

# The Great Simplification

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Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

I would like to warmly welcome my next guest, Iain McGilchrist. Iain is a psychiatrist, a neuroscience researcher, an author, a philosopher, a literary scholar. He's an associate, a fellow of the Green Templeton College, Oxford, a fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a consultant emeritus of the Bethlem and Maudsley Hospital in London. Professor McGilchrist came into prominence with the publication of his tome, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, which is how I came to be exposed to his work. And then 14 years later, his most recent book titled *The Matter With Things: our Brains, our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*. This was one of those conversations that was both profound, wise and intimate.

(00:01:39):

I had never met or spoken with Iain before the camera was turned on, and I learned continually during this podcast, and I immediately felt a kinship with this man who deeply cares about the state of the world and has spent a lifetime researching what I think is the most important aspect of our situation, which is the human brain and our disconnect from the types of experience and perspectives of our ancestors. I hope you enjoy this episode as much as I did. Please welcome Dr. Iain McGilchrist. Dr. Iain McGilchrist, good to meet you sir.

Iain McGilchrist (00:02:33):

Very good to be with you, Nate. Thank you for asking me along.

Nate Hagens (00:02:38):

I've been making it a habit when I say hello to people in other countries that I greet them in their language. But since you're in Scotland, I didn't know if I should just start swearing or how to greet someone in Scottish.

Iain McGilchrist (00:02:55):

Any kind of suitable animal noise that suggests some appreciation, will do.

Nate Hagens (00:03:03):

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So, let me bring you up to speed here. Some things you might not know. 20 years ago I started my PhD. I left Wall Street because I could see how the pieces were starting to connect and that humans were having a real problem with climate change, the environment, resources, et cetera. And I started my PhD with a British psychiatrist on my advisory committee by the name of Dr. Peter Whybrow and we were going to look at why we don't so much face an environmental problem or a resource problem, but a mismatch of the human brain with our current situation. And then I ended up diving into energy and I left that aside, but reading your books, and to be honest, I've had them for two months and I've not made my way through them. I called Daniel Schmachtenberger and said, I'm interviewing Iain McGilchrist next week.

(00:04:03):

Could you leave me some pointers? He left me a 19 minute Voxer that I would need a librarian to translate. But it seems that all along you have been talking about the same thing, which is that our brains are driving much of what's going on. So I don't want to rehash what you've done on lots of other excellent podcasts and videos. And you sent me that animated video, which I think is great. I want to apply it to this superorganism environmental dynamic. But for those people who are not familiar with your work, could you give kind of an elevator pitch, but a long-ish one on the core points in your two main books, *The Master and His Emissary*, and *The Matter With Things*, if you would.

Iain McGilchrist (00:04:57):

Yes, I can do that. I think the first thing that I would point out is I don't believe that the brain is driving these things in some sort of way. I believe that there are many causes of the crisis that we're in now, some of them economic, some of them political, some of them sociological, and it has many aspects. So I'm not saying it's the brain that causes the crisis we're in, but the brain has become hijacked in a way by the way we are thinking now, and that that's important for us to realize. So in the books, essentially they start from a few interesting questions, which puzzled me a lot and were not talked about in my medical training. Why is the brain divided at all? If it's this supercomputer, why waste computing power by dividing it into two chunks in this way? I don't believe it is a computer by the way.

(00:05:56):

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I can tell you half a dozen reasons why it's not like a computer. But nonetheless, why is it divided? Why is it asymmetrical and why for most of the history of the brain has there been no band of fibers connecting them? It was a mammalian invention, the corpus callosum, it's called a body of fibers at the base of the brain that connects the two hemispheres, but the divided brain goes back millions of years, hundreds of millions of years, and the asymmetry of the brain goes back to the very earliest neural networks. Why? And the answer to this is simple in a way, at least I think, and nobody's suggested anything that goes near it in explaining why we have this arrangement, and nobody suggested I'm wrong to say this, it stems from a Darwinian problem of survival. How do you pay narrow attention to something that you need to manipulate, to something you need to pick up?

(00:06:58):

If you're a bird, get that seed quickly. If you're a predator to catch your prey, if you want to pick up sticks or fashion tools, you've got to have this very manipulative cast of mind in which you're going to target that, whatever it is that is important to you in detail. And that requires a very focused narrow beam attention. If that's the only kind of attention you pay, then you will end up being someone else's lunch while you're getting your own, because you need to be on the lookout for predators. You need to be on the lookout for your conspecifics, for your mate, for your offspring that also need to be protected and fed. So the only way in which you can pay these two kinds of attention at once is to have two neuronal masses, each capable of disposing a kind of attention to the world, one narrow targeted piecemeal, the other uncommitted, broad, sustained and vigilant. Now, that may not sound like a big deal, but the fact that there's a different way of attending changes everything because how you attend governs what you find. And so effectively these two ways of attending to the world build completely different images, takes, whatever you like to call them, of the world in our minds. I hesitate over image because it makes it sound, it's just visual, but I mean in every modality. And what are those differences? Well, there are about a dozen of them that are isolable, but let me just say this. In the left hemisphere, the world seems to be made up of little bits that have no context, no meaning, they're isolated, atomistic. And if they have any meaning at all, we put them together in some way for some purpose of our own. They're abstracted from their embodied nature, from their

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physical context, relatively devoid of any kind of meaning, including emotional or spiritual meaning.

