

1 Why now!

First the bad news... The last few years have been the hottest on record. 2016 and 2017 were nearly one-degree Centigrade warmer than pre-industrial levels. Average global sea level has risen about 3 inches over the same period. Carbon dioxide levels have increased from about 350 ppm in 1987, the year of the UN report that defined sustainable development, to over 400 ppm today (Jones, 2017). It continues to grow at even faster rates. The 2017 hurricane season in the Western hemisphere was the most destructive in history. Tropical storm Harvey dropped 51 inches of rain, breaking the previous record for North America. Polar bears are endangered as their ice-flow habitat melts. The list is long and globally widespread.

According to a widely cited report (Steffen et al., 2018), three of the nine critical global risk boundaries are already exceeded: flows of nitrogen and phosphorus from human activities and genetic diversity. Changes in the land surface and climate are in the zone of uncertainty. Basically, the report argues we are playing with fire because we do not know what the consequences of these changes will be, other than they are certain to upset the globe ecosystem and the human societies it supports.

Socially, humans are not doing well either. In the US, inequality is growing even as the economy keeps growing. The gap between poor and the rest of the US population, according to Robert Putnam (2015), is widening to such an extent that the likelihood that the very poor can move up and out of their circumstances is small and falling with time. The widening gap is not just economic, but includes many facets of everyday life, including important social factors, like: school sports, obesity, maternal employment, single parenthood, financial stress, college graduation, church attendance, and friendship networks. In an earlier book, Putnam (2000) chronicled the disappearance of activities, like bowling leagues, which connected people, resulting in the loss of what he termed social capital—a measure of the stability and health of the society. His finding is all the more significant with respect to the famous 1835 work, *Democracy in America*, in which the author, Tocqueville (2003), claimed that the key to the strength of the new republic was the prevalence of just such community groups. The dialogic process on which democracy relies is badly

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broken. The new digital media confuse truth with nonsense. The time is, indeed, out of joint.

The 2016 Presidential election in the US exposed deep fault lines in the society. A recent book by Patrick Deneen (2018), *Why Liberalism Failed*, argues that our basic political philosophy, liberalism, which springs from the Enlightenment thinkers and earlier sources, is systemically flawed and is not so slowly collapsing under its own weight. I find his work is not merely a critique of liberalism, but is essentially a deeper critique of modernity, itself. He arrives at the same set of constitutive beliefs I have identified in my past work as the root causes of the present failures. The first of two key beliefs is the mechanistic model of the world and the emphasis on its parts, rather than its whole organic context. The second is related, describing human beings as autonomous, separated, and self-interested; modern individuals are simply parts of the system, separate from each other and the world. His work, I believe, adds urgency to the continuing critique and reconstruction in this book.

Unfortunately, there is not much good news to counterbalance the bad. Sustainability programs in academia and industry have increased. Many companies have a CSO, Chief “Sustainability” Officer, and many more business schools offer “sustainability” minors. I use scare quotes to indicate that these developments have not changed much: profit still rules the roost, and trends in technology are themselves contributing to the commoditization of people. Robots, for example, have both positive and negative impact on employment and on the economy as a whole. The wealthier countries are outstripping the rest of the world in progress toward meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but their gains are exerting large negative spillover effects, making it more difficult for the others to achieve their goals (Sachs et al., 2017).

Some sixty years ago, Erich Fromm applied his psychoanalytic skills to the whole of modern Western society and found that it came up short in supporting the existential needs of human beings. In his book, *The Sane Society*, he argued that modern societies, especially the US, were exhibiting symptoms of insanity (Fromm, 1955). Using the language of psychology, he concluded that the present culture is highly pathological in terms of providing a proper home for human beings. I have extended his argument to all forms of life.

Fromm claims that what has become normal behavior in modern societies is in fact pathological when contrasted to his notion of “human needs,” which concept is close to what I call flourishing—the attainment of the full potential of living creatures. He notes “if he (*sic*) lives under conditions which are contrary to his nature, and to the basic requirements for human growth and sanity, he cannot help reacting; he must either deteriorate or perish, or bring about conditions which are more in accordance with his need” (Fromm, 1955: 19). Iain McGilchrist, in discussing the divided brain model that I will later elaborate, argues that modernity is driven by an unbalance of the two brain hemispheres and exhibits similar pathologies (McGilchrist, 2012).¹ Under the excessive influence of the left-brain, human beings have become separated

from one another and from the natural world, risking to pull down the wonders of civilization that were constructed when the two sides were more naturally balanced.

