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Michael G. Lawler  
Todd A. Salzman

## The Jesus we Believe in was Right-Brained: “Go and Do Likewise”

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## NEUROSCIENCE

There are four universally-recognized sources of Catholic theology: Scripture, Tradition, Science, and Experience. Pope John Paul II consistently called for an intense dialogue between theology and science in which each discipline would both retain its own integrity and be open to the insights and discoveries of the other. In this essay we focus on a relatively new science, neuroscience, examine its connections to Catholic ethics, and ask what light it might shed on the psychology and character of Jesus.

It is now common knowledge that the human brain is divided into two interconnected hemispheres. In the 1980s, data derived from functional electroencephalogram (fEEG) studies showed that both hemispheres were involved in every brain process, and neuroscientists interpreted this data to mean that there were no functional differences between the two hemispheres. Contemporary research has demonstrated this conclusion is an error. The *right* hemisphere, it has been shown, thinks intuitively and globally in images and metaphors, is comfortable facing new reality that is contrary to what it already knows, and includes in its decision-making empathy, the ability spontaneously to understand what another is feeling. The *left* hemisphere, in contrast, thinks rationally and fragmentedly in concepts that are partial representations of reality, has a tendency to deny knowledge contrary to what it already knows, even to accept absurdities, and is largely unconcerned about others and their feelings.

Notwithstanding the overlap that exists between emotional and cognitional brain functions, neuropsychology has demonstrated that emotional understanding occurs predominantly in the right hemisphere and that the left hemisphere is stubbornly rational and

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Michael G. Lawler is the inaugural holder of the Amelia and Emil Graff Chair in Catholic Theology at Creighton University. Todd Salzman is his successor in the Graff Chair. Their recent publications include *Virtue and Theological Ethics* and *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications*, both published by Orbis Press in 2019.

uninterested in emotions. Persons with lesions in the right frontal lobe undergo a personality change which includes an incapacity for the empathy Pope Francis insists leads to compassion and mercy (*Amoris Laetitia*, 308-311). Despite these functional differences, however, both hemispheres are active in every brain activity and both are always engaged. When we say, therefore, the right hemisphere does this and the left hemisphere does that, we are to be understood as saying that the hemisphere in question is *predominantly*, not exclusively, active in the function in question.

The issue of attention is important in both science and theology. Selection and prioritization of input are necessary, for the human brain is a limited system and a multitude of inputs compete for its limited resources. Attention resolves that competition in favour of the data most relevant to the task at hand. The one brain, attending to reality in two different hemispheric ways, orients knowledge of two different “worlds.” The right hemisphere’s world is the whole world of reality with which humans are necessarily and intimately connected. The left hemisphere’s world is a fragmented and partial *re-presentation* of that whole world. This left-hemispheric world enables us to partially understand both scientific and theological reality.

We raise here a question that is centrally important in both neuroscience and theology, namely, the question of the connection of emotional and cognitive brain activity. It has been fashionable to dismiss *human emotions* as unreliable guides for ethical judgments; only reason and especially will, it has been argued, is of importance for ethics. Modern Catholic ethicists judge that to be a mistake. They accept emotions as forms of unconscious judgments that assign to certain persons and things importance for our well-being and flourishing, and argue that there is a twofold process in any judgment of ethical truth. There is *first* a right-hemisphere, emotional apprehension about the importance of some value for my personal well-being and flourishing and, *second*, a left-hemisphere, rational judgment that indeed this value is *truly* important for my well-being and flourishing. We shall expand on this double process as we go along.

In the early days of emotion research, it was assumed that emotion and knowledge resulted from separate brain processes, an assumption that is now judged to be in error. There is mounting neuroscientific evidence that emotion is not separate from the reasoning that people do about their own values and the values of others. Emotion serves to guide and even on occasion inhibit all-important attention. The right hemisphere places functional restrictions on all thought processes, and hence on how we attend to both theology and science.

