

The Brain Hemispheres and the importance of being with Affect in analysis

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The Brain Hemispheres and the importance of being with Affect in analysis. Why did I choose this subject? Having turned to Jungian training only in my 40's and being a physicist by first vocation, and thus being a thinking type before A part of me was and still is fascinated by the human psyche as a machine. As physicist part of me has the tendency to "understand" psyche and to discover "the laws and dynamics of psyche" in the same way I studied the laws of physics forty years ago. So, my initial attitude towards psyche, during the first years of my training analysis, was towards "grasping" what (my) psychology was about as opposed to just "being with" the experience of psyche. In his early career, Jung himself also had a big part of him wanting to "grasp" and to provide "structure" to characterize psychic life. This is reflected in the title of part 8 of the CW: Structure and Dynamics of the psyche. During the years my ego-focus shifted from: mainly thinking and grasping towards an attitude with more balance between grasping and being with the experience of Psyche. After my qualification I did some further analysis, this time with a Freudian, which made me see the particular therapeutic effect of being with feeling/affect.

Differentiation between those two states: grasping and being with psyche (particularly being with affect) is thus important to me as analyst. Being conscious of the state in which my patient and I are during the hour is often a point of attention during my work.

When I learned that the main difference between the functionality of the left-hemisphere and the right brain hemisphere is precisely that the left hemisphere is about "grasping" and the right is about "being with affect" I started to study this matter further.

There is a general interest in the differences in function between the two brain-hemispheres. Popular belief is that the main difference right hemisphere uses feeling and the left uses logic. In general this is not correct. The left brain is also involved with feeling. Although it is true that **autobiographical** affect is associated with the right-hemisphere (particularly the right amygdala, autobiographical affect regulation is impaired when the right-hemisphere is damaged), the main distinguishing characteristic of the left brain is not logic. It is grasping.

Recently, a lot of progress has been made in the new field of neuro-psychoanalysis to map the functionality brain hemispheres in some detail. A very precise and scientifically responsible inventory of the functionalities of the brain-hemispheres has been published by the British psychiatrist Dr Iain McGilchrist in his seminal work; 'The master and his Emissary'. Two years ago Dr McGilchrist and I jointly presented a seminar in London on this topic in connection with Analytical Psychology. Since, I have been thinking about the question of the brain-hemisphere functionality in connection to our analytical practice. I have particularly asked myself if and how insights from hemisphere neurology can help us in how we work with our analysands.

Today I want to present some of these thoughts and findings. My conclusion is that insight in left- and right-hemisphere functionality will help the analyst to prioritize intervention options during the hour. The work also led me to conclude the importance of being sufficiently with affect, with not-knowing, ambiguity, the pre-verbal/ pre-oedipal and the here-and-now. I also see a danger, particularly for us Jungians, that we stay too much with "archetypal symbol interpretation".

The structure of this talk is as follows. To position the relevance of the subject in a clinical perspective I will start with some well-know psychoanalytical ideas on the importance of being with affect and being with the pre-oedipal and pre-verbal. Thereafter, I will list the main differences between left- and right-hemisphere functionality. It appears that domains generally associated with therapeutic progress are mostly associated with the right-hemisphere and that domains associated with therapeutic resistance are generally associated with the left hemisphere. Finally, working with Jung's central notion of feeling-toned complexes, I hypothesize that, solving complexes may be facilitated by being more with states that correspond to the right hemisphere. I also will make some specific remarks on patients who present somatic issues and those with rivalry, need for control and jealousy-issues.

Many of you will agree that little has more whole-making effect on patients than starting to experience ego dystonic autobiographic affects, such as anger, rage, sadness, guilt and shame that before had been defensively kept out of consciousness. Affect is at the center of everything. Nobody has put it more succinctly than an experienced colleague from Amsterdam who, talking about what worked for her most in her practice says: "feeling is everything". My tutor from London, Jungian Analyst for more than 40 years summarized as follows: "true analysis is analysis of feelings". Quoting Jung's teacher, Prof. Bleuler "the affective state is the ruling power". Jung himself wrote¹: "thoughts and actions are only symptoms of affectivity".

¹ CW 3 para 77

In my own practice, when patients mention that this or that was so meaningful for them in the previous session, it often relates to having been with a certain feeling. The key is that the feelings felt together with the analyst. Yalom advises: “use every opportunity for making the feeling in the patient conscious in the here and now of the transference”, or words of a similar nature. When we are working with dreams, we often ask what the feelings were in the dream. And we try to stay a bit with these feelings.

