athanasius insists in his definitive work *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*,[43] was the reason for the incarnation: "The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body."[44] "Naturally, therefore, the Saviour assumed a body for Himself, in order that the body, being interwoven as it were with life, should no longer remain a mortal thing, in thrall to death, but as endued with immortality and risen from death, should thenceforth remain immortal."[45]

Atonement

McGilchrist is uncomfortable with the idea of atonement, because he does not believe in divine retribution (*TMWT* p.1296) and has trouble with the idea that we need to be "bought back" from God.[46] He shares with Whitehead the sense that the emphasis on God as an omnipotent judge is a mistake.

McGilchrist prefers the idea of "at-one-ment", of God ultimately turning sin and evil into good. Jesus' life, death and resurrection are therefore symbols of redemption, exemplars and myths, rather than unique, decisive and paradigmatic. Whether they are literally true is, for him, unclear, and less important than whether the story of Jesus carries metaphorical truth.[47]

At most, he appears open to the idea of participation in atonement. "[R]epair, is brought about by human acts of compassion in the world, much as the redemption which Christ symbolises is realised and renewed in the acts of kindness and mercy of each one of his followers." (*TMWT* p.1284).

The atonement is both the acceptance and the refusal of human rejection of a right relationship with creation and with God. On the cross, God accepts the human refusal into the

[43] Athanasius, *St. Athanasius on the Incarnation*, tr. and ed. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co Ltd, 1953), chapter 1 §8-§9, chapter 4 §20-§21.
[44] Athanasius, *St Athanasius on the Incarnation*, chapter 4 §22.
[45] Athanasius, *St Athanasius on the Incarnation*, chapter 7 §44.
[46] Private conversation.
[47] In conversation he shared that he does not know enough about Jesus, because the gospels were written some time after the events in question.

person of the Son of God.[48] The vindication of Jesus in his resurrection is "God's refusal of our refusal of the goodness of creation."[49] The death of Christ is the means by which evil is absorbed and overcome by God, enabling not only restoration but a transformation exceeding the possibilities of the natural order.

McGilchrist is not averse to this, but does not know what to make of it. He writes movingly:

> "I understand the Christian belief in the redemption of death through God's own suffering to mean that death is not an end, but plays a part – like the intermediate phase of destruction, of fragmentation, of the shattering of the vessels – in the greater story of repair and restoration; a story that is both mine and not mine, taking place in the immensity of a living cosmos where the part and the whole are as one, yet without of the loss of the meaning of the part that is each one of us." (*TWMT* p.1297-8).

The Christian creeds resolutely affirm the materiality of the resurrection. Jesus's resurrection was not his spiritualised re-absorption into the cosmic consciousness, it was declaration of the triumph of life over death, and the transformation of already good matter into something even greater.

Fulfilment

The uniqueness of the Incarnation, the revelation of God the Father in the person of Jesus Christ, and the once and for all Atonement in the cross and resurrection, open the way to a fulfilment which exceeds the inherent possibilities of the natural order. Jesus Christ, the author of Hebrews proclaims, is the one in whom the meaning of the world is to be found. His ascension reveals that "man is summoned to a destiny that is not given immediately in his creation, a 'higher grace', as Athanasius puts it, 'to reign eternally with Christ in his heaven'."[50] The overabundance of meaning in the world cannot be contained within the world because the destiny of this world does not lie within itself, but is to be found in its restoration, renewal, and transformation of both matter and consciousness. Our material bodies will be transformed; our consciousness, our *Kennen*, will be opened up to a beatific vision of God.

[48] There are, of course, different construals of whether this affects Jesus of Nazareth only in his humanity or also in his divinity.
[49] Tranter, *Oliver O'Donovan's Moral Theology*, 48.
[50] O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 56.

Conclusion

McGilchrist's work is a magnificent affirmation that natural philosophy-theology is not beyond the age of child-bearing. He advances his positions with an appropriate confidence borne out of the breadth and depth of his reading across different fields, cultures and time. But strikingly, he readily acknowledges that revision and openness to dialogue and to learning, are imperatives.[51]

McGilchrist has journeyed very far into the heart of reality in his philosophical vision, but there are yet greater things to be discovered. Theologians will differ in their assessments of McGilchrist's panentheism, his process theology, and his views on the nature of God's knowledge and power. Orthodox Christian theologians would want to affirm that McGilchrist's apophatic theology can be revised in the light of the Incarnation, the Revelation of God in Christ, the Atonement, and the Fulfilment of Creation.

Christianity claims that however much it is true that God is present in creation, God is wholly other than creation. Yet, precisely because God is wholly other than creation, God is able not only to pervade creation by God's Spirit but also to step into creation in the person of a human being, Jesus Christ. Moreover, Christianity radically qualifies the pseudo-certainties of the *via negativa*, through its insistence that, precisely because God is not limited by creation, God has been able to give a true revelation of God's nature in and through the person of Jesus Christ.

Theologians would agree, however, with McGilchrist's diagnosis that "Having abandoned God, our idol is – *ourselves*, as 'God': the gaining of human power over every manifestation of Nature" (*TMWT* p.1333). McGilchrist writes with urgency, seeing our left hemisphere-dominated societies as having fallen into an echo chamber in which artifice and manipulation have replaced encounter and acceptance, rationalism has ousted reason, and reductionism has evacuated meaning.

McGilchrist offers a philosophical vision with many strengths. It is relational, it is anti-reductionist, and it integrates perspectives from a variety of disciplines into a more than plausible whole. Any society in which such a vision has arisen will be greatly enriched if only we will take the time to attend to it.

[51] "Faith, like science, is not static and certain, but a process of exploration that always has in sight enough of what it seeks to keep the seeker journeying onward." (*TMWT* p.1275).