

| R e p r i n t |



# The pre-eminence of the right hand

## A study in religious polarity

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What resemblance more perfect than that between our two hands! And yet what a striking inequality there is!

To the right hand go honours, flattering designations, prerogatives: it acts, orders, and *takes*. The left hand, on the contrary, is despised and reduced to the role of a humble auxiliary: by itself it can do nothing; it helps, it supports, it *holds*.

The right hand is the symbol and model of all aristocracy, the left hand of all common people.

What are the titles of nobility of the right hand? And whence comes the servitude of the left?

### Organic assymetry

Every social hierarchy claims to be founded on the nature of things, φύσει, οὐ νόμῳ; it thus accords itself eternity, it escapes change and the attacks of innovators. Aristotle justified slavery by the ethnic superiority of the Greeks over barbarians; and today the man who is annoyed by feminist claims alleges that woman is *naturally* inferior. Similarly, according to common opinion, the pre-eminence of the right hand results directly from the organism and owes nothing to convention or to men's changing beliefs. But in spite of appearances the testimony of nature is no more clear or decisive, when it is a question of ascribing attributes to the two hands, than in the conflict of races or the sexes.

It is not that attempts have been lacking to assign an anatomical cause to right-handedness. Of all the hypotheses advanced<sup>1</sup> only one seems to have stood up to

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factual test: that which links the preponderance of the right hand to the greater development in man of the left cerebral hemisphere, which, as we know, innervates the muscles of the opposite side. Just as the centre for articulate speech is found in this part of the brain, so the centres which govern voluntary movements are also mainly there. As Broca says, 'We are right-handed because we are left-brained.' The prerogative of the right hand would then be founded on the asymmetric structure of the nervous centres, of which the cause, whatever it may be, is evidently organic.<sup>2</sup>

It is not to be doubted that a regular connection exists between the predominance of the right hand and the superior development of the left part of the brain.<sup>3</sup> But of these two phenomena which is the cause and which the effect? What is there to prevent us turning Broca's proposition round and saying, 'We are left-brained because we are right-handed'?<sup>4</sup>

It is a known fact that the exercise of an organ leads to the greater nourishment and consequent growth of that organ. The greater activity of the right hand, which involves more intensive work for the left nervous centres, has the necessary effect of favouring its development.<sup>5</sup> If we abstract the effects produced by exercise and acquired habits, the physiological superiority of the left hemisphere is reduced to so little that it can at the most determine a slight preference in favour of the right side.

The difficulty that is experienced in assigning a certain and adequate organic cause to the asymmetry of the upper limbs, joined to the fact that the animals most closely related to man are ambidextrous,<sup>6</sup> has led some authors to disclaim any anatomical basis for the privilege of the right hand. This privilege would not then be inherent in the structure of *genus homo* but would owe its origin exclusively to conditions exterior to the organism.<sup>7</sup>

This radical denial is for the less bold. Doubtless the organic cause of right-handedness is dubious and insufficient, and difficult to distinguish from influences which act on the individual from outside and shape him; but this is no reason for dogmatically denying the action of the physical factor. Moreover, in some cases

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1. Some of which are set out and discussed in Wilson 1891: 149; Jacobs 1892: 22; and Jackson 1905: 41.

2. See Wilson 1891: 183; Baldwin 1897: 67; and van Biervliet 1899: 276.

3. Recent investigation has led to the finding by one anatomist that: 'Although there is a functional asymmetry of the brain, in that the main speech centres tend to be situated in the left cerebral hemisphere, it is extremely doubtful whether there is any significant difference in the mass of the cerebral hemispheres. The conclusion must, therefore, be reached that cranial and cerebral asymmetry are not associated with handedness . . . ' (G. B. D. Scott, 'Cranial and cerebral asymmetry and handedness', *Man*, Vol. 55, 1955, pp. 67-70.) —Ed. (Rodney Needham)

4. Jacobs 1892: 25.

5. Bastian and Brown-Sequard in Wilson 1891: 193-34.

6. Rollet 1889: 198; Jackson 1905: 27, 71.

7. Jacobs 1892: 30, 33.

where external influence and organic tendency are in conflict, it is possible to affirm that the unequal skill of the hands is connected with an anatomical cause. In spite of the forcible and sometimes cruel pressure which society exerts from their childhood on people who are left-handed, they retain all their lives an instinctive preference for the use of the left hand.<sup>8</sup> If we are forced to recognise here the presence of a congenital disposition to asymmetry we must admit that, inversely, for a certain number of people, the preponderant use of the right hand results from the structure of their bodies. The most probable view may be expressed, though not very rigorously, in mathematical form: in a hundred persons there are about two who are naturally left-handed, resistant to any contrary influence; a considerably larger proportion are right-handed by heredity; while between these two extremes oscillate the mass of people, who if left to themselves would be able to use either hand equally, with (in general) a slight preference in favour of the right.<sup>9</sup> There is thus no need to deny the existence of organic tendencies towards asymmetry; but apart from some exceptional cases the vague disposition to right-handedness, which seems to be spread throughout the human species, would not be enough to bring about the absolute preponderance of the right hand if this were not reinforced and fixed by influences extraneous to the organism.

But even if it were established that the right hand surpassed the left, by a gift of nature, in tactile sensibility, strength and competence, there would still remain to be explained why a humanly-instituted privilege should be added to this natural superiority; why only the best-endowed hand is exercised and trained. Would not reason advise the attempt to correct by education the weakness of the less favoured? Quite on the contrary, the left hand is repressed and kept inactive, its development methodically thwarted. Dr Jacobs tells us that in the course of his tours of medical inspection in the Netherlands Indies he often observed that native children had the left arm completely bound: it was to teach them *not to use it*.<sup>10</sup> We have abolished material bonds—but that is all. One of the signs which distinguish a well brought-up child is that its left hand has become incapable of any independent action.

Can it be said that any effort to develop the aptitude of the left hand is doomed to failure in advance? Experience shows the contrary. In the rare cases in which the left hand is properly exercised and trained, because of technical necessity, it is just about as useful as the right; for example, in playing the piano or violin, or in surgery. If an accident deprives a man of his right hand, the left acquires after some time the strength and skill that it lacked. The example of people who are left-handed is even more conclusive, since this time education struggles against the instinctive tendency to ‘unidexterity’ instead of following and strengthening it. The

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8. Wilson 1891: 140, 142.

9. Wilson 1891: 127–28; Jackson 1905: 52, 97. The latter author estimates those who are naturally right-handed at 17 per cent; but he does not explain how this figure is arrived at. Van Biervliet (1899: 142, 373) does not admit ‘the existence of truly ambidextrous persons’; according to him, 98 per cent of people are right-handed. But these reckonings apply only to adults; and he assigns a far too narrow meaning to the word ‘ambidexterity’. What matters here is not so much the dimensions of the bones or the strength of the muscles as the possible use of one or the other member.