(00:09:06):

And what you have there is pretty much an inanimate and mechanical world, a dead world. The right hemisphere on the other hand, sees the broad picture and it sees that everything is ultimately connected with everything else, that unlike these fixed frames of the left hemisphere, everything can be seen to be in constant movement. Nothing ever stops moving in the entire universe. It sees that everything is what it is, only in the context that it's in. So once you've isolated it, you've lost most of its meaning. It sees that, for example, the animals and the people that we see around us are embodied, and that's a very important part of their nature. It sees the inner life, it sees what is implicit, whereas the left hemisphere sees only really explicit. As a result, the left hemisphere doesn't understand things like tone of voice, facial expressions, bodily gestures, puns, metaphors, myths, narratives, rights, rituals, anything that isn't just the kind of thing you could teach a machine by putting in a word box and a kind of syntax box, it doesn't really get.

(00:10:24):

And it's also super confident that it's right, in fact, because it knows so very little, it thinks, it knows everything. There's something in psychology, I'm sure you know, called the Dunning-Kruger effect, which dictates that the less you know, the more you think you know and the right hemisphere, however, sees a great deal and has arranged things, so that it can farm out the mere procedural work to the left hemisphere so that it doesn't get distracted from its job of seeing the overall picture. So these two work very well in harmony. As long as the left hemisphere observes its role as an adjunct to the right hemisphere, it sees less, but it can do certain things very quickly in the way that a PC can. I mean, the PC doesn't know what you know, you put data in, it doesn't understand them, it spews stuff out, it doesn't understand it.

(00:11:15):

You do the understanding. The PC just does it quickly. And the left hemisphere is like, as I say, I resist the idea that the brain is a computer, but just for this purposes of this metaphor, the left hemisphere is like the personal PC of the right hemisphere that is the one that we can trust because it's more in touch with reality in every respect. And so I expound that to begin with in The Master and His Emissary, and I do it at greater

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length in the first part of *The Matter With Things*. In the second part of *The Master and His Emissary*, I say, how has this changed if it has changed over the course of Western civilization? Because I see that around us, we seem to be very much living in a world of the kind that the left hemisphere sees, unsophisticated, untempered by what the right hemisphere could teach us.

(00:12:12):

So has it always been like this? And my answer to that is no. Over the history of the West, there have been three points at which civilization seemed to embody the best of the two working together fruitfully. And I'd say these moments are around the sixth century BC in Ancient Greece, around the dot in Rome, and around the 14th, 15th century, the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe. And at those moments, we see something flourishing in the arts, in the sciences, everywhere because these hemispheres are feeding one another. But in every case, after a period of time, things seem to fossilize, they become more mechanical, more hierarchical, more stereotype, more bureaucratic, more legalistic. And the imaginative part that helps us see and understand the world we live in begins to erode. And the civilization collapses. It collapsed in Greece, it collapsed in Rome, and it's collapsing for us now, I believe.

(00:13:15):

In *The Matter With Things* I do a little bit more. I look more at the philosophical implications of this. So I look at the way what neurology can teach us about the hemispheres, what philosophy can teach us about the hemispheres and what physics can tell us about the world that we live in. And I find that these three paths lead from very different starting points to the same picture of the world, which is very close to the one the right hemisphere has of something that is never fixed and certain, that is always evolving, that is in process that is complex, beautiful, rich, interconnected, animate rather than the dead world of mechanistic reductionism. So that's it in a nutshell. There's a lot more to say, but you can ask me if you're interested.

Nate Hagens (00:14:05):

I am interested and I've got like 14 prepared questions for you, and I think I'm just going to scrap those and ask you whatever comes to my mind because I have a ton of questions. So the left brain puts the bits together and creates a narrative that suits us. So it uses the left brain in kind of an internal authority bias sort of way and

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dominates the narrative, which could explain why there's so many people that are cock sure that they understand the world and Trump is right or Biden is right, or climate change is a hoax or we're all going extinct, that it gives people overly self-confident because it helps themselves in their own fitness?

Iain McGilchrist (00:15:01):

I think the left hemisphere envisages only the sort of thing it can know, it knows how to put things together and make something. And so it decides that the world must be made like that from little bits. And in doing so, it completely misunderstands its nature and it produces that kind of cock sure certainty, which is surely the sign of a lack of wisdom. One of the signs of wisdom is that one feels less certain that one knows rather than more certain that one knows in general. So yeah, I do think that, yeah.