Jung said: “getting to the feeling is getting to the complex”. Here Jung was talking about the direct experience of the affect as opposed to being able to name and differentiate different feelings through the feeling-function which, as we know, with him is a rational function.

Being with affect in analysis stands in a way in opposition to being with the ratio. As Jungian analysts we are generally more focussed than our Freudian colleagues on the analysis of archetypal motifs and images from such widely different sources as alchemy, mythology, religion and anthropology. Archetypes themselves carry no affect; it is only when feeling-toned complexes shape-up along archetypal structures that the archetypal manifests with affect. The functionality of the brain-hemispheres which I will discuss next, prompts the question whether too much rational analysis hampers the solving of complexes. I wonder if we are sometimes not overly occupied by the rational analysis of the archetypal. Anecdotally: I was once told about a colleague, who, when long ago he was about to start training, was looking for an analyst in Zurich and after meeting for an initial session with a potential analyst, he decided not to take this person because he/she had been “giving a lecture of anthropology” for a significant part of the hour.

McGilchrist’s book on brain hemisphere functionality is based on about 2500 research papers individually describing particular aspects of brain functionality. Many findings are based on patients with significant lesions or other damage in one of the hemispheres. Conclusions are typically formulated for example as follows: “Damage of the right-hemisphere narrows the field of attention”. Together, this very significant body of research has led to the following findings. I will now present the main conclusions of this work

the differences

The most characteristic difference between the left-hemisphere and the right-hemisphere is that experience is *presented* with the right-hemisphere and *re-presented* by the left-hemisphere. What does this mean? For example: you are sitting with a patient and you note that something in how the patient looks is different. The split-second of first realization that today something looks different, before starting to ask yourself what is different, this is the presentation assembled and

integrated by the right-hemisphere. Immediately after that we realize what is different. For example: it is the hair or the make-up. We find words, we frame the experience, *we re-present*. This is done by the left-hemisphere. The left-hemisphere grasps and frames what had just before been presented by the right-hemisphere. The right-hemisphere is about the primary experience, the left-hemisphere is about grasping that experience. The right hemisphere therefore is a priori of the left hemisphere.

Other differences are naturally following from this first one. The right-hemisphere keeps attention broad whereas the left-hemisphere has a narrow and focussed attention. An example from the animal kingdom: when a rodent is picking-up a nut, and doing so in the open, it needs to focus its attention on holding the nut while at the same time scanning its environment for animals of prey. The focussed attention is coordinated via the left-hemisphere and the scanning for the enemy via the right-hemisphere. These two functions are so different from each-other that they can not be done by a single brain at the same time. This is probably the very reason why we are having two hemispheres in the first place. The right-hemisphere is occupied with the whole whereas the left-hemisphere is with parts. Differentiation is a left-hemisphere process. Also in line with this is that the right-hemisphere is implicit and the left-hemisphere explicit. For example, the right-hemisphere is involved when we sense the intention of an individual, or ourselves, without this being explicitly registered, let alone stated. The left-hemisphere is involved when explicitly realizing and or stating explicitly the intention. To summarize the functions of the left hemisphere mentioned so far: it re-presents, it is about grasping, framing, naming and it is focussed, its field of attention is narrow, it is involved with making experience explicit. Fittingly, the left-hemisphere is associated with either/or thinking and certainty whereas the right-hemisphere is associated with ambiguity and possibility. The left-hemisphere plays a crucial role in fight/flight situations. Closing-off, anger, aggression and paranoia are all correlating with left-hemisphere functioning.

Jung stressed that signs and symbols are essentially different categories. Signs pointing to something specific (the ladies toilet) whereas symbols carry more depth, multi-layered-ness and ambiguity. After what has been said so far about the differences between the hemispheres, it will come as no surprise that the left-hemisphere is associated with *signs* and the right-hemisphere with *symbols*. Correspondingly, the right-hemisphere is indispensable for *as-if thinking* and *metaphor*. The left-hemisphere is about *fixity* whereas the right-hemisphere is associated with *flow*.