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Early neuropsychology distinguished two types of attention, the broad, global attention of the right hemisphere and the narrow, fragmented attention of the left hemisphere. We have *two* ways of attending to reality. Whatever is *new* to experience and knowledge is first present in the global, emotional attention of the right hemisphere, which then transmits its intuitions of the new to the narrow, rational attention of the left hemisphere to be organized. The rational left hemisphere dissects the right-hemisphere intuited whole, abstracts parts of it, and *re-presents* them as concepts for the understanding and manipulation of the original whole. The rational concepts and language through which we deal with reality, though true and valid, are never the whole of reality, but only parts of the whole. In the search for an understanding of the whole, concepts and words should, therefore, be treated as tentative, not because they are false but because they are never the big picture. Neuropsychology demonstrates that in this dual process the activity of the right hemisphere is cognitively *prior* to that of the left. The right hemisphere is concerned with the intuited whole and guides the left's narrow attention of the fragmented whole. The left hemisphere is concerned with only the parts it knows and understands. If not approached critically, this narrow and restricted concern leads easily to a fundamentalism that rejects everything new and adheres uncritically to an established tradition in both science and ethics.

The human mind, then, operates on *two* different cognitive systems, one fast, emotional, and unconscious, the other slow, reasoned, and conscious. The function of the rational system is twofold, to guide rational ethical judgments and to provide justifications for judgments already made emotionally. This dual-process of knowing, we believe, can offer us all help in understanding the project of ethical judgment.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICS

The foregoing suggests several important conclusions for Catholic ethics. What is *new* is present first to the broad, global attention of the right hemisphere before it can be present to and dealt with by the narrow, fragmented attention of the left hemisphere. New experience, new information, new conclusions engage the attention of the right hemisphere more than that of the left, even if the new information is verbal in which the left hemisphere is massively predominant. There is no neuroscientific doubt that the apprehension of anything new occurs in the right hemisphere, and that the right hemisphere alone can bring us something that we do not already know. The left hemisphere prefers and deals with what

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it knows, which makes it more efficient than the right in situations when knowledge is routine but less efficient when knowledge might have to be revised, as happens regularly in both theology and science. The right hemisphere brings us not only new knowledge but also emotion that can control and even inhibit our fragmented left-hemisphere attention to the new knowledge. Twenty years ago, neurologist Vilayanur Ramachandran demonstrated the left-hemisphere tendency to deny anything it does not already know, even to accept absurdities; the right hemisphere, in contrast, is actively alert for what is new. The left-hemisphere, in science, theology, and everything else, holds tenaciously to what it knows, even in the face of contrary evidence. It is of great interest that this left-brain behaviour is truer of men than of women.

### JESUS' RIGHT-BRAIN PERSPECTIVE

In this section, enlightened by the foregoing neuroscientific data, we seek to understand *three* parables told by Jesus. Without data from functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), we can never know with certainty what was going on in Jesus' or anyone else's brain in any interaction but, on the basis of neuroscientific insights, we can interpret from his actions what was going on in his brain prior to his rational judgment to act this way. We *begin* with an interaction reported in Mark's gospel (7:1-30). Jesus had been preaching something entirely new in his Jewish tradition: "all foods [are] clean" (v. 19). The Pharisees with whom he was in dialogue were adhering narrowly and rigidly in their left hemispheres to the long-established Jewish tradition of washing their hands before eating and asked Jesus why he and his disciples did not do so. Jesus replied, from the intuition of his right hemisphere where everything new originates, with an entirely new teaching which "declared all foods clean" (v. 19). What goes into a person from outside, Jesus teaches, "cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on." What comes out of a man or woman "is what defiles a man [or a woman]. For from within, out of the heart of man or woman, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery" and other "evil things" (vv. 18-23). Reflecting on contemporary experience in contemporary society we could expand that list: refusal to help the poor, the vulnerable, the homeless, discrimination against those whose ideas or life-styles differ from our own.