We always eventually become blind to cultural pathologies because normality is defined by an insidious tautology, that is, by referring to what is currently culturally accepted, whether healthy or not. I have argued and continue to claim that the underlying (modern) social paradigm is the cause of the observed pathologies. Like Fromm, I believe that the persistent problems of individuals and collectivities of individuals can be traced to the stories—the beliefs and associated norms—used to construct everyday behaviors. Change the story at its roots and the behaviors will change. In this and others of his works, Fromm set out to examine the role that society (culture) plays on the mental state of individuals, looking particularly at “recurrent *conflicts between human nature and society*—and the consequences, particularly as far as modern society is concerned” (Fromm, 1955: 21) (emphasis in the original).

I remain convinced that flourishing should be taken as the primary goal or vision of humanity around the globe. This book adds grounds to the arguments I have made previously. Other grand social visions have failed badly and our vision of continuing progress is sputtering. The absence of flourishing and the opposing presence of so many failures can be traced to the consequences of building societal superstructures on faulty beliefs. The world we inhabit is shaped by workings of both the “laws” of nature and by the network of rules that constitute human institutions. We can’t do anything about the facts we use about the former and their worldly manifestations; they have been at work for billions of years. These facts followed the creation of the universe in the Big Bang, according to the most accepted scientific theories today.

We humans are here, however, and the world is not the same as it would be in our absence. We have intervened and interfered with the workings of the natural world as we have become civilized during the evolution of our species. Our tools and technology reshape the natural world in ways that are guided by the activities of human cultures. The human species, *Homo sapiens*, roamed the Earth long before it developed language and lived in coordinated cultures. By culture, I mean persistent patterns of rule-driven behavior, coordinated by language. Once language evolved beyond a rudimentary capturing of facts about the world, humans acquired a capability for design: the creation of new material and social forms. Early humans had some inherent ability to create purposeful objects intentionally, which capacity became greatly amplified with the development of language.

As they evolved, *H. sapiens* developed language-symbolic representation of worldly phenomena, a development that expanded intentional action and social coordination. About 35,000 years ago, in a period known to anthropologists and archaeologists as the “Great Leap Forward,” human cultures boomed. Jared Diamond, a noted author, writes, “Anatomically modern people appeared in Europe and, suddenly, so did sculpture, musical instruments, lamps, trade, and

innovation ... It was then but a short further step to those monuments of civilization that distinguish us from all other animals” (Diamond, 2008: 15).

All these “monuments to civilization” are constructed on a myriad of beliefs about the world. Beliefs is the name given to the structure of facts about the world as they are represented in our brains and mental structures. We do not use facts directly in the cognitive processes underlying our actions; we use beliefs about them. For example, I may believe your upset-appearing actions are a response to something I did when you were simply reacting to a stubbed toe. In one way or another, beliefs often depart from the facts themselves. We cannot do anything about this; it is simply a fact about being human, but it is critical to remain aware of this difference.

If either the facts or our beliefs about them are wrong, our intentions will not be fully met. The real world always ultimately wins. As Keynes famously wrote, “In the long-run, we are all dead.” If we build our civilized worlds on the backs of erroneous facts or beliefs, cracks are going to appear sooner or later; some are certainly apparent today. In my work and that of many others, these cracks are called unintended consequences and, recently, big ones have been collected under the name of unsustainability. I have argued and continue to argue that modern societies are trying to fill the cracks with the wrong stuff. Our fixes now virtually always come from the same set of beliefs about the world that have created them. So supposedly said Albert Einstein “The world we created today as a result of our thinking thus far has problems which cannot be solved by thinking the way we thought when we created them.”

We have looked largely to technology as the answer to the growing threats to the Earth. Increasing eco-efficiency (more value with less impact) will allow continued growth. And, related to this, growth is always taken to be the right answer to everything that fails to meet expectations. That path will never take us to the desired destination: a flourishing planet. My past work has argued that our concerns can be traced to the beliefs that constitute modern cultures and their institutions. Little will happen to change the trajectory we are on until these are changed to better reflect reality, but even that is not enough. Our failures to realize our visions come from a lack of understanding of and focus on ourselves, *Homo sapiens*. Fortunately, I have the advantage of access to extensive new knowledge about the human brain that allows me to take that inquiry to a new level.

My own experience adds urgency. I spent eight years at MIT in pursuit of my Chemical Engineering degrees (B.S. and Sc.D.) With the assistance of a few compliant advisors, I managed to exchange most of my Humanities requirements for more science. I left as a very competent engineer. Gradually as my work took me out of the laboratory into management and policy concerns, I started to recognize how poorly I was prepared to deal with them. At some point I began a self-generated program to fill in what I found were vast and critical gaps. It is now almost seventy years since I graduated, and I think I have done a pretty good job, but I wish I had had a much earlier start. I am very

concerned that my experience is being exacerbated by the demands of an increasingly technological world.