Nate Hagens (00:15:38):

Did you ever have a chance to watch, we were emailing a couple of months back, the latest episode with Daniel Schmachtenberger and I on artificial intelligence where we really, it was only a little bit on AI, it was mostly about how humans have had narrow boundary criteria, nation states' economic systems have out competed wide boundary, more wisdom types of systems. Did you ever listen to that and what do you think about? That intelligence versus wisdom is a little bit of a narrow boundary goal versus a wide boundary goal?

Iain McGilchrist (00:16:17):

I did listen to part of it, but I didn't listen to all of it. And I'm very interested in Daniel's work, and he and I are going to do a couple of things together. But what I'd say about that is that first of all, human beings are not just the squalid competitive apes that we are made out to be. We have many interesting traits. We are social animals. We know how to sacrifice for another. And indeed the history of evolution is as much a history of cooperation as it is of competition. Competition's very important of course, but the cooperation has been neglected, and we do know how to cooperate. And when we're working well, both the hemispheres cooperate with one another and we cooperate with one another. So I mean, the history of the West is the one that I know best.

(00:17:10):

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I haven't attempted to write about the history of the East, though I suspect it will tell a different story until very recently when it seems to have become occidentalized in the most lamentable way, taking all our worst sins upon it. But anyway, yeah, I mean I think that is right. Wisdom is always going to be relatively rare and involves a lot of things. It involves the putting together of a life well lived and the experience that comes from that with an understanding of history, a sense of the spiritual and an ability to aggregate information. But at the moment, I'd say that information is triumphing over a true understanding and an understanding is what intelligence requires and means. So that much of the time we are amassing information and we kind of know in a technical way certain things we probably know more in that sense than humanity has ever known.

(00:18:17):

But we're also, in my view, less wise than humanity has ever been, this fact that we can know things and can do things has gone to our heads and made us hubristic, vain and ridiculous because we think we can solve everything, but we don't understand a half of what we've got hold of here. So I think AI is a problem, yeah.

Nate Hagens (00:18:38):

So how does that map from an individual to a culture? Because as individuals, we have left hemispheres and right hemispheres, and we have a corpus callosum that divides them and is getting larger over time, implying that there's some narrative control going on, but our culture doesn't have a left or a right hemisphere. So is it just the proportion of the population that is kind of tilted in one direction that periodically, you said there were a couple historical cultures that flourished because they had more of a balanced... What's the difference between individuals, population and the whole culture with respect to this phenomenon?

Iain McGilchrist (00:19:23):

Yes, it's a reasonable question. Of course, I'm not suggesting that physically the brain has changed enormously since 2000 years ago. It will have changed a bit because it's always evolving, but it's not that I'm referring to. It's that we use the brain in different ways. We can choose to listen to one part of the brain more than another. And I think that what happens as a society becomes a powerful civilization, a number of things

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happen. One is that it overreaches itself either in terms of its territory or its military and economic power. And in doing that, it needs to be able to control or thinks it needs to be able to control an ever vaster panoply of elements in human life. And to do that, it needs to simplify, to roll out, as we say, a bureaucratic system and so forth. So as a civilization becomes too large and over reaches itself, it moves more and more to towards a kind of left hemisphere thinking that helps it with the map, the theory, the diagram of life rather than the actual business of life.

(00:20:42):

And I think the other thing that happens, well, there are many things that happen. I think there are about half a dozen that I refer to in the preface to *The Matter With Things*. Sorry, the preface to *The Master and His Emissary*, and take much further in *The Matter With Things*. But one is something that the great philosopher A.N. Whitehead said that "A civilization thrives until it overanalyzed itself." And I think what's happening in our world is we don't really live connected so much to nature. We don't live connected to a spiritual tradition. We don't live connected to our history and culture. Our art has become too intellectualized. It's become too conceptual, not powerful, visceral and metaphoric in its nature as most great art is. And so we've been cut loose and we're all kind of at a loss and when we try to talk to one another across these spaces, we tend to talk in very theoretical terms, so people talk about a theory of politics, a theory of economics, and a theory of how people behave and so on.

(00:21:52):

Usually this is inaccurate, over simple. And so it's that that gets us into this frame of mind because the left hemisphere's message is money for old root. It's incredibly simple. We are just apes that compete for territory, money and power. That's the left hemisphere's knowledge because, let me put it this way, the left hemisphere's wrizzled edge is to make us powerful, to help us grab things. It controls the right hand, which for most of us is the one which we do the grabbing and the manipulating, and it helps us maintain power. But all the rest of the understanding of everything else that humans are capable of, the life, the spirit, the life of morality, of beauty, of goodness, of truth, all these things are somehow left out of this picture and become somehow marginalized or trivialized as they have done, I believe in our culture at the moment.

(00:22:52):



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And so why I wrote *The Matter With Things* was because I could see that we all agree there is something that is the matter with things. Very few people think everything's going fine right now, but it's also a notice of the facts that we overvalue matter in the most simple sense. I actually say that materialists are not people who overvalue matter. They're people who undervalue matter because matter is a very extraordinary thing. Matter is wonderful, but this kind of simple idea of matter is what we tend to overestimate the power of, the consciousness and the spirit, the mind is somehow a secondary secretion of matter which it cannot be, and that we've made a world up out of things, which is how the left hemisphere puts things together. Whereas I believe the importance in everything lies in relationship, not in what we call the things themselves that are related.