After this interaction with the Pharisees, Jesus goes into a house where he is joined by a Syrophenician woman "whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit" (v. 25). The woman bowed down at his feet, and "begged him to cast the demon out of

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her daughter” (v. 26). Jesus’ immediate reply we might understand from our own experience. Allowing his rational left hemisphere to focus narrowly on what he and we all intuitively know, the separation between “us” and “them,” he notes that she is not one of “us” and replies that “it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (v. 27). Undeterred, and empowered by her right-hemisphere empathy, love, and compassion for her daughter, the woman responds that “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28). *Emotionally* moved in his right hemisphere by the woman’s reply to see the bigger global picture, perhaps intuiting empathetically that the child was not separated from him as one of “them,” that she was a child of God equal to any Jew, Jesus was moved to empathy and compassion for both the woman and her little daughter and banished the demon from her child. The woman “went home and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone” (v. 30). We are convinced that the neuroscientific data on brain activity, when carefully attended to, helps us to understand better the actions of the actors in this gospel event and points us to the broader messages of all gospel stories. This story of the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees helps us to understand the difference between the left-hemisphere inspired and narrowly focused actions of religious hierarchs and bigots and the broader right-hemisphere inspired intuitive insight of Jesus, which all his followers are called to imitate. The interaction between the empathetic, compassionate, and merciful Jesus and the Syrophenician woman should lead us to an equal empathy, compassion, and mercy for all those who are afflicted, vulnerable, poor, and cast aside in our own society.

## SECOND PARABLE

Our *second* story is taken from Matthew’s gospel (18:23-35). It is the story of a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. One servant “was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents [about fifteen years’ wages for a laborer at the time]; and as he could not pay his Lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made” (vv. 24-25). The servant pleaded with his king “for patience with me and I will pay you everything” and “out of pity for him the Lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt” (vv. 20-21). The servant went out and met a fellow servant who “owed him a hundred denarii [about one hundred days wages, far less than what the first servant owed the king]; and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe’” (v. 28). The second servant pleaded exactly like the first, “Have patience with me and I will pay you”

(v. 29), but the first servant refused and put his fellow servant “in prison till he should pay the debt” (v. 30). This story reveals all kinds of left-hemisphere reason and right-hemisphere emotions.

At first, the king acts out of the narrow, fragmented reason of his left hemisphere, narrowly attending to what he knows: the servant owes him a lot of money, he cannot pay, there is a law about the payment of debts, he must go to jail. Then, in response to his servant’s piteous pleading, the king experiences the right-hemisphere emotions of empathy, compassion, and mercy, and forgives the servant’s debt. The servant immediately meets a fellow servant who owes him a small amount of money, and he immediately follows the fragmented rational judgment of his left hemisphere, there is a law about the payment of debts, he must be sent to jail; and so he is. The wicked servant pays no attention to the bigger, global picture perceived by his right hemisphere, which includes the fact that he has just been forgiven a much larger debt. When the king hears of his servant’s behavior, how he ignored his king’s example in a much smaller matter, he experiences the holy and wholly-justified emotion of anger and “delivered him to the jailers till he should pay all his debt” (v. 31).

From this story we learn of the initial narrow, fragmented, left-hemisphere reaction on the part of both the king and the servant who was forgiven his debt: the law is the law and the debtor must go to prison. There is, then, on the part of the king after the pleading of the servant, right-hemisphere global attention to the bigger picture, perhaps including cruel repercussions to his servant and his servant’s family, and the emergence of the emotions of empathy, compassion, and mercy. Not so with the servant who stays stubbornly with his left-hemisphere knowledge; there is a law about debt payment, the law is the inviolable law, and his fellow servant must go to jail. There is, finally, the emotion of the king’s righteous anger, initiated in his right hemisphere by the intuition that his servant should have followed his example and forgiven his fellow servant’s small debt as he had been forgiven a much larger debt. The king, of course, in this parable is a stand-in for Jesus and the wicked servant is a stand-in for the rest of us, frequently and self-righteously lacking in empathy, compassion, and mercy toward those around us who have offended us, really or imaginarily, in some small thing. And still we unthinkingly pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” forgetting that frequently we follow left hemisphere, rational, fragmented knowledge that we have been somehow offended and that the offender must be somehow punished, perhaps even sent to jail.

