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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Crisis of Soul II

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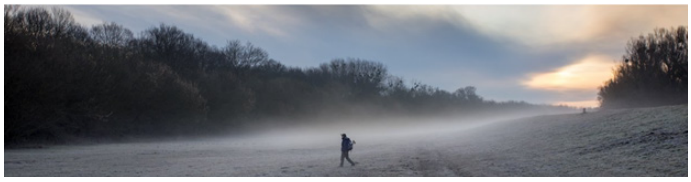

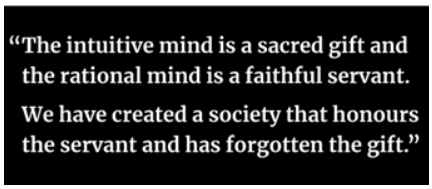

[1]

In my prior essay I claimed as Merleau-Ponty suggested, and as Lakoff & Johnson have more recently emphasized everything we know is embodied and cannot be abstracted without distorting its essential nature [2].

That spirit and body are not distinct, or opposed, but discernibly different aspects of the same being, is expressed in many traditions through embodied spiritual practices, such as meditation and prayer in conjunction with the assumption of bodily postures. It is also implicit in the existence of holy places, such as shrines, and in holy objects, such as icons. Above all, ritual, which is common to perhaps all religions, is the enactment of embodied metaphor.

This does not deny that many traditions, and perhaps particularly the Christian tradition, have had an ambivalence towards the body: the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection of the body appear to assert the inseparability of soul and body, while ascetics (of all traditions, but perhaps particularly of the Christian tradition) have emphasized the abject nature of the flesh.

Ancient philosophical theories of soul are in many respects sensitive to ways of speaking and thinking about the soul [psuchê] that are not specifically philosophical or theoretical.

We discussed in my last essay we touched upon various Presocratic thinkers, of Plato (first in the Phaedo, then in the Republic), Aristotle (in the De Anima or On the Soul), Epicurus, and the Stoics. These are by far the most carefully worked out theories of soul in ancient philosophy. Ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle developed comprehensive theories about the soul, viewing it as responsible for mental functions, moral qualities, and vital functions of living organisms.

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Later Hellenistic philosophers focused more narrowly on the soul's role in mental and psychological functions.

Later theoretical developments for instance, in the writings of Plotinus and other Platonists, as well as the Church Fathers described theories against the background of the classical theories, from which, in large part, they derive.

The concept of a "crisis of soul" is a complex and multifaceted issue that has been explored in various contexts throughout history. This phenomenon can be understood from different perspectives, including psychological, philosophical, and societal viewpoints.

Understanding the Soul Crisis

The idea of a soul crisis often refers to a profound sense of disconnection, loss of meaning, or existential struggle that individuals may experience. In contemporary discourse, this concept has gained particular relevance in discussions about mental health, personal development, and societal challenges.

Psychological Views

In modern psychology, the concept of "soul" is often replaced with terms like "self" or "psyche." However, the idea of a core essence of a person persists in various forms with contemporary discussions often focusing on personal identity, consciousness,

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and the nature of the self.

Addressing the Soul Crisis requires us to recognize and consider a number of considerations including:

1. Validation of Suffering: It's crucial to acknowledge and make room for suffering rather than immediately pathologizing it.
2. Holistic Approach: Understanding that a soul crisis may manifest in various ways, including physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms.
3. Support Systems: Creating environments in schools, communities, and therapy rooms that allow for the expression and exploration of existential struggles.
4. Personal Reflection: Encouraging individuals to engage in self-reflection and exploration of their values, beliefs, and place in the world.
5. Professional Help: In some cases, seeking guidance from mental health professionals or spiritual advisors may be beneficial.

It's important to recognize that experiencing a soul crisis can be a profound and transformative process. As some mystics refer to it, the "Dark Night of the Soul" can be a period of significant growth and self-discovery, often following major life changes or realizations.

For the physician, a crisis of soul is a complex phenomenon that reflects deep existential struggles and disconnections. By approaching it with compassion, understanding, and a willingness to explore its depths, he or she can work towards healing and finding renewed meaning and connection. However, the bigger challenge is when all societal professional regulatory and professional forces conspire to disconnect him or her from their deepest spiritual core.

