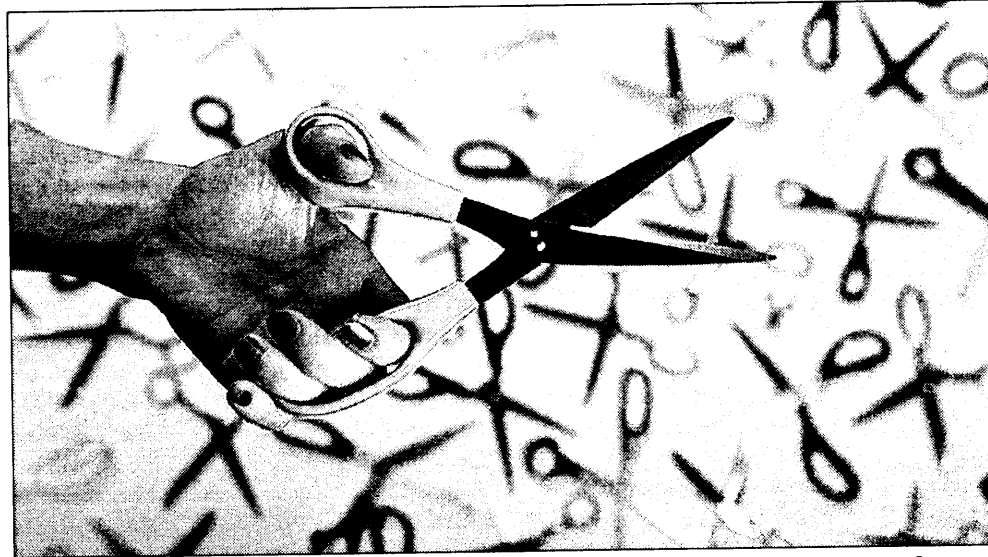


# All things sinister

FRANK CLOSE

The left testicle hangs lower because it is heavier; those who are left-handed suffer from more immune disorders and die younger; Neanderthals were left-handed. Left-handers have a bad time of it. However, left-handers are more creative on average, more intelligent, and include Einstein and Benjamin Franklin among their fold. These are all urban myths about left and right, and each of them is untrue. In *Right Hand, Left Hand*, Chris McManus provides a fascinating study of the origins of asymmetry in life, culture and myth.

The left testicle does lie lower and is larger in many statues (check this at a gallery near you) but in flesh-and-blood men the left testicle is slightly lighter, though it does indeed lie lower. As McManus explains, the origin of this myth lies in the triumph of theory over observation. As the function of the testicles was not at all clear to the Ancient Greeks (Aristotle for example thinking that they acted as weights to keep open the ducts where the seed was discharged) it was hardly surprising that they became convinced that the lower testicle, the one that had pulled down further, had to be the heavier: "simple mechanics but incorrect biology". Their statues then portrayed what they believed rather than the actuality. The true origins of this asymmetry are due to the fact that our apparent left-right symmetry is only skin-deep. In most of us, the heart and stomach are on the left, the liver and appendix on the right. Plumbing the machine of life and packing all the tubes and



Shelagh Howe demonstrates a pair of left-handed scissors during Left-Handers day at North Lincolnshire College, 1998

nervous pathways efficiently leads to other asymmetries, such as the low-slung left testicle.

One of the most famous myths is that the Earth's rotation causes water to drain down the plughole in your bath anticlockwise in the northern hemisphere and clockwise in the south. The

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**Chris McManus**  
**RIGHT HAND, LEFT HAND**  
 The origin of asymmetry in brains, bodies, atoms and cultures  
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real cause is due to a subtle form of symmetry-breaking called "hidden symmetry" and has nothing to do with rotation. Unfortunately, here McManus confuses the issue by claiming that it is "not controversial" that "ocean currents and tornadoes turn in opposite directions in the two hemispheres . . . [as] can easily be seen on pictures from meteorological satellites". Ocean currents and large-scale circulations in the atmosphere such as hurricanes, yes; but tornadoes?

ring themes in all discussions of left and right is the way that the left has been vilified throughout history and cultures. Adroit dexterity versus gaucheness and all things sinister; as McManus puts it "the only recorded sinistral success in an essentially one-sided cold war (with the dominant right-handed world) was the introduction in the medical profession of the term rectum for a little regarded part of the human anatomy".

Another sinister example of the bad association of the left is that presented by heraldry, wherein the diagonal bar may run either "A" or "P". The former is referred to as "bend dexter", such as that on the shield held by the knight where the diagonal runs from the knight's top right to bottom left. The latter, known as "bend sinister", is conventionally the sign of a bastard son, whereas bend dexter is for a legitimate son. Intrigued, I did some research of my own. Oxbridge colleges and other organizations with heraldic symbols uniformly choose the bend dexter. Yet, when members of those colleges sport their ties, the diagonals seem uniformly to run in the backward, sinister direction. Checking ties, in the street, in stores and on television, it seems that British club ties are sinister, whereas Ivy League ties from the United States seem to run in the mirror sense, dexter.

We can react emotionally in different ways to pictures and their mirror images. This, according to McManus, is related to the left-right asymmetries in our brain and the way this affects our perception. In a sense we tend to "read" images from left to right. One effect of this may be that the forward-slash, /, seems more natural in contrast to its mirror image, \, which is seen to be falling over. Is the British penchant for ties with sinister patterns due to a profound understanding of the psychology of perception by their designers? If so, why do ties worn in America do the opposite? Or is it simply a random accident of no significance?

Perhaps this question is relevant for the universe at large: is left-right asymmetry significant or not? The deeper one looks, the more does asymmetry become apparent and seem-

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