Nate Hagens (00:23:56):

So many thoughts, Iain, let me go off on a tangent here. I would say that historically the animist religions would probably have a better balance between the left and the right hemispheres. And the story that I've put together with the energy hungry, emergent cultural superorganism kind of started with the agricultural revolution 10 to 12,000 years ago, which was in many ways a fall from grace because we were living close to limits, but we were living with the right brain appreciation of the relationships with ourselves, with our surroundings, with nature, with other species. Is it possible that as the population expanded and then exploded, that our world is so full of things and stories about the things and advertising about the things that the left brain has no choice but to intercede and take over? I'm just speculating. What do you think about all that?

Iain McGilchrist (00:25:20):

Well, I think it's very tempting for the left hemisphere to think that it's going to understand these things, but that is part of the problem. I think you are right about animistic cultures. I'm not saying that animism is the answer to philosophy, not in the least, but I think it's a way of understanding something that's very important, which is the relationship of life to the world at large, including things that are in our purview that we wouldn't normally call animate. In fact, if you suppress the left hemisphere, which you can do experimentally, people see things that we would call inanimate sometimes as animate. And if you do the opposite and suppress the right hemisphere,

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they begin to see even people and animals as machines or pieces of furniture. So I think animism is an expression of a kind of vision that we could learn from.

(00:26:25):

But I think subsequent philosophy has gone much further in that. And I don't know if we want to go there, but I hold a view called panentheism, which is that God is in everything and everything is in God. And I think that in fact, the great loss in our time is of any spiritual or moral compass, any sense of our groundedness in a cosmos that is beautiful, has a direction to it and has meaning in it. I mean, we are taught that we just paint these things on the walls of ourselves to cheer ourselves up, that we invent meaning and values and purpose. I don't believe this at all. In fact, the long book, *The Matter With Things* is demonstrating exactly how wrong that is, and that in fact, we don't invent them, but we discover them. We literally find them or fail to find them depending on who we are.

Nate Hagens (00:27:17):

Is it possible that 8 billion... Well, before I ask that you just said you can suppress the left hemisphere experimentally. Is that in a medical situation or are there some parlor tricks you can do at home because that might be a good thing if we all did those experiments.

Iain McGilchrist (00:27:36):

No. As they used to say in those films, don't attempt this at home.

Nate Hagens (00:27:42):

Okay.

Iain McGilchrist (00:27:46):

I'm talking effectively about something called transcranial magnetic stimulation, which is a process that will be done in a hospital setting, or at least, yes, in a clinical setting.

Nate Hagens (00:28:01):

Iain, let me tell you a story. Three years ago, I was chainsawing on my property here and I had to crawl under the horse fence to get to the tree and it's electrified, and the

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electrical fence hit me squarely on the top of my head, and it hurt so badly for five seconds. For the next five hours, I was in this zen state where I felt connected to everything. I didn't have a compulsion to check my phone. It was weird. And I just always wondered if that was a miniature version of what you're describing.

Iain McGilchrist (00:28:44):

Well, it's a wonderful story. Thank you. I wouldn't like to say really, but I mean, of course, just in case anybody's listening, who knows somebody or has ECT, it is done with an anesthetic now, and you are not aware of it, so it's all fine. But in any case, passing an electric current.

Nate Hagens (00:29:03):

Okay.

Iain McGilchrist (00:29:03):

But in any case, passing an electric current through the brain, surely it does make some changes. Yeah. Where were we? We were talking about, yeah, you can isolate one at a time but not to try it at home. Yeah. And you asked me that question probably for some reason.

Nate Hagens (00:29:20):

Is there a test that you could give people other than walking into a cocktail party and talking to someone for five minutes and realizing that they're pretty much left brain dominant? But is there a test, like a psychological test that can see where people are behaviorally on this spectrum, or is it not that refined?

Iain McGilchrist (00:29:43):

No. I mean, there are some terrible things on the internet that tell you whether you're left or right brain, but just forget that. Forget most of everything that's on the internet unless it comes from me on this topic because it's going to repeat the awful old canards about the two hemispheres. But no, there are proper neuropsychological instruments, as we call them, that can be administered, questionnaires, and can score people. But again, largely these things were generated before the huge body of work

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that I have done, and it's the 2,000 pages, or more, of these two books together, which really has completely changed the landscape on hemisphere difference.

(00:30:34):

Most of the things that people used to say are wrong. There are one or two things that are broadly right, so it is important. And you can tell, yes. I mean, especially if you're a psychiatrist, you can tell fairly quickly if somebody's autistic, and autism is a condition which has different manifestations. I think there are autisms rather than one simple autism. But the commonest form of autism is rather like trying to understand the world on the basis of your left hemisphere alone.