10. Jacobs 1892: 33.

consequence is that left-handers are generally ambidextrous and are often noted for their skill.<sup>11</sup> This result would be attained, with even greater reason, by the majority of people, who have no irresistible preference for one side or the other and whose left hand asks only to be used. The methods of bimanual education, which have been applied for some years, particularly in English and American schools, have already shown conclusive results:<sup>12</sup> there is nothing against the left hand receiving an artistic and technical training similar to that which has up to now been the monopoly of the right.

So it is not because the left hand is weak and powerless that it is neglected: the contrary is true. This hand is subjected to a veritable mutilation, which is none the less marked because it affects the function and not the outer form of the organ, because it is physiological and not anatomical. The feelings of a left-hander in a backward society<sup>13</sup> are analogous to those of an uncircumcised man in countries where circumcision is law. The fact is that righthandedness is not simply accepted, submitted to, like a natural necessity: it is an ideal to which everybody must conform and which society forces us to respect by positive sanctions. The child which actively uses its left hand is reprimanded, when it is riot slapped on the over-bold hand: similarly the fact of being left-handed is an offence which draws on the offender a more or less explicit social reproof.

Organic asymmetry in man is at once a fact and an ideal. Anatomy accounts for the fact to the extent that it results from the structure of the organism; but however strong a determinant one may suppose it to be, it is incapable of explaining the origin of the ideal or the reason for its existence.

### Religious polarity

The preponderance of the right hand is obligatory, imposed by coercion, and guaranteed by sanctions: contrarily, a veritable prohibition weighs on the left hand and paralyses it. The difference in value and function between the two sides of our body possesses therefore in an extreme degree the characteristics of a social institution; and a study which tries to account for it belongs to sociology. More precisely, it is a matter of tracing the genesis of an imperative which is half esthetic, half moral. Now the secularised ideas which still dominate our conduct have been born in a mystical form, in the realm of beliefs and religious emotions. We have therefore to seek the explanation of the preference for the right hand in a comparative study of collective representations.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Wilson 1891: 139, 148-49, 203. A left-handed person benefits from the inborn dexterity of the left hand and the skill acquired by the right.

12. See Jackson 1905: 195; Lydon 1900; Buyse 1908: 145. An 'Ambidextral Culture Society' has existed in England for some years.

13. Cf. (in peasants on Lombardy and Tuscany) Lombroso 1903: 444. Lombroso believes himself to have justified scientifically the old prejudice against left-handed people.

14. Most of the ethnographic facts on which this study is based come from the Maori, or more exactly from the very primitive Tuhoe tribe, whose conceptions have been recorded with admirable fidelity by Elsdon Best in his articles in the *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute* and the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*.

One fundamental opposition dominates the spiritual world of primitive men, that between the sacred and the profane.<sup>15</sup> Certain beings or objects, by virtue of their nature or by the performance of rites, are as it were impregnated with a special essence which consecrates them, sets them apart, and bestows extraordinary powers on them, but which then subjects them to a set of rules and narrow restrictions. Things and persons which are denied this mystical quality have no power, no dignity: they are common and, except for the absolute interdiction on coming into contact with what is sacred, free. Any contact or confusion of beings and things belonging to the opposed classes would be baneful to both. Hence the multitude of prohibitions and taboos which, by keeping them separate, protect both worlds at once.

The significance of the antithesis: between profane and sacred varies according to the position in the religious sphere of the mind which classifies beings and evaluates them. Supernatural powers are not all of the same order: some work in harmony with the nature of things, and inspire veneration and confidence by their regularity and majesty; others, on the contrary, violate and disturb the order of the universe, and the respect they impose is founded chiefly on aversion and fear. All these powers have in common the character of being opposed to the profane, to which they are all equally dangerous and forbidden. Contact with a corpse produces in a profane being the same effects as sacrilege. In this sense Robertson Smith was right when he said that the notion of *taboo* comprised simultaneously the sacred and the impure, the divine and the demoniac. But the perspective of a religious world changes when it is regarded no longer from the point of view of the profane but from that of the sacred. The confusion that Robertson Smith referred to no longer exists. A Polynesian chief, for example, knows very well that the religious quality which imbues a corpse is radically contrary to that which he himself possesses. The impure is separated from the sacred and is placed at the opposite pole of the religious universe. On the other hand, from this point of view the profane is no longer defined by purely negative features: it appears as the antagonistic element which by its very contact degrades, diminishes, and changes the essence of things that are sacred. It is a nothingness, as it were, but an active and contagious nothingness: the harmful influence that it exerts on things endowed with sanctity does not differ in intensity from that of baneful powers. There is an imperceptible transition between the lack of sacred powers and the possession of sinister powers.<sup>16</sup> Thus in the classification which has dominated religious consciousness from the beginning and in increasing measure there is a natural affinity and almost an equivalence between the profane and the impure. The two notions are combined and, in opposition to the sacred, form the negative pole of the spiritual universe.

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15. Our account of religious polarity is only intended to be a rapid sketch. Most of the ideas expressed here will be familiar to the reader who knows the works published by Durkheim, Hubert and Mauss in the *Année Sociologique*. As for certain novel views which this account may obtain, these will be taken up again elsewhere, with the necessary elaboration and proofs.

16. Some examples of this necessary confusion will be given below. See what is said later about the inferior class of woman, earth, and the left side.

Dualism which is of the essence of primitive thought, dominates primitive social organization.<sup>17</sup> The two moieties or phratries which constitute the tribe are reciprocally opposed as sacred and profane. Everything that exists within my own phratry is sacred and forbidden to me: this is why I cannot eat my totem, or spill the blood of a member of my phratry, or even touch his corpse, or marry in my clan. Contrarily, the opposite moiety is profane to me: the clans which compose it supply me with provisions, wives, and human sacrificial victims, bury my dead and prepare my sacred ceremonies.<sup>18</sup> Given the religious character with which the primitive community feels itself invested, the existence of an opposed and complementary section of the same tribe, which can freely carry out functions which are forbidden to members of the first group, is a necessary condition of social life.<sup>19</sup> The evolution of society replaces this reversible dualism with a rigid hierarchical structure:<sup>20</sup> instead of separate and equivalent clans there appear classes or castes, of which one, at the summit, is essentially sacred, noble, and devoted to superior works, while another, at the bottom, is profane or unclean and engaged in base tasks. The principle by which men are assigned rank and function remains the same: social polarity is still a reflection and a consequence of religious polarity.