It is often assumed that the right-hemisphere is about emotions and the left-hemisphere is not. In general, however, this is not correct. Both hemispheres, particularly the right and the left amygdala are involved with emotions. However, **autobiographic** affect, which plays such an important role in analysis, is indeed regulated through the right-hemisphere. Bonding and empathy are also

regulated by the right-hemisphere. By contrast, the left-hemisphere is responsible for rivalry and the need for control. Denial is a left-hemisphere specialty. The left-hemisphere is rational. The right-hemisphere is reasonable. This difference might be reflected in the known distinction between law (left-hemisphere) and justice (right-hemisphere).

The right-hemisphere is correlating with embodied, realistic states whereas the left-hemisphere with disembodied and overly optimistic ones. The right-hemisphere is associated with a sense of Self and *contextual* experience, whereas the left-hemisphere is responsible for *de-personalized abstracted* thinking.

These are the main differences between left- and right-brain functionality and I think that most of you did get a general feeling for what the right-hemisphere and the left-hemisphere are about. However, the list of difference is much longer and includes all kind of very specific properties of one of the hemispheres. I recommend McGilchrist's book to those of you who want to learn more about these too. One very specific example is that we use the right-hemisphere to interpret the expression of the upper face (eyes) in terms of a person's emotional state, whereas we use the left-hemisphere to interpret the expression of the lower half of the face (mouth, fight/ flight).

Right-hemisphere associated with therapeutic progress, Left-hemisphere is associated with therapeutic challenges

Looking from a therapeutic perspective at the list of differences between the functionalities of the left and the right brain hemispheres we can not escape the conclusion that therapeutic progress is much more associated with the right-hemisphere functions whereas therapeutic resistance is much more associated with the left-hemisphere.

In Jungian psychology, therapeutic progress is understood as dissolving complexes. Let us look for a moment at Jung's concept of feeling-toned complexes. One of the basic findings of Jung is that complexes disrupt the unity of psyche, i.e. wholeness. Complexes are dissociated states. Being in a complex is a narrowing of the field of perception, memory and identity. Jung describes complexes as kind of "splinter-psyches".

Here is a quote (cw8 para 200) from Jung on complex formation:

Everyone knows nowadays that people "have complexes." What is not well known, though far more important theoretically, is that complexes can have us. The existence of complexes throws serious doubts on the naive assumption of the unity of consciousness, which is equated with

“psyche” and on the supremacy of the will. Every constellation of a complex postulates a disturbed state of consciousness. The unity of consciousness is disrupted.

When complexes constellate: unity in psyche is broken, flow stops, there is a certainty, black and white thinking, always-never thinking. There is denial of everything that does not fit in the complex.

- narrowing attention
- certainty
- in parts, not whole
- closing off
- fixed
- certainty (no ambiguity)
- flow is reduced
- denial

When we compare the neurological left-hemisphere properties to the psychology of complex-formation the similarities are more than striking. It seems safe, therefore, to assume that the left-hemisphere is involved in complex constellation and that the right-hemisphere is involved with complex-free states. This assumption calls-up two interesting questions:

1. Can we as analysts identify specific interventions aimed at de-activating the left-hemisphere and activating the right-hemisphere?
2. Would such interventions significantly contribute to the dissolution of complexes — and therefore whole-making” in the patient?

It seems that question 1 can be answered affirmatively. It is well known clinical experience that when we amplify the being with affect by facilitating in the analysand a shift in conscious direction from thinking to feeling, particularly autobiographical feeling, the sense of relatedness to the analyst often deepens. This is often accompanied by a silent state of reverie and intensified checking of emotions (of the other through eye-contact). Rarely, does the patient start to rationalize after such an intervention. Thinking analysis is replaced by affective “being with”. Deepened relatedness, checking via the eyes and unfocussed reverie are all mediated through the right-hemisphere. Thus: being with affective states, could also trigger increased activity of other the “right hemisphere” states such as: reverie, relatedness and checking emotions via the eyes.

The second question, whether these specific interventions will lead to the dissolution of complexes requires a bit deeper thinking. It seems to depend on the timespan that we are talking at.

Immediately following the intervention the complexes clearly dissolve. We don't see any fragmentation or tunnel-vision if the individual has really been able to put him- or herself in touch with the experience of autobiographical affect. Being with affect seems to reduce left-hemisphere dominance. What is not so clear is how sustainable the absence of the complex is. I.e. how long will the complex-free state last? In general the complex will return after a while (and some complexes e.g. the father and mother-complexes can be extremely persistent). It also seems to depend on where we are in the hour. The later in the hour, the bigger the chance that the patient will stay out of a complex for the rest of the hour. Those are often the finest moments in the work. However, the person may be completely back into the complex-state at the next session. In the next part of this presentation I will explore the question if we can "train the brain" to stay longer with the right-hemisphere.

