

Book review of *The Right Way to Flourish: Reconnecting to the Real World*, by John Ehrenfeld

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Those who have been engaged in Industrial Ecology for a while recognize John Ehrenfeld to be an exceptional leader and intellectual powerhouse within the field. After retiring from MIT's Technology, Business and Environment Program, Ehrenfeld was the founding director of the International Society of Industrial Ecology. His fingerprints are all over the Society—and he was one of the principal architects of its success. Ehrenfeld's intellectual contributions are just as impressive, with writings on topics such as industrial symbiosis, complex systems, the roots of sustainability and industrial ecology, and more recently, his work on flourishing.

I am humbled and slightly overawed by the opportunity to review *The Right Way to Flourish* (Ehrenfeld, 2019). I was fortunate to receive Ehrenfeld's guidance when organizing the Society's 2007 conference in Toronto (along with Shi Lei and Helga Weisz). He helped me to understand the breadth of the field and the changes it was going through at that time, embracing sustainable consumption. He opened my eyes to the untapped potential of complexity theory, which partially influenced my work on the evolution of cities (Kennedy, 2011). When he talks, I listen.

Ehrenfeld argues with his latest book that in order to solve the wicked, complex environmental and social challenges of the modern world we need more—a lot more—right-brained people. That is, broad-minded, organic thinkers who are vigilant and caring. Of course, summary does not do the book justice. It is far deeper than that. Ehrenfeld provides a rich synthesis of ideas from neuro-science, philosophy, psychology, and sociology—with a good dose of spirituality—in arriving at his prognosis. The route to flourishing he offers, moreover, involves no less than a substantial rebalancing of western, Cartesian, scientific thought.

1 | CONTENT

Early in the book, Ehrenfeld reviews and updates his philosophy of "flourishing" a term expressing biological and existential processes through which humans reach an exalted form of well-being. Flourishing, he argues, is an emergent property. It cannot be quantified, but instead, it is like joy or aliveness and so is not amenable to measurement through metrics such as Gross National Happiness. Flourishing has both personal and social dimensions; it involves both "personal wholeness" and "social coherence," building on the philosophy of Loyal Rue. Earlier connections made between flourishing and sustainability are severed, because without context, sustainability is an empty word. Elsewhere in the book he argues that "Sustainability has become a euphemism for business-as-usual..." (p. 160).

Ehrenfeld then introduces key ideas from the work of neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist (2012). McGilchrist's theory is that human behavior depends upon which of the two brain hemispheres is dominating in decision-making. The left brain is for narrow, focused work, while the right-brain is used for more flexible, empathetic, exploratory, or vigilant activities. Critically, the left hemisphere sees the world in a mechanistic way, aligned with reductionist-type science; the right hemisphere captures the full, richly contextual, organic view of the world. Ehrenfeld shows consistency between McGilchrist's model of the brain and related ideas in psychology and philosophy, such as those of Eric Fromm and John Searle. He also begins to develop his central argument that left-brain ways of being are too dominant today. Instead, "To bring flourishing forth, the modern culture must be restructured to bring the hemispheres back into balance" (Ehrenfeld, p. 50).

In the chapter intriguingly titled "Two non-facts that run our modern world," Ehrenfeld distinguishes between brutal facts, such as properties of the material world; and institutional facts, which are fallible, but gain their power from social or institutional structures. The latter includes scientific theories. His two "non-facts" derive from a mismatch between these two: the inability of Cartesian or mechanical models to explain emergent phenomena of the natural world; and the overemphasis of self-interest in Enlightenment-based theories of human nature. He rejects neo-classical economics, which resonated with me: most of my current work is on developing a biophysical alternative.

Ehrenfeld lays out the processes through which humanity can begin to rebalance left-brain dominance through three major elements: a) changing individual behavior; b) living with complexity; and c) changing institutional structure. Strategies for individuals include critical thinking, mindfulness training, reflection, and mood control, as well as art, music, and poetry. Ultimately, the hope is to cultivate *Homo curitans*: people who “care,” in the action-based sense of “looking after” and “providing for the needs of.” He also describes barriers posed by modern technology—such as cell phones.

Industrial ecologists have much to learn from the chapter entitled “Navigating the mazes of complexity.” Ehrenfeld recounts some of the challenges of complex systems, for which the interrelationships among parts are not analytically tractable; and wicked problems, which inherently involve value judgements. His innovative approach for working with complexity requires recognition of our inability to fully understand or control the world. The next step is to apply the practice of pragmatism, which requires careful observation by a community of competent, caring, and systematic inquirers who find wisdom before action. The other key elements are patience, a rebuilding of societal institutions, and an ability to understand humans in the context of the natural world.

Ehrenfeld’s final chapter is a splendid climax, in which he lays out approaches for building flourishing institutions. As an academic, I was drawn to his proposed curriculum for a college degree in flourishing. He also offers steps for business and government institutions to take. At the end, there is an appropriate kick in the teeth for STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) education, of which, ironically, he (and I) are products.

2 | REFLECTIONS

I worried as I read that Ehrenfeld’s right-brain shift might preclude even slightly analytical systems-oriented fields such as ecology, which Eugene Odum considered “one of the few academic disciplines dedicated to holism” (Odum, 1977, p.1291). Not to worry. At stake for Ehrenfeld is the imbalance between left- and right-brain modes of being. In the end, he embraces ecology and certain forms of systems thinking within the practice of pragmatism.

Use of metaphor is always worth pausing over. In *Industrial Ecology* we have learned that sometimes, when the metaphor is abandoned, something real remains. Industrial, societal, and urban metabolism: these are all real phenomena, with associated flows of energy and materials. McGilchrist’s theory of the divided brain, Ehrenfeld notes, is metaphorically like our bodies having two individuals inside them (p. 43). But if we really do have asymmetric brains, each half directing different functions, and if we can learn to develop the right-brain better, or simply use it more, then perhaps the metaphor is unnecessary.

On the topic of the two hemispheres, Ehrenfeld introduces a fabulous paradox. McGilchrist’s model is a scientific theory, so it belongs to the left-brain, but it implicates the importance of the right-brain for flourishing. Ehrenfeld explains “The paradox can be resolved by taking the divided-brain model as a pragmatic concept rather than a scientific concept.”

An important final comment: while the book covers a wide range of advanced topics, it is very readable. It is short and concise, skillfully written, and has a clear, logical structure. I would end by giving the book “five stars,” but that might be a bit too left-brain. Better to say, perhaps, it provides evidence that Ehrenfeld at least is surely flourishing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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