The whole universe is divided into two contrasted spheres: things, beings, and powers attract or repel each other, implicate or exclude each other, according to whether they gravitate towards one or the other of the two poles.

Powers which maintain and increase life, which give health, social pre-eminence, courage in war and skill in work, all reside in the sacred principle. Contrarily, the profane (in so far as it infringes on the sacred sphere) and the impure are essentially weakening and deadly: the baleful influences which oppress, diminish and harm individuals come from this side. So on one side there is the pole of strength, good, and life; while on the other there is the pole of weakness, evil, and death. Or, if a more recent terminology is preferred, on one side gods, on the other demons.

All the oppositions presented by nature exhibit this fundamental dualism. Light and dark, day and night, east and south in opposition to west and north, represent in imagery and localise in space the two contrary classes of supernatural powers: on one side life shines forth and rises, on the other it descends and is extinguished. The same with the contrast between high and low, sky and earth: on high, the sacred residence of the gods and the stars which know no death; here below, the profane region of mortals whom the earth engulfs; and, lower still, the dark places where lurk serpents and the host of demons.<sup>21</sup>

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17. On social dichotomy, see McGee 1900: 845, 863; Durkheim & Mauss 1903: 7.

18. On this last point, see chiefly Spencer & Gillen 1904: 298.

19. Note that the two moieties of the tribe are often localised, one occupying the right and the other the left (in camp, during ceremonies, etc.). Cf. Durkheim & Mauss 1903: 52; Spencer & Gillen 1904: 28, 577.

20. The outline of which exists from a primitive stage: women and children, in relation to men, form an essentially profane class.

21. On the identification of the sky with the sacred element and the earth with the profane or sinister, cf. (for the Maori) Tregear 1904: 408, 466, 486; Best 1905a: 150, 188; 1906: 155. Compare the Greek opposition of celestial to chthonian divinities.

Primitive thought attributes a sex to all beings in the universe and even to inanimate objects; all of them are divided into two immense classes according to whether they are considered as male or female. Among the Maori the expression *tama tane*, 'male side', designates the most diverse things: men's virility, descent in the paternal line, the east, creative force, offensive magic, and so on; while the expression *tama wahine*, 'female side', covers everything that is the contrary of these.<sup>22</sup> This cosmic distinction rests on a primordial religious antithesis. In general, man is sacred, woman is profane: excluded from ceremonies, she is admitted to them only for a function characteristic of her status, when a taboo is to be lifted, i.e., to bring about an intended profanation.<sup>23</sup> But if woman is powerless and passive in the religious order, she has her revenge in the domain of magic: she is particularly fitted for works of sorcery. 'All evils, misery, and death', says a Maori proverb, 'come from the female element.' Thus the two sexes correspond to the sacred and to the profane (or impure), to life and to death. An abyss separates them, and a rigorous division of labour apportions activities between men and women in such a way that there can never be mixing or confusion.<sup>24</sup>

If dualism marks the entire thought of primitive men, it influences no less their religious activity, their worship. This influence is nowhere more manifest than in the *tira* ceremony, which occurs very often in Maori ritual and serves the most diverse ends. The priest makes two small mounds on a sacred plot of ground, of which one, the male, is dedicated to the Sky, and the other, the female, to the Earth. On each of them he erects a stick: one, called the 'wand of life' and which is placed to the east, is the emblem and focus of health, strength, and life; the other, which is placed to the west, is the 'wand of death' and is the emblem and focus of all evil. The detail of the rites varies according to the end sought, but the fundamental theme is always the same: on the one hand, to repel towards the pole of mortality all impurities and evils which have penetrated and which threaten the community; on the other, to secure, strengthen, and attract to the tribe the beneficent influences which reside at the pole of life. At the end of the ceremony the priest knocks down the wand of Earth, leaving the wand of Sky standing: this is the sought-after triumph of life over death, the expulsion and abolition of evil, the well-being of the community and the ruin of its enemies.<sup>25</sup> Thus ritual activity is directed with reference to two opposite poles, each of which has its essential function in the cult, and which correspond to the two contrary and complementary attitudes of religious life.

How could man's body, the microcosm, escape the law of polarity which governs everything? Society and the whole universe have a side which is sacred, noble and precious, and another which is profane and common: a male side, strong and active, and another, female, weak and passive; or, in two words, a right side and a left side—and yet the human organism alone should be symmetrical? A moment's reflection shows us that that is an impossibility. Such an exception would

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22. See especially Best 1905b: 206 and 1901: 73.

23. Best 1906: 26.

24. See, on the Maori, Colenso 1868: 348, and cf. Durkheim 1898: 40; Crawley 1902.

25. Best 1901: 87; 1906: 161–62; Tregear 1904: 330, 392, 515. Cf. Best 1898a: 241.

not only be an inexplicable anomaly, it would ruin the entire economy of the spiritual world. For man is at the centre of creation: it is for him to manipulate and direct for the better the formidable forces which bring life and death. Is it conceivable that all these things and these powers, which are separated and contrasted and are mutually exclusive, should be confounded abominably in the hand of the priest or the artisan? It is a vital necessity that neither of the two hands should know what the other doeth:<sup>26</sup> the evangelical precept merely applies to a particular situation this law of the incompatibility of opposites, which is valid for the whole world of religion.<sup>27</sup>

If organic asymmetry had not existed, it would have had to be invented.

### The characteristics of right and left

The different way in which the collective consciousness envisages and values the right and the left appears clearly in language. There is a striking contrast in the words which in most Indo-European languages designate the two sides. While there is a single term for 'right' which extends over a very wide area and shows great stability,<sup>28</sup> the idea of 'left' is expressed by a number of distinct terms, which are less widely spread and seem destined to disappear constantly in the face of new words.<sup>29</sup> Some of these words are obvious euphemisms,<sup>30</sup> others are of extremely obscure origin. 'It seems', says Meillet,<sup>31</sup> 'that when speaking of the left side one avoided pronouncing the proper word and tended to replace it by different ones which were constantly renewed.' The multiplicity and instability of terms for the left, and their evasive and arbitrary character, may be explained by the sentiments of disquiet and aversion felt by the community with respect to the left side.<sup>32</sup> Since

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26. *Matt.* 6, 3. For the reciprocal interdiction, cf. Burckhardt 1830: 282.

27. McGee has described the dualistic structure of primitive thought from a point of view and in terms rather different from mine. He considers the distinction between right and left as an addition to a primitive system recognising only the opposition between before and behind. This assertion seems arbitrary to me. Cf. McGee 1900: 843.

28. This is the root *deks-* which is met with in different forms from the Indo-Iranian *dāksīna* to the Celtic *dess*, passing through Lithuanian, Slavonic, Albanian, Germanic and Greek. Cf. Walde 1905–6 s.v. *dexter*.