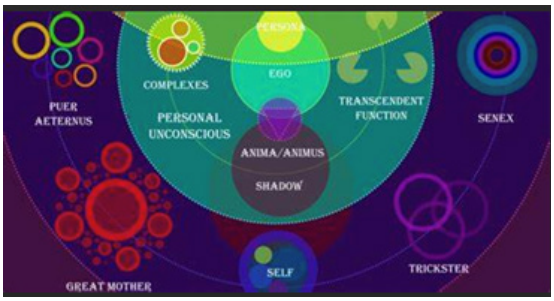
The field of psychology has been dominated by quantitative science and psychiatry, and the experience of existential darkness has been medicalized, rather than examined, valued, and understood. The spiritual origin and meaning of depression are hardly talked about, yet well documented when we look closely at people's experience across history.

True Self, False Self: Winnicott

The idea of a "true self" vs. a "false self" is first introduced by British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1960). Winnicott used "true self" to describe a sense of self that was based on authentic experience and a feeling of being alive much like how we were as a child when we felt safe in the presence of a trusted other and were free to fully express ourselves. The "false self" is a defensive facade, something we develop to meet our parents' societal or interpersonal demands.

The consequence of over-investing in our false self is that we become physically and psychologically sick. When our outside self is succumbing to conformity, our inner being might become deviant. If we do not address the issue, this underlying rebellion will push back and, eventually, erupt. That is why we "act out" with behaviors that are self-sabotaging or destructive, bypassing our rational mind and against our will.

Our soul is always aligned with our real, authentic, intense, and sensitive true self, and when we overwork in the suit of our armor, our soul will wake us up sometimes violently, in surprising hours. Before the renewal of our true self, however, comes the painful "death" of our ego-based false self. Mystics call this period the "Dark Night of the Soul." We often experience a period of low after significant life changes, such as changing jobs, moving countries, divorcing, losing a loved one, or coming to terms with a severe illness. Although the Dark Night of the Soul may appear to be a curse, it is a blessing in disguise. This period of our lives helps us to descend into the depths of our psyches so that we can find our true selves, discover our calling, and reconnect to our spirit.



Individualization: Carl Jung

Authenticity was a big part of Carl Jung's life's work. Jung defined a mature personality as "the supreme realization of the innate idiosyncrasy of a living being" (CG Jung, The Development of Personality, 1954).

The first half of our lives is about building an ego identity. To survive in the world, we adopt a persona at the cost of our inner reality. We repressed our anger, our opinion, our voice, as well as our joy and creative energy to fit in. Then, at some point, it no longer works, and we realized we could no longer live a lie to make those around us feel comfortable. When the emotionally sensitive person is "sick of normalization" (The Aims of Psychotherapy, Jung, 1954), and no longer feels able to hide their truths, Jung saw this as a sign of health. Jung found that people often suffer from anxiety or depression at the midpoint of life (which for the old souls can mean anything from mid-20s to late 50s), because they had strayed too far from their true nature. At the critical juncture, we enter a chaotic "liminal space" a space where we anxiously float in an "in-between" zone. As Richard Rohr puts it:

"… It is when you have left the tried and true but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are

between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. If you are not trained in how to hold anxiety, how to live with ambiguity, how to entrust and wait, you will run ... anything to flee this terrible cloud of unknowing."

Internal chaos is a rite of passage as we go through a transformation. Many great artists and thinkers have to go through this to find their voice and to eventually put their unique stamps into the world. Jung developed his theory of individualization out of a painful personal experience: Being the son of a pastor in the Swiss Reformed church, he discovered early in his life that he could not subscribe to the orthodox Protestant faith in which he had been brought up in and forged his own path.

Although the first step of transformation is not easy and can evoke a myriad of complex feelings, from fear to guilt and a compulsion to please those we care about, it is a worthwhile endeavor and will eventually lead to deeper intimacy with those we love. As Mark Nepo poignantly puts it:

"When we cease to shed what is dead in us to soothe the fears of others, we remain partial. When we cease to surface our most sensitive skin simply to avoid conflicts with others, we remove ourselves from all that is true. When we maintain ways we've already discarded just to placate the ignorance of those we love, we lose access to what is eternal." (2011, P. 106)

Authenticity: Existential Philosophies

Outside of psychology, existential philosophers are among the most aware of the value of nonconformity. Many existentialists use terms such as "crowd," "horde" (Scheler), the "masses" (José Ortega y Gasset), or "herd moralities' (Nietzche) to describe the way of living in which one simply "does what others do." Kierkegaard considered that angst and existential despair would appear when an inherited or borrowed worldview (often of a collective nature) proved unfit and untrue. Nietzsche suggested that the so-called "Death of God" the loss of common faith in religion and traditional morality created a more widespread existential crisis for the philosophically aware.