Nate Hagens (00:31:08):

Here's another question, and I'm going to run out of questions. I mean, I won't run out of questions. So, I've been involved in this systems ecology group for 20 years. I've got hundreds and hundreds of contacts, who live around the world, who are looking at how energy, money, climate change, biodiversity, politics, anthropology fit together into a cohesive story.

(00:31:34):

I would say that relative to the standard population, the preponderance of people with Asperger's or something similar is very much high in this group of people. And I wonder if it's something to do with the ability to separate out the noise, which the left brain is very good at focusing on, and stepping back and looking at the whole picture. Total speculation, just wondering if you have any input there.

Iain McGilchrist (00:32:05):

Well, I wouldn't want to be dogmatic, and I think that might come into it, but there are a couple of other things that come to mind. One is the capacity for systematization of a linear and left-hemisphere congruent kind, which people with Asperger's or autism have. And the other is something I have noticed and was noticed by others, particularly by an important German psychiatrist called Kretschmer in the 1930s, that people who either come from families of either schizophrenia or autism or Asperger's, the subjects often are very focused on doing good in the abstract, but are often not very good at being warm or kind to individual people.

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So, they embrace a brilliant idea that we're going to make the world like this, and of course, we need people like that. But we also need to have them have their feet planted firmly on the ground because, as is well known, the most desperate, homicidal, and tyrannical regimes in the history of the world started out with people having an idea how to make humanity better and forcing them to be better.

Nate Hagens (00:33:38):

There are ways that we can expand our boundaries of empathy and care and start to recognize that we're part of a whole, that we're related to all other life on the planet, that this is the one blue-green oasis in a dark cold universe. And I think we are approaching a species-level conversation. So, your work, I actually think, is foundational to that, that we have to shift from a me to an us somehow. Now, there's been, in the last couple of years, a lot of movement towards psychedelics like ayahuasca or 5-MeO-DMT from toad or mushrooms, or non-drugs like chanting or rave parties or just going out in nature. But can these substances-

Iain McGilchrist (00:34:37):

No.

Nate Hagens (00:34:38):

... access the relational of skills of the right brain, or what do you think about all that?

Iain McGilchrist (00:34:45):

Well, in brief, the psychedelics, which to me are relatively uninteresting, though they can indeed have lasting effects on people. I know from personal testimonies of people, not my own, that this can happen. I don't think that it's liberating the right hemisphere, and I explain why I don't think that's what's happening in the Matter with Things. I think probably what is happening is that the frontal lobes are being suppressed. And the frontal lobes are, if you like, the filters that, by their effect of inhibiting the more posterior cortex, shape our reality by making sense of it. And so, when you take them off, you get a flood of stimuli with no particular way of having filtered that. Perhaps in the absence of filtering by the frontal cortex, we are more open to spiritual messages.

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But I think that there are very many other ways that we can, much more sound ways... It's being very much promoted, psychedelics as the answer to depression and other things. But the reason for that is that it will cost the pharmaceutical industry absolutely nothing to market these substances. They're already known, and they'll never need to work again because they can just make money out of providing these purified substances. And so, they are very much skewing the dialogue on this. And what's not known so widely is that you can have terrible experiences using psychedelics, which are devastating to your psyche, so you're playing with fire.

(00:36:35):

So, I would like to take the conversation away from that and to the things that really, really do matter, if you are happy with that, which are relating to a society, to a social group, relating to nature and relating to some, whatever you'd like to call it, higher power, divine ground, the sacred. These things are not just my opinion that they're important for us, there is vast research that shows that they are very important for mental wellbeing, for physical wellbeing, for cognitive skill, and for the cohesion of a society.

Nate Hagens (00:37:22):

So, clearly the sacred or the belief in any deity or god or anything like that has to emanate from the right hemisphere. So, right now, to me, it seems like the belief in religion is waning as the driving force relative to the last couple hundred years. But also right now, the belief in economic growth, or capitalism and economic growth has become a religion of sorts. I mean, that's what our sacred is now.

(00:38:04):

And you don't know much about my work, Iain, but I'm a champion for the 10 million other species we share this planet with, and I deeply view the natural world as sacred. And that's what's our calling right now, is we kind of had to go through this last 200 years of Las Vegas smorgasbord-energy orgy of things to maybe recognize, whoa, maybe the next technology is inner-tech, in our minds towards this sacred destination. What do you think about all that?

Iain McGilchrist (00:38:51):

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Well, first of all, you know that I believe in the importance of the other living elements of our planet, and even things that we think of as inanimate and exploit have their value and their place. So, I wholly agree with you. We're singing from the same hymn sheet there. I'm not sure that religion only comes from the right hemisphere, but I do think you're right that the most important parts of religious experience and practice, the consensus is, seem to be underwritten by the right hemisphere.

(00:39:32):

The left hemisphere is sort necessary for systematizing it and turning it into a durable phenomenon such as Christianity or whatever it may be, Islam. But in doing so, it often over legalizes, makes over-certain, over-fixed what should be less certain, more fluid, more awe-inspiring, in fact.