29. Concerning these terms (Skr. *sayāh*, Gr. *λαίος*, Gr. *σκαίος*, etc.) cf. Schrader 1901 s.v. *Rechts und Links*; Brugmann 1888: 399.

30. Gr. *εὐώνυμος* and *ἀριστερός*, Zend *vairyāstara* (= better), OHG *winistar* (from *wini*, friend), Arabic *aisar* (= happy, cf. Wellhausen 1897, 2: 199), to which should be added, according to Brugmann, the Latin *sinister*. According to Grimm 1818, 2: 681, 689 and more recently Brugmann 1888: 399 the left was originally the favourable side for the Indo-Europeans; these philologists have been deceived by linguistic artifices intended to conceal the true nature of the left. It is certainly a question of antiphrasis.

31. In a letter which he has been so kind as to send me and for which I express my thanks, Meillet had already suggested this explanation (1906: 18).

32. Similarly, and for the same reason, 'the names of illnesses and infirmities such as lameness, blindness, and deafness differ from one language to another' (Meillet 1906: 18).



the thing itself could not be changed the name for it was, in the hope of abolishing or reducing the evil. But in vain; for even words with happy meanings, when applied by antiphrasis to the left, are quickly contaminated by what they express and acquire a 'sinister' quality which soon forbids their use. Thus the opposition which exists between right and left is seen even in the different natures and destinies of their names.

The same contrast appears if we consider the meaning of the words 'right' and 'left'. The former is used to express ideas of physical strength and 'dexterity', of intellectual 'rectitude' and good judgement, of 'uprightness' and moral integrity, of good fortune and beauty, of juridical norm; while the word 'left' evokes most of the ideas contrary to these. To unite these many meanings, it is ordinarily supposed that the word 'right' meant first of all our better hand, then 'the qualities of strength and skill which are natural to it', and by extension diverse analogous virtues of the mind and heart.<sup>33</sup> But this is an arbitrary construction. There is nothing to authorise the statement that the ancient Indo-European word for the right first had an exclusively physical connotation; and more recently formed words such as our *droit*<sup>34</sup> and the Armenian *adj*,<sup>35</sup> before being applied to one of the sides of the body, expressed the idea of a force which goes straight to its object, by ways which are normal and certain, in opposition to ways which are tortuous, oblique, and abortive. In fact, the different meanings of the word in our languages, which are the products of an advanced civilisation, are distinct and juxtaposed. If we trace them back by the comparative method to the source from which these fragmentary meanings derive, we find them fused together originally in one notion which encompasses and confounds them all. We have already met this notion: for the right, it is the idea of sacred power, regular and beneficent, the principle of all effective activity, the source of everything that is good, favourable and legitimate; for the left, this ambiguous conception of the profane and the impure, the feeble and incapable which is also maleficent and dreaded. Physical strength (or weakness) here is only a particular and derivative aspect of a much more vague and fundamental quality.

Among the Maori the right is the sacred side, the seat of good and creative powers; the left is the profane side, possessing no virtue other than, as we shall see, certain disturbing and suspect powers.<sup>36</sup> The same contrast reappears in the course of the evolution of religion, in more precise and less impersonal forms: the right is the side of the gods, where hovers the white figure of a good guardian angel; the left side is dedicated to demons, the devil; a black and wicked angel holds it in dominion.<sup>37</sup> Even today, if the right hand is still called good and beautiful and the

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33. Cf. for example Pictet 1863: 209.

34. From the low Latin *directum*; cf. Diez 1878, 5: 272 s.v. *ritto*.

35. Connected with the Skr. *sādhyá*, according to Lidén 1906: 75. Meillet, to whom I owe this note, considers the etymology irreproachable and very probable.

36. Best 1902: 25; 1904: 236.

37. Meyer 1873: 26. Cf. Gerhard 1847: 54; Pott 1847: 260. Among the Greeks and Romans the right is frequently invoked in formulas of obsecration; cf. Horace Ep. I, 7, 94—*quod te per genium dextramque deosque penates obsecro et obtestor*; see Sittl 1890: 29, n. 5.

left bad and ugly,<sup>38</sup> we can discern in these childish expressions the weakened echoes of designations and religious emotions which for many centuries have been attached to the two sides of our body.

It is a notion current among the Maori that the right is the 'side of life' (and of strength) while the left is the 'side of death' (and of weakness).<sup>39</sup> Fortunate and life-giving influences enter us from the right and through our right side; and, inversely, death and misery penetrate to the core of our being from the left.<sup>40</sup> So the resistance of the side which is particularly exposed and defenceless has to be strengthened by protective amulets; the ring that we wear on the third finger of the left hand is primarily intended to keep temptations and other bad things from us.<sup>41</sup> Hence the great importance in divination of distinguishing the sides, both of the body and in space. If I have felt a convulsive tremor while sleeping it is a sign that a spirit has seized me, and according to whether the sign was on the right or on the left I can expect good fortune and life or ill fortune and death.<sup>42</sup> The same rule holds in general for omens which consist in the appearance of animals thought to be bearers of fate: sometimes these messages are susceptible of two contradictory interpretations, according to whether the situation is seen from the point of view of the person who sees the animal or of the animal which he encounters;<sup>43</sup> if it appears on the left it presents its right side, therefore it can be considered favourable. But these divergences, carefully maintained by the augurs for the confusion of the common people and the increase of their own prestige, only show in a still clearer light the affinity that exists between the right and life, and between the left and death.

A no less significant concordance links the sides of the body to regions in space. The right represents what is high, the upper world, the sky; while the left is connected with the underworld and the earth.<sup>44</sup> It is not by chance that in pictures

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38. Cf. Grimm 1818: 685.

39. Best 1898a: 123, 133.

40. Darmesteter 1879, 2: 129 n. 64.

41. The custom goes back to very ancient times (Egyptian, Greek, Roman). The metal (originally iron, later gold) is endowed with a beneficial virtue which protects from witchcraft: characters engraved on the ring add to its power. The names given to the third finger of the left hand prove its magical character and function: it is the finger 'without a name', 'the doctor', and in Welsh 'the charm finger'. See the articles 'Anulus' and 'Amuletum' in Daremberg & Saglio 1873; Pott 1847: 284, 295; Hofmann 1870: 850. On the word *scaevola* (from *scaevus*, left), meaning a protective charm, see Valetton 188g: 319.

42. Best 1898a: 130; Tregear 1904: 211.

43. Or, what amounts to the same thing, the god who sends the message. This explanation, already proposed by the ancients (Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae*, 78; Festus 17 s.v. *sinistrae aves*) has been definitely proved by Valetton (1889: 287). The same uncertainties are found among the Arabs: cf. Wellhausen 1897: 202 and Doutté 1909: 359.