Honor the Existential Darkness

I have been moved deeply by the work of Ian McGilchrist in bridging the gap between neurophysiology and spirituality in the broadest cultural sense. He moves effortlessly between hard-core neuroscience and a deep understanding of western cultural history.

Ian McGilchrist writes:

I believe that we are engaged in committing suicide: intellectual suicide, moral suicide and physical suicide. If there is anything as important as stopping us poisoning our seas and destroying our forests, it is stopping us poisoning our minds and destroying our souls.

Our dominant value – sometimes I fear our only value – has, very clearly, become that of power. This aligns us with a brain system, that of the left hemisphere, the raison d'être of which is to control and manipulate the world. But not to understand it: that, for evolutionary reasons that I explain, has come to be more the raison d'être of our – more intelligent, in every sense – right hemisphere. Unfortunately, the left hemisphere, knowing less, thinks it knows more. It is a good servant, but a ruinous – a peremptory – master. And the predictable outcome of assuming the role of master is the devastation of all that is important to us – or should be important, if we really know what we are about.

Even if we could, by some miracle, reverse the course on which we are set, unless we change our way of thinking, of being in the world – the way that is destroying us as we speak – it would all be in vain [3].

Ian McGilchrist, a psychiatrist and author, has written extensively about the divided brain and its impact on our perception of the world, which can be seen as relevant to the idea of a soul crisis.

Source: The Divided Brain | Iain McGilchrist

McGilchrist's Perspective on Modern Challenges

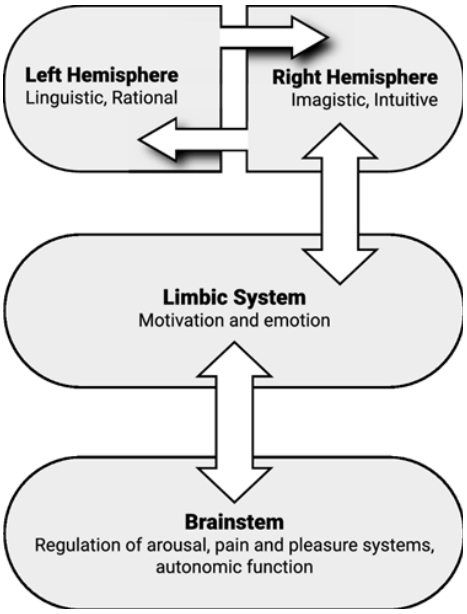
The Divided Brain and Its Consequences

In his classic volume The Right Brain and the Unconscious: Discovering the Stranger Within, the clinical neuropsychologist Rhawn Joseph [6] observed, Just as we have a conscious and an unconscious mind, as well as a right and left-brain, we also have two self-images.

One is consciously maintained, and the other is almost wholly unconscious. The *conscious self-image* is associated with the *left half of the brain* in most people. However, this self-image is also subject to unconscious influences. By contrast, the *unconscious self-image* is maintained within the *right brain* mental system and is tremendously influenced by current and past experiences… the two self-images… interact. Indeed, sometimes the conscious self-image is fashioned in reaction to unconscious feelings, traumas, and feared inadequacies that the person does not want to possess, but that, nevertheless, are unconsciously maintained.

Continuing this theme, the neurologist Guido Gainotti [4] offered an article on "Emotions, Unconscious Processing and the Right Hemisphere", where he concluded, "The right hemisphere may subserve the lower schematic' level (where emotions are automatically generated and experienced as 'true emotions') and the left hemisphere the higher 'conceptual' level (where emotions are consciously analyzed and submitted to intentional control." More recently, the neuropsychiatrist Iain McGilchrist [5] asserts:

If what one means by consciousness is the part of the mind that brings the world into focus, makes it explicit, allows it to be formulated in language, and is aware of its own awareness, it is reasonable to link the conscious mind to activity almost all of which lies ultimately in the left hemisphere. The right hemisphere both grounds our experience of the world at the bottom end, so to speak, and makes sense of it, at the top end… this hemisphere is more in touch with both affect and the body… neurological evidence supports what is called the primacy of affect and the primacy of unconscious over conscious will (see Figure 1).