(00:40:01):

I think we've lost the capacity for three very important things, a sense of awe or wonder, a sense of our own humility, or the humility we should have, and compassion. And I think these are the things that most religions that are real religions, or spiritual traditions that are true spiritual traditions have in common, that they induce and rekindle in us a sense of wonder. They make us feel appropriately humble about what we can do and what we can know, and they increase our sense of oneness with and compassion towards the rest of the created world.

(00:40:48):

Now, I think that is what's going wrong. I think we've completely failed to understand that religion is not about a matter of propositional belief, but dispositional belief. Belief is a matter of a disposition of your consciousness towards the world in a certain way. It's not about propositions or six impossible things that you have to believe before breakfast. That's not what religion's about. And what I want to do in my work is take people from a standpoint where they will almost certainly be part of the culture that believes that only somebody rather simple or uneducated would think that there was a divine realm to a position where they will see that only somebody who's rather simple or uneducated would just want to rule that out.

(00:41:43):

I'm not saying would become suddenly religious, but I think it's extremely clear that people who either are fundamentalist religious or fundamentalist atheists are on the

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wrong track and that they have more in common with one another than they have with true believing people. In any case, I just think that that business of the ever-evolving deeper relationship, a loving relationship with the world in all its manifestations is the secret of human wellbeing and happiness.

(00:42:18):

And you say that there is now a different religion, that of economic growth and so on. And I have acquainted myself, in the last 24 hours, a bit with what you've said about this. I find it very compelling. I'm sure you're broadly right, and it reminds me of something that GK Chesterton said, that, "When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in anything." And that anything for them is their own power to become more and more rich, powerful, wealthy. And that leaves out of the count just about everything that sustains human happiness. And in the seeking for it, they will never find happiness. As a psychiatrist, I can tell you that the most successful people, the richest people, the most powerful people are not the world's happiest people.

Nate Hagens (00:43:14):

As a former high-net-worth stockbroker on Wall Street, I totally concur with that assessment. So, you mentioned earlier there were some previous cultures that were successful at this empathy and compassion and a sense of, you didn't mention sacred, but what were the commonalities in these societies? And how did that evolve, or don't we have historical data to know what happened?

Iain McGilchrist (00:43:45):

Yes, it's difficult. One thing that's a surprise is that a properly functioning society in which the two hemispheres are really working in the complementary but asymmetrical way that they should seemed to arise just like that. You'd think that the civilization took a very long time to build, but actually these civilizations just sort of seemed to arise in a relatively short time span and work well, and then gradually, always move further towards the right hemisphere.

(00:44:21):

And one of the aspects of this is, I could put it this way, that the left hemisphere is always trying to close down on a certainty, but the right hemisphere is always trying



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to open up to a possibility. And that explains much of the difference between the way the hemispheres see the world. And in these early stages of civilization, people are very open to possibility, and this is a very fruitful frame of mind. They have very few certainties, but they know that nothing will prosper unless they give of themselves. It's no good sitting back and waiting for it to build itself. So, a civilization goes through, one might say three phases, really. And this has been very beautifully written about by Patrick Ophuls in a book called *Immoderate Greatness*, a very short book, but he points out that all civilizations-

Nate Hagens (00:45:18):

He was on this podcast, Iain.

Iain McGilchrist (00:45:21):

Oh, was he? Oh, fantastic. Well, he's a bit of a hero of mine.

Nate Hagens (00:45:24):

Yeah. He's a good friend of mine.

Iain McGilchrist (00:45:26):

Oh, that's great. That's really great.

Nate Hagens (00:45:27):

Yeah. He's 90 years old, and he's sharp as a tack.

Iain McGilchrist (00:45:30):

He's just great. I'm always recommending his book to people. But as you know, I mean, he suggests that in the first phase, people are very brave. They give of themselves. They're generous spirited. They create things, and they defend them and so on. And then there comes a period, as it will, when the groundwork has been laid, and now we can move on to more sophisticated things. We get a rising of philosophy and art and so forth, and that's a very benign phase.

(00:46:01):

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But after a while, we go into a decadent phase where people just expect that this is the norm and that they don't have to do anything for it to carry on, that it's their right. When people say, "A right," I always get a little mental question, "Where does this right come from, exactly?" I'm not saying that there is no use for the term right, but I think it needs to be thought about rather more carefully than we do.

(00:46:28):

Anyway, I think this is what happens, and I can see certainly movements in Eastern civilizations, which all my life have fascinated me. I'm probably a Daoist. I'm probably a Buddhist, and I'm very interested in the Vedanta. And in these traditions you see a kind of wisdom that comes from a degree of humility, of letting go of control, of letting go of certain knowledge in order to attain wisdom. The Tao Te Ching begins with the line, "The Dao that can be named is not the real Dao." And it also contains the lines that, "The master does nothing, but nothing is left undone."

(00:47:16):

I mean, those need to be glossed, but they're really a way of saying that our obsession with immediate action and doing and being busy and increasing our knowledge is actually a way of stopping ourselves achieving either peace or wisdom. And in the context of this conversation, I mean, whether people achieve peace for themselves is a personal matter, but if they don't achieve some wisdom, if there aren't people speaking wisely, our civilization is definitely doomed.