44. The whirling dervishes keep the right hand raised with the palm upwards, to receive blessings from heaven which the left hand, held low towards the earth, transmits to the world below. Simpson 1896: 138. Cf. p. 104.

of the Last Judgement it is the Lord's raised right hand that indicates their sublime abode to the elect, while his lowered left hand shows the damned the gaping jaws of Hell ready to swallow them. The relation uniting the right to the east or south and the left to the north or west is even more constant and direct, to the extent that in many languages the same words denote the sides of the body and the cardinal points.<sup>45</sup> The axis which divides the world into two halves, the one radiant and the other dark, also cuts through the human body and divides it between the empire of light and that of darkness.<sup>46</sup> Right and left extend beyond the limits of our body to embrace the universe.

According to a very widespread idea, at least in the Indo-European area, the community forms a closed circle at the centre of which is the altar, the Ark of the Covenant, where the gods descend and from which divine aid radiates. Order and harmony reign within the enclosure, while outside it extends a vast night, limitless and lawless, full of impure germs and traversed by chaotic forces. On the periphery of the sacred space the worshippers make a ritual circuit round the divine centre, their right shoulders turned towards it.<sup>47</sup> They have everything to hope for from one side, everything to fear from the other. The right is the *inside*, the finite, assured well-being, and peace; the left is the *outside*, the infinite, hostile, and the perpetual menace of evil.

The above equivalents would in themselves allow us to assume that the right side and the male element are of the same nature, and likewise the left side and the female element; but we are not reduced to simple conjecture on this point. The Maori apply the terms *tama tane* and *tama wahine* to the two sides of the body, terms whose almost universal extension we have already noted: man is compounded of two natures, masculine and feminine; the former is attributed to the right side, the latter to the left.<sup>48</sup> Among the Wulwanga tribe of Australia two sticks are used to mark the beat during ceremonies: one is called the man and is held in the right hand, while the other, the woman, is held in the left. Naturally, it is always the 'man' which strikes and the 'woman' which receives the blows; the right which acts, the left which submits.<sup>49</sup> Here we find intimately combined the privilege of the strong sex and that of the strong side. Undoubtedly God took one of Adam's left ribs to create Eve, for one and the same essence characterizes woman and the left side of the body. It is a matter of the two parts of a weak and defenceless being,

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45. See Gill 1876: 128, 297. The Hebrew *jamîn*, Skr. *dákshina*, Irish *dess* mean both right and south; see Schrader 1901 s.v. *Himmelsgegenden*. For the Greeks the east is the right of the world and the west the left; cf. Stobaeus, *Eclogae*, I, 15, 6.

46. This is why the sun is the right eye of Horus and the moon his left. The same in Polynesia (Gill 1876: 153). In Christian representations of the crucifixion the sun shines on the region to the right of the cross, where the new Church triumphs, while the moon illuminates the side of the impenitent thief and the fallen synagogue. See Mâle 1898: 224, 229.

47. See Simpson 1896; and below p. 104.

48. Best 1898a: 123; 1902: 25; Tregear 1904: 506.

49. Eylmann 1909: 376. (I am indebted to M. Mauss for this reference.)

somewhat ambiguous and disquieting, destined by nature to a passive and receptive role and to a subordinate position.<sup>50</sup>

Thus the opposition of the right and the left has the same meaning and application as the series of contrasts, very different but reducible to common principles, presented by the universe. Sacred power, source of life, truth, beauty, virtue, the rising sun, the male sex, and—I can add—the right side; all these terms are interchangeable, as are their contraries, they designate under many aspects the same category of things, a common nature, the same orientation towards one of the two poles of the mystical world.<sup>51</sup> Can one believe that a slight difference of degree in the physical strength of the two hands could be enough to account for such a trenchant and profound heterogeneity?

### The functions of the two hands

The different characteristics of the right and the left determine the difference in rank and functions which exists between the two hands.

It is well known that many primitive peoples, particularly the Indians of North America, can converse without saying a word, simply by movements of the head and arms. In this language each hand acts in accordance with its nature. The right hand stands for *me*, the left for *not-me*, *others*.<sup>52</sup> To express the idea of *high* the right hand is raised above the left, which is held horizontal and motionless; while the idea of *low* is expressed by lowering the 'inferior hand' below the right.<sup>53</sup> The raised right hand signifies *bravery*, *power*, *virility*; while on the contrary the same hand, turned to the left and placed below the left hand, signifies, according to context, the ideas of *death*, *destruction* and *burial*.<sup>54</sup> These characteristic examples are enough to show that the contrast between right and left, and the relative positions of the hands, are of fundamental importance in 'sign-language'.

The hands are used only incidentally for the expression of ideas: they are primarily instruments with which man acts on the beings and things that surround him. It is in the diverse fields of human activity that we must observe the hands at work.

In worship man seeks above all to communicate with sacred powers, in order to maintain and increase them, and to draw to himself the benefits of their action. Only the right hand is fit for these beneficial relations, since it participates in the nature of the things and beings on which the rites are to act. The gods are on our

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50. A contemporary physician naively formulates the same idea: see Liersch 1893: 46.

51. The table of contraries which, according to the Pythagoreans, balance each other and constitute the universe comprises finite and infinite, odd and even, right and left, male and female, stable and changing, straight (εὐθύ) and curved, light and shade, good and evil, high and low; see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 5; and cf. Zeller 1876: 321. The correspondence with the table that I have set out is perfect: the Pythagoreans have simply defined and given shape to extremely ancient popular Ideas.

52. Wilson 1891: 18-19.

53. Mallery 1881: 364.

54. Mallery 1881: 414, 416, 420. Cf. Quintilianus, XI, 3. 13 in Sittl 1890: 358 (on the gesture expressing abomination).

right, so we turn towards the right to pray.<sup>55</sup> A holy place must be entered right foot first.<sup>56</sup> Sacred offerings are presented to the gods with the right hand.<sup>57</sup> It is the right hand that receives favours from heaven and which transmits them in the benediction.<sup>58</sup> To bring about good effects in a ceremony, to bless or to consecrate, the Hindus and the Celts go three times round a person or an object, from left to right, like the sun, with the right side turned inwards. In this way they pour upon whatever is enclosed in the sacred circle the holy and beneficent virtue which emanates from the right side. The contrary movement and position, in similar circumstances, would be sacrilegious and unlucky.<sup>59</sup>

But worship does not consist entirely in the trusting adoration of friendly gods. Man would willingly forget the sinister powers which swarm at his left, but he cannot; for they impose themselves on his attention by their murderous blows, by threats which must be eluded, and demands which must be satisfied. A considerable part of a religious cult, and not the least important part, is devoted to containing or appeasing spiteful or angry supernatural beings, to banishing and destroying bad influences. In this domain it is the left hand that prevails: it is directly concerned with all that is demoniacal.<sup>60</sup> In the Maori ceremony that we described it is the left hand that sets up and then knocks down the wand of death.<sup>61</sup> If greedy spirits of the souls of the dead have to be placated by the making of a gift, it is the left hand that is specified for this sinister contact.<sup>62</sup> Sinners are expelled from the Church by the left door.<sup>63</sup> In funerary rites and in exorcism the ceremonial circuit is made 'in the wrong direction', presenting the left side.<sup>64</sup> Is it not right that the destructive powers of the left side should sometimes be turned against the malicious spirits who themselves generally use them?