It is one of the great wonders of human civilization that we create lasting order in the world simply by opening our mouths and making sentences come out. We will see that a certain kind of sentence creates the rules constituting and governing all the cultural structures (institutions) of civilization. If we string all those sentences together, we will have, in essence, written the story behind life today. We can change the story by adding new rules and replacing old facts with new ones. Modern civilization is bogged down. It is time to rewrite the story.

Why this book?

This book follows my two earlier books and other writings in pursuing answers to two important questions (Ehrenfeld, 2008; Ehrenfeld and Hoffman, 2013).

- 1 Is there an intrinsic purpose to all life, and, if so, is human life different from other forms?
- 2 How are we (as a species) doing to realize our purpose, and if we are not doing so well, how can we do better?

Modern thinkers have answered the second part of the first question, but have neglected the first part for life other than human beings. In our case, they have focused on how we should live, inventing the idea of “good” as a criterion for choice among different possibilities. The “why” aspect of the question has most frequently been shunted off to theologians who seek its answer in the workings of some supernatural god. Others attribute life to some miracle—recognizable, but inexplicable. I am in the latter camp. Life did just happen. We now recognize life as an instance of emergence, the appearance of order in an otherwise chaotic (complex) system. Order can be defined as the appearance of stable patterns in space or time or both. The temporal aspect is critical for life because, if the particular order that creates life reverts to chaos, life vanishes. Life is associated with action. Living entities act in various way. They take from and egest materials into the surrounding milieu; they move; they utter sounds. That is just about all they do, but we humans distinguish among these actions according to the functions we ascribe to them in the context of living.

To the extent that we can and have given names to what we observe, the answer to the first part of question one is yes: living does have an intrinsic purpose, and that purpose is to continue to live. Notice I am talking about the process of living, that is, acting from moment to moment; that is all that we can ever observe without cutting into our bodies. Loyal Rue, a philosopher whom I have found to be exceedingly helpful in examining the first question, called this purpose, viability (Rue, 2011). The purpose of life is to keep on living, once the molecules that constitute all living bodies create the magical structures from which life emerges.

Most life forms, which have existed since the first living entity emerged from the primordial muck, have no clue about their purpose, even if such a purpose exists. They possess no way of stepping out of the process of life itself, a distancing that is essential in being able to observe the process from moment to moment, and to compare one of those moments to the next. Time with a past, present, and future, as human beings know it, does not exist for them. They simply are.

This idea that life is all about living is not restricted to philosophers. The biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Maturana and Varela, 1980), gave it another name, autopoiesis—a fancy name for self-reproduction.² If viability or autopoiesis is the name for the basic purpose of living, how might we describe an organism that is successfully acting out that purpose? By success, I mean continuing to reproduce itself from the moment of birth to death. If enough individual living beings of a species can do this, the species, as a whole, will be preserved because there will be enough survivors to offset the inevitable losses due to whatever terminates life. Both the genes and the world are involved in determining success or failure.

We can observe such successes or failures or imply them from historical evidence. It is fair to say that we can also use the words “good” and “bad” to describe the conditions associated with success and failure, respectively. A successful life is one where the environment is “good” for it; conversely, organisms fail when they become overwhelmed by situations that are bad for them, like lurking predators, illness, lack of food, intolerable environmental conditions, and so on. Good conditions are species-specific and may change as the world changes. The extinction of species comes as the “bads” start to outweigh the “goods,” and reproductive success dwindles until no one is left. The generation of new species follows the opposite trajectory. Genetic variations produce individuals that are better able to survive.

Rather than use the language of good and bad to describe successful existence of species other than humans, we usually refer to them as flourishing or not. Flourishing has a direct connection with the idea of good. The word refers to extended periods, not to any single moment. A species flourishes when it lasts through many generations. All individual living organisms can be said to flourish when they express their genetic potential over their lifetimes. Human flourishing has an added dimension, arising from our species’ ability to exist in a meaningful way. We exhibit an existential potential as well as the universal biological one. So, the answer to the second part of question one is also “yes”; human life is different from other species.

The difference arises because humans possess some unique features, particularly consciousness and language, both of which contribute to our ability to tell meaningful stories about the world. The stories explain what we experience, express who we are, communicate with others, and, importantly, underpin the institutions and technological tools that form the cultures that become our homes on the Planet. Human cultures have evolved along with our biological makeup although at a far more rapid pace in recent times. Our flourishing rests

on how well we are doing in both of these domains: biological life and cultural existence.