Nate Hagens (00:47:49):

So again, this is our first conversation despite having mutual friends and mutual interests. One of the key learnings for me this past decade in brain research was that humans didn't evolve to see reality. Fitness, at the time, mattered more than truth. And I've taught a class at the University of Minnesota called Reality 101, A Survey of the Human Predicament, and it's an environmental class mostly for freshmen.

(00:48:25):

But can learning about reality, about the different hemispheres, about our brains, about supernormal stimuli, and all the different things we inherited from our ancestors and their interrelationships, can that change our behavior at the individual and ultimately at the cultural level? Or does it have to come... A two-part question.

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(00:48:52):

So, my work here with this podcast is to educate and warn people about the future that Patrick Ophuls also believes is happening, is that our energy surplus declines, and as the caring capacity and environmental health of our world decline, we're in for a tough road.

Iain McGilchrist (00:49:16):

Clearly.

Nate Hagens (00:49:17):

So, in my articulating and having conversations with you and others, do the facts matter, or is it really a... Do we need a new narrative of meaning of sacredness, and the facts don't matter as much? That's a big bite. What do you think about that?

Iain McGilchrist (00:49:39):

I think facts are important. I think in certain areas of life, claiming things to be facts needs to be carefully done, but we shouldn't lose the sense that there are facts. I think that what science teaches us is important, very important as a road to truth. I think that reason, properly understood, i.e. not just a kind of rationalizing about things that could be done by ChatGPT, but I mean, the fusion of the experience of a life well lived and judgment based on that and the ability to see things in the overall context combined with the ability to think clearly and express oneself clearly is very important.

(00:50:35):

I also think that letting go of those things is important because they have limitations. They can't expect to be used to answer some of the big questions which appear paradoxical to the left hemisphere, but nonetheless are on a path to the deep realities, as Niels Bohr, perhaps the greatest figure in the genesis of quantum physics said, and as the great leaders of most religions, at least the mystical traditions of most religions and spiritual pathways have said.

(00:51:11):

So, in the second part of the Matter with Things... The first part, I'm just looking at really what we need to understand about the left hemisphere's incapacity to be in touch with the real world compared with the right hemisphere. Now, that's the reverse

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of what the pop psychology thing tells us. The left hemisphere may be boring and down to earth, but at least it's reliable. However, that's not the case. It's extremely unreliable compared with the right hemisphere, which is much more in touch with reality and a much better touchstone when we come to decide what we should believe. Anyway, that's Part I.

(00:51:50):

But in Part II, I look at the various pathways to truth, and I say they are science, reason, and intuition and imagination, and that all four of these need to be brought to bear if we're going to function properly as a society and to understand who we are, what we are doing here, and how we are to relate to the world at large.

(00:52:12):

And then in the last part of the book, it's metaphysics, and I look at things like the coincidence of opposites, the one and the many, but also things like time, space, matter, consciousness, values, purpose, and the sense of the sacred. So, I'm looking at all of those things. So, what I want to say is my book is based on science and on a lot of philosophizing, so there's a great deal of facts in it. I quote, in one book, 5,500 sources, and in the other, about two and a half thousand, so together, there's a lot. So, I do rely on those things and I think that our tendency to, for example, dismiss science if it happens to say things that are not fashionable or politically correct, is absolutely a disaster for us all and for science. So, science is non-negotiable in that sense, although you need to look at the light in which it's interpreted, but we can't do away with it.

(00:53:17):

So, I think understanding what is going on in our heads and how it's affecting the way we see the world is really important. And in that sense, I'd go as far as to say that if we are to get out of this situation... People always say, "So, what are we to do? What are we to do?" And they want half a dozen bullet points, and there are half a dozen bullet points that I can give. But in a way, they're at a very low level. They're practical things that can be done now, and they're not unimportant. But actually, I know that unless we change the whole way we conceive what humanity is, what the world is and how the two connect, we will not get this right. And it wouldn't even matter if we did save our skins because we would not have saved our souls. And without that we would

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just continue being the same, frustrated, greedy, desperate people that we seem to be now.

(00:54:18):

So, I think we have to see the predicament. And the reason I think that I would like as many people as possible to read and talk about my work is it's a contribution to that debate. It's a really substantial thing that it cost me decades of my life. And I think that people are responding to it by the messages I get all the time from people saying, "Your work has changed my life." Now, most writers, if they get that once, they're delighted, but I get that every day. In fact, today, amongst several messages, I kind of got one that said, "It would be an underestimate to say that your work has changed my life." So, I'm delighted, always, to hear this because I don't know. I can only tell whether this is important from the reactions I get from other people.

(00:55:04):

I'm a psychiatrist, and I learnt very early on that you can tell what people need to do very, very early on, and you can say it. But they won't do it because they need to have been brought to the place where they see for themselves that that's what they need to do. So, we need to get humanity to a point where they see for themselves that what they're doing is crazy, suicidal.