Magical practices proliferate on the borders of regular liturgy. The left hand is at home here: it excels at neutralizing or annulling bad fortune,<sup>65</sup> but above all in

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55. See Schrader 1901 s.v. *Gruss*. Cf. Bokhâri 1903: 153.

56. Bokhâri 1903: 157. Conversely, places haunted by *djinn* are entered left foot first (Lane 1836: 308).

57. When the left hand intervenes it is only to follow and duplicate the action of the right (White 1887: 197). It is still often ill-regarded (Sittl 1890: 51 n. 2, 88; Simpson 1896: 291).

58. See Genesis 48, 13.

59. On *pradâkshina* and *deasil*, see Simpson 1896: 75, 90, 183, and especially the monograph by Caland (1898). Traces of this observance are found in the entire Indo-European area.

60. See Plato, *Laws*, 4, 717a– τοῖς χθονίοις θεοῖς ... ἀριστερὰ νέμων ὀρθότατα τοῦ τῆς εὐσεβείας σκοποῦ τυγχάνοι; Cf. Sittl 1890: 188.

61. Gudgeon 1905: 125.

62. Kruyt 1906: 259, 380 n I.

63. Martène 1736, 2: 82; cf. *Middoth* in Simpson 1896: 142.

64. Simpson 1896; Caland 1898; Jamieson. 1808 s.v. *widdersimnis*. Sorceresses present the left to the devil to do him homage.

65. Best 1904: 76, 236; 1905: 3; 1901: 98; Goldie 1904: 75.

propagating death.<sup>66</sup> 'When you drink with a native [on the Guinea Coast] you must watch his left hand, for the very contact of his left thumb with the drink would suffice to make it fatal.' It is said that every native conceals under his left thumb-nail a toxic substance that possesses almost 'the devastating subtlety of prussic acid'.<sup>67</sup> This poison, which is evidently imaginary, symbolises perfectly the murderous powers that lie in the left side.

It is clear that there is no question here of strength or weakness, of skill or clumsiness, but of different and incompatible functions linked to contrary natures. If the left hand is despised and humiliated in the world of the gods and of the living, it has its domain where it is mistress and from which the right hand is excluded; but this is a dark and ill-famed region. The power of the left hand is always somewhat occult and illegitimate; it inspires terror and repulsion. Its movements are suspect; we should like it to remain quiet and discreet, hidden in the folds of the garment, so that its corruptive influence will not spread. As people in mourning, whom death has enveloped, have to veil themselves, neglect their bodies, let their hair and nails grow, so it would be out of place to take too much care of the bad hand: the nails are not cut and it is washed less than the other.<sup>68</sup> Thus the belief in a profound disparity between the two hands sometimes goes so far as to produce a visible bodily asymmetry. Even if it is not betrayed by its appearance, the left still remains the cursed hand. A left hand that is too gifted and agile is the sign of a nature contrary to right order, of a perverse and devilish disposition: every left-handed person is a possible sorcerer, justly to be distrusted.<sup>69</sup> To the contrary, the exclusive preponderance of the right, and a repugnance for requiring anything of the left, are the marks of a soul unusually associated with the divine and immune to what is profane or impure: such are the Christian saints who in their cradle were pious to the extent of refusing the left breast of their mother.<sup>70</sup> This is why social selection favours right-handers and why education is directed to paralyzing the left hand while developing the right.

Life in society involves a large number of practices which, without being integrally part of religion, are closely connected with it. If it is the right hands that are joined in a marriage, if the right hand takes the oath, concludes contracts, takes possession, and lends assistance, it is because it is in man's right side that lie the powers and authority which give weight to the gestures, the force by which it

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66. See *Kauśika sūtra* 47, 4 in Caland 1900: 184. Blood extracted from the left side of the body causes death (Best 1897: 41). Contrarily, blood from the right side gives life, regenerates (the wounds of the crucified Christ are always in his right side).

67. Lartigue 1851: 365.

68. Lartigue 1851; Burckhard 1830: 186; Meyer 1873: 26, 28.

69. This is why beings, real or imaginary, which are believed to possess dreadful magical powers are represented as left-handed: this is the case with the bear among the Kamchadal and the Eskimo (Erman 1873: 36; J. Rae in Wilson 1891: 60).

70. Usener 1896: 190–91. When the Pythagoreans crossed their legs they took care never to place the left on top of the right. Plutarch, *De vit. pud.* 8. Cf. Bokhâri 1903: 75.

exercises its hold on things.<sup>71</sup> How could the left hand conclude valid acts since it is deprived of prestige and spiritual power, since it has strength only for destruction and evil? Marriage contracted with the left hand is a clandestine and irregular union from which only bastards can issue. The left is the hand of perjury, treachery, and fraud.<sup>72</sup> As with jural formalities, so also the rules of etiquette derive directly from worship: the gestures with which we adore the gods serve also to express the feelings of respect and affectionate esteem that we have for one another.<sup>73</sup> In greeting and in friendship we offer the best we have, our right.<sup>74</sup> The king bears the emblems of his sovereignty on his right side, he places at his right those whom he judges most worthy to receive, without polluting them, the precious emanations from his right side. It is because the right and the left are really of different value and dignity that it means so much to present the one or the other to our guests, according to their position in the social hierarchy.<sup>75</sup> All these usages, which today seem to be pure conventions, are explained and acquire meaning if they are related to the beliefs which gave birth to them.

Let us look more closely at the profane. Many primitive peoples, when they are in a state of impurity—during mourning, for example—may not use their hands, and in particular they may not use them for eating. They must be fed by others putting the food into their mouths, or they seize the food in their mouths like dogs, since if they touched the food with their polluted hands they would swallow their own death.<sup>76</sup> In this case a sort of mystical infirmity affects both hands and for a time paralyses them. It is a prohibition of the same order that bears on the left hand, but as it is of the same nature as this hand itself the paralysis is permanent. This is why very commonly only the right hand can be actively used at meals. Among the tribes of the lower Niger it is even forbidden for women to use their left hands when cooking, evidently under pain of being accused of attempted poisoning and sorcery.<sup>77</sup> The left hand, like those pariahs on whom all impure tasks are thrust, may concern itself only with disgusting duties.<sup>78</sup> We are far from the sanctuary here; but the dominion of religious concepts is so powerful that it makes itself felt in the dining-room, the kitchen, and even in those places haunted by demons and which we dare not name.