This brief discussion, to be expanded below, lays out my basic argument why flourishing is the basic indicator for answering the second question: how are we doing? You should know my answer, “Not so good!” That same answer applies both to our species, and also to the rest of the Earth, living and inanimate. As I have already noted, I make this claim, but will not devote much space to providing evidence to back it up because so much is already available from scholarly sources, public media, and our own individual observations. This shortcut allows me to go directly to the second part of question two, “How can we do better?”

For me, part of that question can be answered simply, “Start using flourishing as the primary indicator of successful human existence.” We will do better in moving toward our goals if we start using a more meaningful indicator than those in play today, like GDP. That is not nearly enough, however; it is critical that we understand why we have missed the mark of continued progress, the goal of the Enlightenment thinkers on whose ideas our modern culture is grounded. Unless we have the “creation” story right, it is very unlikely we can tell a more elaborate story as the basis of a flourishing world.

One side of human flourishing is tied to our desire to find meaning in our actions. One route to meaning follows philosophy, particularly the phenomenologists and existentialists. This is the reason their work is sprinkled throughout the book. Meaning leads to purpose, intention, and direction—descriptions of action unique to human beings. This route got me into the very fraught area of “being,” itself. Humans alone ask questions about their existence; they are concerned (or care) about and act within the world that surrounds them.

Meaning comes from the processes by which our brain converts the stream of signals bombarding our senses to create our perceptions of the world—our reality. The “nature” of our perceptual reality is never an exact replica of the “nature” out there, contrary to Descartes. Our existential success depends on the fit between our inner worlds and the real outside one. For centuries we have followed Descartes’ notion of mind in one form or another. Now we are learning that the brain can create two distinct depictions of the world, resulting in dichotomous patterns in individual behaviors and also in human cultures.

The observation that many social disagreements are dichotomous is not the result of some logical parsimony, but is rooted in the way the human brain works, according to Iain McGilchrist (2012). Building on earlier bilateral models of the brain, McGilchrist claims that the left- and the right-brain hemispheres operate differently, each providing a distinctive view of the outside, real world to the cognitive system that serves as the control system for our bodies.

My thesis is that for us as human beings there are two fundamentally opposed realities, two different modes of experience; that each is of

ultimate importance in bringing about the recognisably human world; and that their difference is rooted in the bihemispheric structure of the brain. It follows that the hemispheres need to co-operate, but I believe they are in fact involved in a sort of power struggle, and that this explains many aspects of contemporary Western culture.

(McGilchrist, 2012: 3)

I will be using his work throughout the book because I find it both explains and also ties together the story of flourishing I have been developing for a decade or so. McGilchrist makes it clear that, although we always operate in a diminished understanding of the real world, the right brain hemisphere does a better job of capturing its organic whole. Its world is dynamic, holistic, concrete, and ready to be explored. The left-brain hemisphere portrays a world that is static, mechanistic, composed of abstractions, and ready to be controlled. Our individual responses to the real outside world depend on which hemisphere is in charge. Further and importantly, human cultures reflect the balance between the two hemispheres. That balance has changed over human history to become strongly dominated by the left-brain, resulting in what might be called the modern mind existing in a modern culture. McGilchrist connects this shift to the same set of negative aspects of modern life today I find threatening, even though I have gotten to this place by a rather different path.

The divided brain model of McGilchrist is remarkable in its ability to dissolve a number of very old arguments in philosophy. The contradictions that phenomenologists like Heidegger found in the great Greek philosophers' models about the world largely disappear if one associates them with one or the other of the brain hemispheres. They are not contradictory at all; they are merely thinking about the world as presented by the different sides of the brain. McGilchrist attributes the mechanistic, individualistic, abstract nature of modernity to the dominance of the left-brain.

The critical feature of this divided model of the brain is that flourishing primarily involves the right-brain. The general absence of flourishing from our modern world reflects the dominance of the left. *Homo economicus*, the modern human being, lives in the left-brain world; *Homo curitans*, my name for the authentic, caring human being that brings forth and can exhibit flourishing, is a creature of the right. The challenge ahead is to return the balance of the hemispheres so that authenticity returns and the ways that we apprehend the world bring forth its full, contextual richness as the arena in which we act out our individual and collective lives.