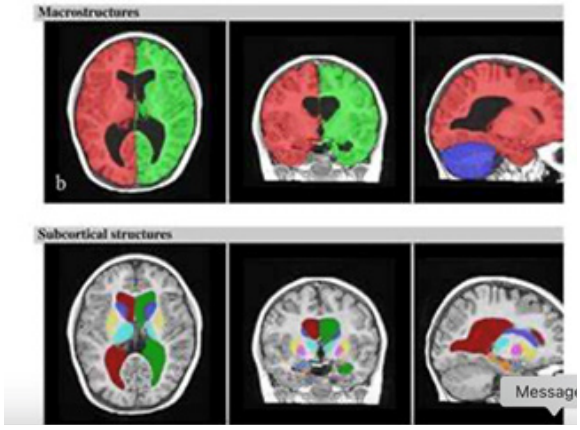


Unconscious processing of the "lower", "bottom up" early developing implicit right brain and subsequent connections into the "higher", "top down" later developing conscious explicit left brain. Note the vertical axis of the emotional right brain on the right side of the figure

McGilchrist develops his theory on the fundamental differences between the left and right hemispheres of our brain when it comes to perceiving reality. He explains that the left hemisphere tends to perceive each thing as something isolated, complete in itself and not changing – which makes the world a set of recognizable and manipulable things. The right, on the other hand, perceives the unity, the continuous change and the interrelationship existing between all things.

"**It is the deep structure of the cosmos that we tend to misunderstand,**" he writes in the first pages of the book. "The problem is that the same brain mechanisms that manage to simplify the world to subject it to our control work against a true understanding of it."

As the modern Western world has been built, in recent decades, from a perspective more dominated by our left hemisphere, the author highlights the urgency of paying attention to our intuition, to the sensible world, to mystery and to everything that cannot be empirically proven but that, without a doubt, exists. Love, the sacred and the transcendental, by being left off the radar of science, have lost an essential place in human existence that needs, more than ever, to regain its value.



He writes:

The first thing to say is that "the sacred" is famous for being impossible to put into words, and although I don't think it can be defined in a phrase, it speaks to a field of values that are beyond the merely utilitarian and every day. It is something bigger than us, that exists before us and will continue after us, and that demands a kind of loyalty. Surely people who look for everything to be verifiable will be disappointed with this answer, but the fact that something cannot be proven by science does not mean that it does not exist. There are real things that science simply cannot deal with; they are on another plane of existence.

Pascal, the great mathematician, was also writing about spirituality, and he suggested that you can act as if you believe in the first place and see what happens. If nothing happens, at least you tried; but you might find that in the process of doing the things that people who do believe do, you begin to feel and experience something and respond to that. Since it is impossible to exclude that there is a God as much as it is impossible to prove it, why not try to believe? Our culture tells us that everything can be decided by reason and science, and although I am a great advocate of both, it is illogical to assume that they can give us the answer to everything. From our experiences and the intuitions that arise from them, we can sense things that cannot be verified. We have been brought up in the modern, Western belief that the world is purely material, in the sense that it has no consciousness, no purpose, no value; many people are defensive of the idea of a God, and I don't think that is a good thing.

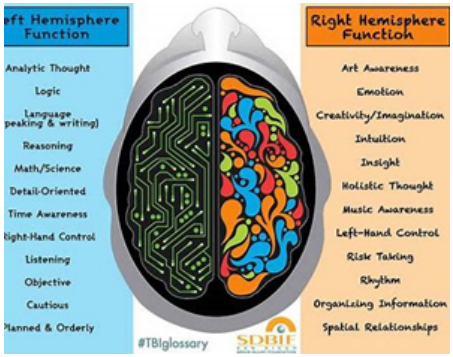
Many of the findings of neuroscience simply offer us a description of the brain correlates of human experience. As such they offer a description of experience at a reduced level, but do not directly illuminate the nature of that experience. Indeed, it is argued by certain philosophers that the brain cannot tell us anything about experience that we could not have discovered by introspection, since by definition the "inwardness" of mental life has to be the authority on experience [6].

In summary, McGilchrist's work focuses on the different ways the two hemispheres of the attend to the world:

- The left hemisphere tends to control and manipulate the world but lacks understanding.
- The right hemisphere is more intelligent and better suited for understanding the world.

He argues that our society has become dominated by left-hemisphere thinking, which leads to:

- An overemphasis on power and control
- A lack of holistic understanding
- A tendency to oversimplify complex realities



This imbalance could be seen as contributing to a "crisis of soul" by disconnecting us from a more comprehensive, nuanced view of reality.