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71. On the Roman *manus*, see Daremberg & Saglio 1873 s.v. *manus*; Sittl 1890: 129, 135. The Romans dedicated the right to good faith; in Arabic the oath is called *jamîn*, the right (Wellhausen 1897: 186).

72. In Persian, 'give the left' means to betray (Pictet 1877, 3: 227). Cf. Plautus, *Persa*, II, 2, 44–*furtifica laeva*.

73. See Schrader 1901 s.v. *Gruss*; Caland 1898: 314–15.

74. Cf. Sittl 1890: 27, 31, 310 (δεξιουσθαι, *dextrae*).

75. On the importance of right and left in Christian iconography, see Didron 1843: 186 and Mâle 1898: 19.

76. Cf. (for the Maori) Best 1905a: 199, 221.

77. Leonard 1906: 310. Neither may a woman touch her husband with the left hand.

78. On the exclusive use of the left hand for cleansing the apertures of the body 'below the navel', see Lartigue 1851; Roth 1899: 122; Spieth 1906, I: 235; Jacobs 1892: 21 (on the Malays); *Laws of Manu* V, 132, 136; Bokhâri 1903: 69, 71; Lane 1836: 187.

It seems, however, that there is one order of activity at least which escapes mystical influences, viz. the arts and industry: the different roles of right and left in these are held to be connected entirely with physical and utilitarian causes. But such a view fails to recognise the character of techniques in antiquity: these were impregnated with religiosity and dominated by mystery. What more sacred for primitive man than war or the hunt! These entail the possession of special powers and a state of sanctity that is difficult to acquire and still more difficult to preserve. The weapon itself is a sacred thing, endowed with a power which alone makes blows directed at the enemy effective. Unhappy the warrior who profanes his spear or sword and dissipates its virtue! Is it possible to entrust something so precious to the left hand? This would be monstrous sacrilege, as much as it would be to allow a woman to enter the warriors' camp, i.e. to doom them to defeat and death. It is man's right side that is dedicated to the god of war; it is the *mana* of the right shoulder that guides the spear to its target; it is therefore only the right hand that will carry and wield the weapon.<sup>79</sup> The left hand, however, is not unemployed: it provides for the needs of profane life that even an intense consecration cannot interrupt, and which the right hand, strictly dedicated to war, must ignore.<sup>80</sup> In battle, without actually taking part in the action, it can parry the adversary's blows; its nature fits it for defence; it is the shield hand.

The origin of ideas about right and left has often been sought in the different roles of the two hands in battle, a difference resulting from the structure of the organism or from a sort of instinct.<sup>81</sup> This hypothesis, refuted by decisive arguments,<sup>82</sup> takes for the cause what is really the effect. It is none the less true that the warlike functions of the two hands have sometimes reinforced the characteristics already attributed to them and the relations of one to the other. Consider an agricultural people who prefer peaceful works to pillage and conquest, and who never have recourse to arms except in defence: the 'shield hand' will rise in popular estimation, while the 'spear hand' will lose something of its prestige. This is notably the case among the Zuni, who personify the left and right sides of the body as two gods who are brothers: the former, the elder, is reflective, wise, and of sound judgement; while the latter is impetuous, impulsive, and made for action.<sup>83</sup> But however interesting this secondary development may be, which considerably modifies the characteristic features of the two sides, it must not make us forget the primary religious significance of the contrast between the right and the left.

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79. Best 1902: 25; Tregear 1904: 332.

80. Tregear 1904.

81. For example, Carlyle, cited by Wilson (1891: 15); similarly, Cushing 1892: 290.

82. An account of this is to be found in Jackson 1905: 51, 54. But the weightiest argument has escaped him. It is extremely probable, as has been shown by Deniker (1900: 316) and Schurtz (1900: 352), that the shield derives from a parrying-stick, the manipulation of which required great dexterity. Moreover, there are many peoples who do not know the use of the shield; such indeed are the Maori (Smith 1892: 43; Tregear 1904: 316), among whom the distinction between right and left is particularly pronounced.

83. Cushing 1892; 1883: 13. Cf. a curious passage on Hermes the Thrice-Great in Stobaeus, *Eclogae* I, 59; and Brinton 1896: 176-77 (on the Chinese).



What is true of military art applies also to other techniques; but a valuable account from the Maori enables us to see directly what makes the right hand preponderant in human industry. The account concerns the initiation of a young girl into the craft of weaving, a serious affair wrapped in mystery and full of danger. The apprentice sits in the presence of the master, who is both artisan and priest, in front of two carved posts which are stuck in the ground and form a sort of rudimentary loom. In the right post lie the sacred virtues which constitute the art of weaving and which make the work effectual; the left post is profane and empty of any power. While the priest recites his incantations the apprentice bites the right post in order to absorb its essence and consecrate herself to her vocation. Naturally, only the right hand comes into contact with the sacred post, the profanation of which would be fatal to the initiate; and it is the same hand that carries the thread, which is also sacred, from left to right. As for the profane hand, it can co-operate only humbly and at a distance in the solemn work that is done.<sup>84</sup> Doubtless this division of labour is relaxed in the case of rougher and more profane pursuits. But none the less it remains the case that, as a rule, techniques consist in setting in motion, by delicate manipulation, dangerous mystical forces: only the sacred and effective hand can take the risk of initiative; if the baneful hand actively intervenes it will only dry up the source of success and vitiate the work that is undertaken.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, from one end to the other of the world of humanity, in the sacred places where the worshipper meets his god, in the cursed places where devilish pacts are made, on the throne as well as in the witness-box, on the battlefield and in the peaceful workroom of the weaver, everywhere one unchangeable law governs the functions of the two hands. No more than the profane is allowed to mix with the sacred is the left allowed to trespass on the right. A preponderant activity of the bad hand could only be illegitimate or exceptional; for it would be the end of man and everything else if the profane were ever allowed to prevail over the sacred and death over life. The supremacy of the right hand is at once an effect and a necessary condition of the order which governs and maintains the universe.

## Conclusion

Analysis of the characteristics of the right and the left, and the functions attributed to them, has confirmed the thesis of which deduction gave us a glimpse. The obligatory differentiation between the sides of the body is a particular case and a consequence of the dualism which is inherent in primitive thought. But the religious necessities which make the pre-eminence of one of the hands inevitable do not determine which of them will be preferred. How is it that the sacred side should invariably be the right and the profane the left?