As a move in that direction, this book, itself, leans toward the right-brain. It is pragmatic, attempting to place familiar, but abstract, concepts back into the context of the real living world out there. Whatever truths are to be found in this work will show up only as the concepts and prescriptions herein are put into action. I still draw on the work of a number of philosophers because I find their ideas offer guidance, but this book is not a philosophical exercise. In retrospect, I notice that the philosophical sources I use mostly come from the

domains of pragmatism, phenomenology, and existentialism—all devoted to understanding the nature of the world as it really is, undistorted by the workings of our senses and brains. Such a holistic view arises in the right-brain as opposed to the left-brain source of much of the rest of philosophy and normal science that work by finding abstract truths after lifting things, including life forms, from their worldly context. I believe that what I offer here is pragmatically right and sufficient to serve as the basis for action, but I cannot be certain until the ideas are applied and the results compared to the intentions of action.

About the structure of the book

More specifically, my purpose in writing this book is to weave a new story of modernity along four primary threads:

- 1 To deepen the critique, made in my previous work, of modern cultures, based on a model of the brain that offers an understanding of why we have become increasingly disconnected from the world with all the untoward consequences that have become visible;
- 2 To continue and deepen my argument that flourishing should be taken as the primary (normative) quality for human societies to strive for, based on an expanded base of compelling evidence from biology, cognitive science, and philosophy;
- 3 To point to an alternative set of foundational beliefs that may change the way we think and act, and, consequently, bring forth the possibility of flourishing in the course of ordinary cultural life; and
- 4 To lay out a framework, based on the bihemispheric brain model, for designing new material and institutional structures that can generate normal behaviors such that flourishing can emerge.

The focus of the book is on the Western world, and, particularly, the US. What is written here can be taken as a warning to other countries that are trying to emulate or being subjected to the existing cultural structure of modernity.

I will continue to argue that two historic facts are at the heart of the failure to produce flourishing are: the depictions of how the natural world and the human species work. Now I believe I have a more coherent and convincing argument for my claims. And that is where I am going with the rest of the book. I will be using new terms, chosen because they appear, at least to me, to be less confusing and easier to match with everyday vernacular. I will be drawing from my previous sources, but, additionally, lean on the work of John Searle, the American philosopher of mind and language, and the findings of neuroscience, particularly the work of Iain McGilchrist.

The reader will find glimmerings from both my previous two books. This is intentional; both were concerned with acknowledging the decay occurring in both the natural and social world. The major difference is that I have left

sustainability behind (see Appendix). After working with it for several decades, I realized that the word is semantically unfit to set a context for such efforts. I believe that “sustainability,” even given a positive spin, has arisen today as a metaphor to deal with a deep malaise about life in general, and a sense that something is missing from modern life. Sustainability is an empty word, devoid of meaning without a reference to something to sustain. The implicit reference of sustainability is growth, a remnant of the Brundtland report and its definition of sustainable development, but growth is, itself, a big part of the problem.³ Global warming is, by far, the environmental issue of highest public concern, and is generally accepted as arising from aggregate economic activity. The increase in its causal factors is “essentially the product of humankind’s addiction to GDP growth” (Lawn, 2016: 3). [Economic] growth has become transformed from a means to attain some form of human perfection to become the primary end of modern political economies. This shift alone is reason enough to call for a new vision to drive our individual and collective aspirations, hence one of the reasons to call on flourishing.

Unsustainability arises from the fundamental structure of our culture, based on our most basic beliefs about reality. Ironically, these very beliefs are the primary source of our problems and need to be *supplanted*, *not sustained*. What is needed is just the opposite—to find new beliefs that will enable human beings to ground a new worldview. Then and only then will we be able to build the foundation to sustain flourishing. The new beliefs I propose will change our views of how the world and the human beings within it work. Ironically, none of these beliefs is new; they have been hanging around, some even for millennia, but have been pushed aside by the thrust of modernity.

My prior emphasis on business is gone, replaced by a broader examination of the opportunities and venues for change. I still shy away from writing a conventional how-to book, because I remain skeptical of abstract, generalized expertise as the place to seek solutions to our most serious and persistent problems. This book provides only a skeleton of implementing ideas. Many others will have to put the flesh on.

There are a few structural issues with the book that I cannot solve. It is important that I begin with a discussion of flourishing. I see no point to what I write about, if you do not, eventually, accept my claim that flourishing should be the primary normative visionary goal of human activity. To do that, I find it works best if the first chapter after this introduction tells you what I think flourishing is and how my focus on it has arisen. Flourishing rests on the model of human existence and cognition I will present, but subsequently. Then I want to better substantiate my claims about why the present world is broken and needs fixing.

Notes

- 1 I recommend McGilchrist’s book to all who find my work relevant to their lives, but with the warning that it is very challenging in content and style.

- 2 The following is a definition from this source. “An autopoietic machine is a machine organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network” (Maturana and Varela, 1980: 78).
- 3 Sustainable development is defined as: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987: 43).

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