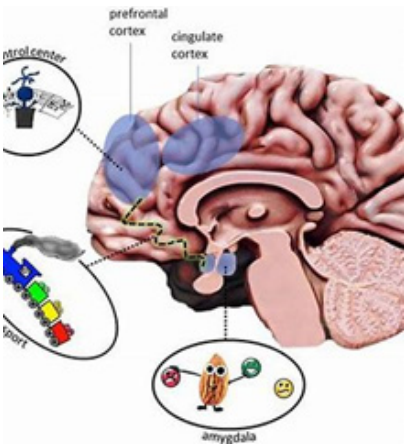
In "A Vision for Survival" McGilchrist proposes that addressing this crisis requires [7]:

- Changing our way of thinking and being in the world.
- Recognizing the "inexhaustibly, truly wondrous, creative, living universe" rather than seeing it as a "meaningless, moribund mechanism".
- Integrating insights from neuropsychology, physics, philosophy, and spiritual traditions.

He suggests that this shift in perspective is necessary not only for our survival but also for us to "deserve to survive".

While McGilchrist doesn't use the exact phrase "crisis of soul," his work addresses deep-seated issues in modern society that align closely with this concept. His emphasis on the need for a more balanced, holistic approach to understanding the world and us resonates with the idea of addressing a soul crisis through reconnection with deeper meaning and purpose.

The right hemisphere of the brain plays a crucial role in understanding and addressing a soul crisis, as it is intimately involved in emotional processing, holistic perception, and the integration of complex experiences. This connection between the right hemisphere and the concept of a soul crisis can be explored through several key aspects:



Emotional Processing and Arousal

The right hemisphere has been shown to have a dominant role in emotional processing and arousal:

- It demonstrates a general dominance for emotional functions, regardless of affective valence.
- The right hemisphere is particularly responsive to arousing and unpleasant emotional stimuli.
- It plays a critical role in unconscious processing of emotionally salient visual stimuli.

These characteristics suggest that the right hemisphere is well-suited to process the intense emotional experiences often associated with a soul crisis.

Holistic Perception and Context

The right hemisphere's approach to processing information is particularly relevant to understanding a soul crisis:

- It attends vigilantly and empathetically to the whole, providing a broader context for experiences.
- This holistic perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of complex life situations that may contribute to a soul crisis.

Attention and Salience

The right hemisphere's role in attention and processing of salient stimuli is significant:

- It contains lateralized attention networks that prioritize emotionally arousing stimuli.
- This prioritization can lead to a heightened awareness of emotionally charged experiences, which may be central to a soul crisis.

Meaning and Spirituality

The right hemisphere appears to be particularly attuned to aspects of experience that relate to meaning and spirituality:

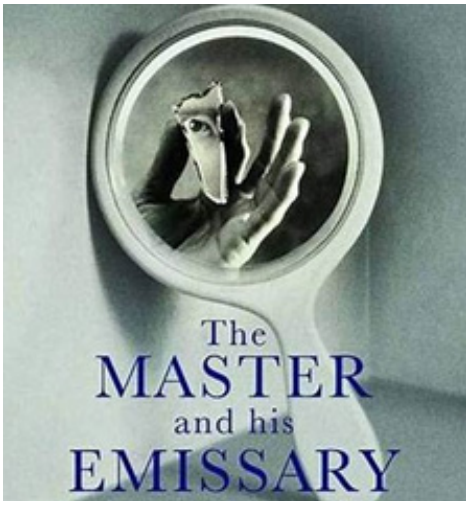
- It is described as the cognitive processor of awe, wonder, respect, and a deep sense of meaning found in the sacred.
- This capacity for finding meaning and connecting with the sacred can be essential in addressing and resolving a soul crisis.

The right hemisphere's dominance in emotional processing has several important clinical implications:

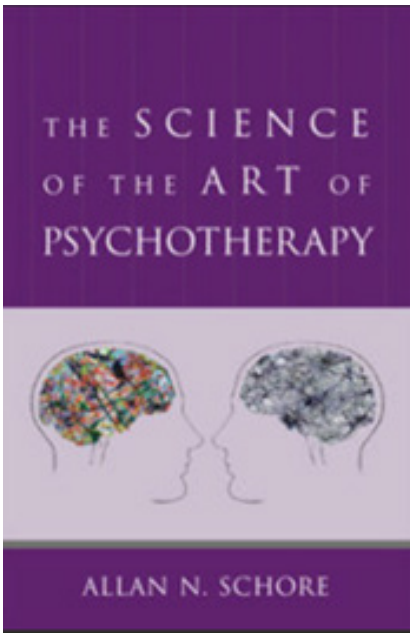
The Therapeutic Encounter

More recently McGilchrist writes, "the social and empathic self, and the continuous sense of self, with 'depth' of existence over time, is more dependent on the right hemisphere", concluding,

"Without a self, there is no capacity for intersubjectivity, for the experience of shared time and shared space" [8]. In parallel classical writings in the psychodynamic psychiatry literature Whitehead asserts [9],



Every time we make therapeutic contact with our patients we are engaging profound processes that tap into essential life forces in ourselves and in those we work with. Emotions are deepened in intensity and sustained in time when they are intersubjectively shared. This occurs at moments of 'deep contact'.