Jung originally called complexes "feeling-toned-complexes" as he found —and we know very well from our practices and the rest of our lives— that complexes constellate when certain affects are activated. What is interesting in the light of the hemisphere exploration is that affects are mediated through the amygdala and particularly that autobiographical affect is mediated by the right-amygdala. The neurological signal correlating to the onset of feeling-toned Complex dynamics would thus be in the right-hemisphere and would travel via some high-speed neurological path to the left-hemisphere activating those parts in the left-hemisphere that are responsible for narrowing of vision, defenses etc. Somehow this high-speed path to the left-hemisphere is not chosen in cases where, in the temenos of the analytic hour, the autobiographical affect is consciously triggered through our intervention. In those cases, instead of traveling to the left-hemisphere, the neurological signal originating in the right amygdala travels to other right-hemisphere parts (the ones correlating with reverie, eyes, relatedness, wholeness). It is far from unthinkable that repeated interventions, such as bringing the patient to be with affect, will "broaden" the neurological pathways in the right-hemisphere, through the plasticity of the brain, such that the neurological trigger originating in the right amygdala travels "stays in the right-hemisphere" allowing the patient to be with the affect without formation of the complex for longer periods of time.

Ultimately, channeling the neurological signal away from the complex-forming left-hemisphere, can be brought —to a degree— under the influence of ego consciousness which requires the plasticity of the pathway from the right-amygdala to the frontal cortex. This might be imagined as the broadening of a narrow country road to a multilane highway allowing a quick check and intervention by ego-consciousness in situations where previously complexes would have been constellated.

What role does typology play in all of this? Thinking types clearly have a predisposition to be in the realm of the left-hemisphere. Feeling types possibly a bit less so. Remember that with Jung, the feeling function is a rational function. It is the re-presentation of affect rather than the presentation of it. For intuitive and sensation types the situation is less clear. In general, however, there seems to be analytic merit in facilitating patients to be with the right-hemisphere thus reducing the incidence of complex formation and increasing the tolerance for being with autobiographical affect.

In a way there is nothing new here for experienced analysts. We are all familiar with the importance of being with affect and being with the here-and-now and conscious of Eros and the elatedness with the analysand. At best the additional insight from hemisphere functionality provides another language for framing (left-hemisphere) the essence of what we do. Perhaps the novel insight from hemisphere functionality helps us to be more alert for potential negative effects of over-interpreting certain dynamics and over-interpreting dream images. All explicit interpretation brings the analyst-analysand couple in left-hemisphere mode, too much of which has adverse effects as we have seen. Particularly the tendency of some Jungians who might be interpreting archetypal dream imagery too explicitly may prevent the patient developing the right-hemisphere neural pathways and may therefore do nothing to reducing problematic complex constellation tendencies.

I want to end this presentation by suggesting that insight in the brain-hemisphere functionality may also help when working with three specific problems that patients often present:

1. jealousy/rivalry
2. anxiety/need for control
3. disembodiment

As is well known jealousy can be most destructive and life-spoiling. Patients can talk for hours on end how either their own life or the life of their partner is spoiled by jealousy. Jealousy is at the heart of the strongest of complexes. Jealousy is totally associated with the left-hemisphere.

Similarly, the need for control that many patients experience, for example those with OCD issues, may play a crucial role in analysis. These problems are often very difficult to address in the work, to the extent that many colleagues find that OCD related issues are a contra-indication for analysis.

Thirdly, issues with the body, such as weight issues, dermatological issues, issues with the digestive tract and other psycho-somatal complaints may hinder the patient.

It is therefore, I think, very important to note that all three problems: jealousy, need for control and disembodiment stem from the left-hemisphere. It seems not unreasonable to postulate that being more with affect, and being less with grasping and intellectualizing will help reducing complaints in these areas too. In my own practice I think I have seen some very positive first results in all three domains.

In closing, I want to acknowledge that much of these things we know already intuitively. Nevertheless, it helps me to ask myself now and then during the hour” where are we: left or right?”. I hope that, although this has been an extremely left-hemisphere talk, you will have some useful takeaways from it.

Thank you