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### THIRD PARABLE

Our *third* parable is the parable featuring the man whom Luke simply calls “a Samaritan” (Luke 10:33) but who has been interpreted in Catholic history as “the Good Samaritan,” because his actions are deemed good. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead” (Luke 10:30). Along came a priest who, seeing the half-dead man lying on the road, felt he would compromise his priestly purity required for his temple functions if he tended to him, crossed over to the other side of the road, and self-righteously hurried by. Along came a Levite, a man of the same tribe of Levi as the priest but not a priest, and he too worried about his Levitical purity, crossed over to the other side of the road, and also self-righteously hurried by. Then along came a Samaritan, deeply despised by Jews of the time, who when he saw the beaten man lying bloody and wounded on the road “had compassion and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him” (vv. 33-34). He even gave the innkeeper “two denarii [about 1.25 euros],” telling him to take care of the man and “whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back” (v. 10:35). Wishing to emphasize the point of the parable, Jesus asked the lawyer who had challenged him “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The left-brained lawyer, probably much like the rest of us, had no doubt: “the one who showed mercy on him” (10:36-37). Jesus’ final command is what all Christians are to learn, not only from this parable but from his whole ministry: “Go and do likewise” (v. 37).

In our days, when the poor and vulnerable, refugees and immigrants, are being globally demonized, we find Jesus’ refusal to acknowledge any human distinction between “us” and “them,” between Jews, Samaritans, and Syrophenicians, and his preference for right-brained empathy, compassion, and mercy over left-brained legal and religious justice in the parables of the wicked servant and the Good Samaritan enlightening. We also find his command at the conclusion of the parable of the Good Samaritan, “*Go and do likewise*” (Luke 10:37), which we insist flows not only from his parable but from his entire life, a sound prescription for human and Christian well-being and flourishing. We will never see a wounded man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, but we might see one on the road from Dublin to Dundalk. We will certainly see homeless men, women, and their children sleeping rough all across our country, poor, hungry, cold, emotionally deeply



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wounded, and avoided. Jesus' command "Go and do likewise," we must understand, applies to those people and situations.

### CONCLUSION

Our understanding of Jesus' parables and life, and of their instructions for our ethical lives, has been wonderfully enhanced by our understanding of both the neuroscience we briefly explained and Pope Francis' theological insistence that right-hemisphere mercy and compassion toward our fellow humans, especially those who are in any way beaten and wounded, are at the very heart of the Gospel. Unlike the priest and Levite, we cannot hurry by wounded men, women, and children; we are called to stop and do good to the wounded, even if it means that in the process, as Francis poetically states, our "shoes get soiled by the mud of the streets." Jesus expects us, he continues, "to stop looking for those communal or personal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and to know the power of [right-brained] tenderness" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 308). Our warm right-brained attention to the global world of reality in which all humans are necessarily involved is a *better* prescription for Christian and human living than a cold left-brained attention to a fragmented and partial *re-presentation* of that whole world. It is time and past time for all Christians and their too often embarrassingly sinful leaders to heed Jesus' gospel command: "Go and do likewise."

**Catholic Social Teaching.** One of the key elements of Catholic Social Teaching is that work is an important activity for human beings. In most economic and political systems, work is seen as a commodity, something one does in exchange for something else, such as an income. However, in Catholic Social Teaching, work is seen, not as a commodity, but as crucial and central to an individual's self-worth. It also contributes to the development of one's self, family, community and the larger society.

– SEÁN McDONAGH, *Robots, Ethics and the Future of Jobs* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 167.