In his volume The Science of the Art of Psychotherapy Alan Schore suggested that across disciplines we were witnessing a paradigm shift from a one-person intrapsychic to a two-person relational psychology, a shift in perspective from within a brain to an intersubjective relationship between brains, such as the right brain-to-right brain mother–infant attachment and therapist–patient psychotherapy relationships [10].

In a recent comprehensive overview of studies of the psychotherapy relationship Norcross and Lambert [11] conclude:

Decades of research evidence and clinical experience converge: the psychotherapy relationship makes substantial and consistent contributions to outcome independent of the treatment… We need to proclaim publicly what decades of research have discovered and what hundreds of thousands of practitioners have witnessed: The relationship can heal…What does not work are poor alliances in adult, adolescent, child, couple, and family psychotherapy as well as low levels of cohesion in group psychotherapy. Paucity of collaboration, consensus, empathy, and positive regard predict treatment dropout and failure.

Both research and clinical studies document that states shared between two individuals in both development and psychotherapy occur via synchrony, and that this fundamental developmental mechanism underlies emotion transmission, affective reciprocal exchange, physiological linkage, and empathy, all right brain relational functions.

Kaiser and Butler [12] now assert that in relational systems successful engagement is expressed in automatic and implicit sharing of social content, including emotions, where two or more persons understand the world "more or less as one":

The implicit sharing process is temporal and bidirectional between…people…a mutual dynamic process is occurring, whereby partners make micro-adjustments over time driven by implicit information from high-resolution perceptions of the others' states and intentions. Mutual interaction…involves a complex fitting-together of the individuals involved, producing a resonance between two attuned systems and feelings of psychological closeness [13].

McGilchrist finds implications of right hemisphere phenomenology for the religious life under three (inevitably, artificially distinct) headings:

1. Metaphysical issues, those concerned with the nature of reality;
2. Epistemological issues, those concerned with how we approach an understanding of that reality;
3. Ethical issues, consequences for the way we are disposed towards, and act in, the world.

A. Foundational or metaphysical issues

1. The "Other"
2. "Betweenness"
3. Paradox
4. Causation
5. Embodiment

McGilchrist concludes there are reasons to suppose the non-dominant hemisphere may be more able to mediate religious experience or is more prone to accept it as a reality, depending on one's point of view.

Hitherto there has been a tendency in the literature to associate religious experience with activity in the right frontal and temporoparietal cortex, though at times in the left frontal cortex, the interpretation of which is open to question.

On phenomenological grounds one would expect the right hemisphere to be more open to intimations of the divine and to adopt a stance that would not automatically rule out the possibility of something beyond everyday experience and language.

Implications for Addressing a Soul Crisis

Understanding the right hemisphere's role can inform approaches to addressing a soul crisis:

1. Holistic Therapies: Therapies that engage the right hemisphere's holistic processing, such as art therapy or mindfulness practices, may be particularly effective.
2. Emotional Exploration: Techniques that allow for deep emotional processing and expression can leverage the right hemisphere's strengths in emotional comprehension.
3. Meaning-Making: Encouraging activities that foster a sense of awe, wonder, and connection to something greater than oneself may help activate the right hemisphere's capacity for finding meaning.
4. Intuitive Approaches: Trusting and developing intuition, which is largely a right-hemispheric function, can be valuable in navigating a soul crisis.
5. Balancing Hemispheric Activity: Recognizing the need for balance between left and right hemispheric functions to avoid an overreliance on reductionist, goal-oriented thinking that may exacerbate a soul crisis.

In conclusion, by engaging and balancing right hemispheric functions, individuals may find more effective ways to navigate and resolve the deep existential challenges associated with a crisis of the soul.

I believe there is sufficient expression in the literature to incorporate spiritual practice in the therapeutic encounter and at the least be open to and not ignore the spiritual backgrounds and claims of patients in their presenting complaints.

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