According to some authors the differentiation of right and left is completely explained by the rules of religious orientation and sun-worship. The position of

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84. Just as it may not be touched with the left hand, so the sacred post must not be surprised in its upright state by night or by a (profane) stranger. See Best 1898b: 627, 656 and Tregear 1904: 225, who follows him.

85. The thread worn by a Brahman must be plaited from left to right (cf. above, p. 109); plaited the opposite way, it is consecrated to the ancestors and cannot be used by the living (Simpson 1896: 93).

man in space is neither indifferent nor arbitrary. In his prayers and ceremonies the worshipper looks naturally to the region where the sun rises, the source of all life. Most sacred buildings, in different religions, are turned towards the east. Given this direction, the parts of the body are themselves assigned to cardinal points: west is behind, south to the right, and the north to the left. Consequently the characteristics of the heavenly regions are reflected in the human body. The full sunlight of the south shines on our right side, while the sinister shade of the north is projected to our left. The spectacle of nature, the contrast of daylight and darkness, of heat and cold, are held to have taught man to distinguish and to oppose his right and his left.<sup>86</sup>

This explanation rests on outmoded ideas about naturalistic conceptions. The external world, with its light and shade, enriches and gives precision to religious notions which issue from the depths of the collective consciousness; but it does not create them. It would be easy to formulate the same hypothesis in more correct terms and to restrict its application to the point that we are concerned with; but it would still run up against contrary facts of a decisive nature.<sup>87</sup> In fact, there is nothing to allow us to assert that the distinctions applied to space are anterior to those that concern man's body. They all have one and the same origin, the opposition of the sacred and the profane; therefore they are usually concordant and support each other; but they are not thereby less independent. We must therefore seek in the structure of the organism the dividing line which directs the beneficent flow of supernatural favours towards the right side.

This ultimate recourse to anatomy should not be seen as a contradiction or concession. It is one thing to explain the nature and origin of a force, it is another to determine the point at which it is applied. The slight physiological advantages possessed by the right hand are merely the occasion of a qualitative differentiation of which the cause lies beyond the individual, in the constitution of the collective consciousness. An almost insignificant bodily asymmetry is enough to turn in one direction and the other contrary representations which are already completely formed. Thereafter, thanks to the plasticity of the organism, social constraint<sup>88</sup> adds to the opposed members and incorporates in them those qualities of strength and weakness, dexterity and clumsiness,<sup>89</sup> which in the adult appear to spring spontaneously from nature.<sup>90</sup>

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86. See Meyer 1873: 27; Jacobs 1892: 33.

87. (1) The system of orientation postulated by the theory, though very general and probably primitive, is far from being universal; cf. Nissen 1907. (2) The heavenly regions are not characterised uniformly: e.g. for the Hindus and the Romans the north is the *regio fausta* and inhabited by the gods, while the south belongs to the dead. (3) If ideas about the sun played the part attributed to them, the right and the left would be inverted among peoples of the southern hemisphere; but the Australian and Maori right coincides with ours.

88. This constraint is exercised, not only in education properly speaking, but in games, dances, and work, which among primitive peoples have an intensely collective and rhythmic character (Bücher 1897).

89. Fr. *Gaucherie*, lit. 'leftness'. —Ed. (Rodney Needham)

90. It could even be that constraint and social selection should at length have modified the human physical type, if it were proved that the proportion of left-handers is greater

The exclusive development of the right hand has sometimes been seen as a characteristic attribute of man and a sign of his moral pre-eminence. In a sense this is true. For centuries the systematic paralysation of the left arm has, like other mutilations, expressed the will animating man to make the sacred predominate over the profane, to sacrifice the desires and the interest of the individual to the demands felt by the collective consciousness, and to spiritualise the body itself by marking upon it the opposition of values and the violent contrasts of the world of morality. It is because man is a double being—*homo duplex*—that he possesses a right and a left that are profoundly differentiated.

This is not the place to seek the cause and the meaning of this polarity which dominates religious life and is imposed on the body itself. This is one of the profoundest questions which the science of comparative religion and sociology in general have to solve; we ought not to tackle it indirectly. Perhaps we have been able to bring certain novel elements into this research; in any case, it is not without interest to see a particular problem reduced to another that is much more general.

As philosophers have often remarked,<sup>91</sup> the distinction between right and left is one of the essential articles of our intellectual equipment. It seems impossible, then, to explain the meaning and genesis of this distinction without taking the part, at least implicitly, of one or the other traditional doctrines of the origin of knowledge.

What disputes there were formerly between the partisans of innate distinction and those of experience! And what a fine clash of dialectical arguments! The application of experimental and sociological method to human problems puts an end to this conflict of dogmatic and contradictory assertions. Those who believe in the innate capacity to differentiate have won their victory: the intellectual and moral representations of right and left are true categories, anterior to all individual experience, since they are linked to the very structure of social thought. But the advocates of experience were right too, for there is no question here of immutable instincts or of absolute metaphysical data. These categories are transcendent only in relation to the individual: placed in their original setting, the collective consciousness, they appear as facts of nature, subject to change and dependent on complex conditions.

Even if, as it seems, the different attributes of the two hands, the dexterity of one and the clumsiness of the other, are in great part the work of human will, the dream of humanity gifted with two 'right hands' is not visionary: But from the fact that ambidexterity is possible it does not follow that it is desirable; the social causes which led to the differentiation of the two hands might be permanent. However, the evolution that we are now witnessing hardly justifies such a view. The tendency to level the value of the two hands is not an isolated or abnormal fact in our culture. The ancient religious ideas which put unbridgeable distance between things and beings, and which in particular founded the exclusive preponderance of the right hand, are today in full retreat. Neither aesthetics nor morality would suffer from

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among primitives than among civilised peoples; but the evidence on this point is vague and of little weight. Cf. Colenso 1868: 343; Wilson 1891: 66; and, on Stone Age man, Wilson 1891: 31 and Brinton 1896: 175.

91. In particular, Hamelin 1907: 76.

the revolution of supposing that there were weighty physical and technical advantages to mankind in permitting the left hand at least to reach its full development. The distinction of good and evil, which for long was solidary with the antithesis of right and left, will not vanish from our conscience the moment the left hand makes a more effective contribution to human labour and is able, on occasion, to take the place of the right. If the constraint of a mystical ideal has for centuries been able to make man a unilateral being, physiologically mutilated, a liberated and foresighted community will strive to develop better the energies dormant in our left side and in our right cerebral hemisphere, and to assure by an appropriate training a more harmonious development of the organism.

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