Nate Hagens (00:55:30):

Are you taking on new patients?

Iain McGilchrist (00:55:33):

No. I'm 70, and I had to make a decision some time ago that I was going to write and lecture rather than carry on with the day job.

Nate Hagens (00:55:47):

No, I was being facetious. But what you just said rings hella true to me, so I was being facetious. So, what I hear you saying is that science is necessary but insufficient, and that if we look at the human predicament with climate change and population and resource depletion and everything else, and if we try to construct a path through that using only engineers and architects, we will fail because we have to look at the other...

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What did you say, imagination, creativity? You had four categories. We have to integrate all of those.

Iain McGilchrist (00:56:26):

Intuition and imagination. And I know that intuition is often a target for people in cognitive neuroscience. And of course, some people have made a career out of it like Dan Kahneman, professionally suspicious of intuition. I talk about his work, which is in many ways very important in my book, *The Matter with Things*. But I think that intuition's had a bad rap. And because there are certain situations which are the highly artificial in which you can show that following your intuition won't lead to the right answer, that is the flip side of the fact that we are able to make very complex decisions fairly quickly using intuition, although intuition is not thinking fast. Sometimes intuitions are deep and take a long time to come through. And sometimes rationalizing is what we do thinking fast and quickly.

(00:57:22):

So, people sometimes say, "Is Kahneman's type-one thinking the right hemisphere and type two-thinking the left?" No. If anything, it would be the other way round. But it's really more that type-one thinking is subcortical, is kind of almost instinctive whereas a richer combination of intuition and reason involves both hemispheres. So, it's a different thing. But anyway, I just wanted to put in a word for intuition because I think our willingness to discard, dis-attend to, and generally despise our intuitions is one of the...

(00:58:03):

Generally despise our intuitions is one of the reasons we've become so stupid. I mean, there are many things that I believe now that if there is a humanity in the future, people will look back on it as the most absurd era. We are part of the most ridiculous era of humanity in which completely improbable and very stupid things are said by highly intelligent people. And if they had any contact at all with their intuitions, they would guide them to a much, much wiser place.

Nate Hagens (00:58:33):

So I suspect that lots of people in our culture have trauma. We are living through an absolute crazy twilight zone sort of era. A lot of people are stressed. I think intuitively

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the listeners and viewers of this program will agree with you that they would like to expand or lean into their right brain more, they want to be connected with the birds and the trees and their garden and with relationships at a slower pace, and they see how everything is connected and they care like you and I do about the 10 million other species we share the planet with. But the needs of the day, we have to have a job to get health insurance, otherwise we'd go broke if we get sick, we have to build defense mechanisms against all the polarization shouting on YouTube and in social media, are the wants of the day forcing the left brain to take over and not allow people to reflect on the relationships between everything? What do you think about that?

Iain McGilchrist (00:59:43):

Well, let me be clear, there is nothing wrong with the left hemisphere in itself, it's a very valuable servant. It is the emery to the master, and as such is irreplaceable. We need it and we need the work that it can do. All I'm really saying is that it must be aware that it is a servant, not the master. And at the moment it thinks it's the master, it thinks it has all the answers, and that's the bit that makes it a problem. So I'm not saying, of course, I'm not... And I think I started what I've just been saying, by saying that we really do need the everyday stuff, we need the jobs and we need to put in place particular measures, legal measures, maybe scientific plans to try and stop the poisoning of the oceans and all that. All of that I agree with, but what I'm really saying is that that's not enough.

(01:00:39):

That's only a part of the story. And perhaps in some ways, although it sounds stupid to say this, it is less important than being able to see things in a different way, 'cause if we did, we wouldn't need to be doing it all by constraint and restraint. We need constraints and restraints in life. One of the paradoxes is for society to be free, it needs to observe certain restraints. But when you say we need to have, whatever it was you said, mechanisms in place to sort of police the social media, if we were more aware of the shallowness as a way we talk and think so often nowadays in soundbites and without having really thought about things deeply and probably not from a background of humane education, which is now a rarity compared with what it was 40, 50 years ago. If we were aware of that, there wouldn't be the need to police us in that way.

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(01:01:45):

I mean, during my lifetime, people have become obviously much less civilized. They've become willing and able to cheat one another with greater violence, verbal, physical and in other ways. So we are in a realm where we are so badly dehumanized already that the only way to help is by imposing kind of rules, which in themselves constrain our better nature as well as our unfortunate tendencies of now.

Nate Hagens (01:02:18):

So in that last bit, you mentioned the word aware or awareness four times. I right now have a new coach who's an expert in something called Feldenkrais, which is awareness through movement. And her advice to me is all I'm asking for you is for awareness, and once you become aware of something, then for the first time you have choices. And a couple of days ago she sent me this beautiful quote by Viktor Frankl, "between stimulus and response, there is a space, in that space is our power to choose our response, in our response lies our growth and our freedom." I'm just wondering how that maps, if at all, to the left brain, right brain story that you're unpacking is the left brain jumping into this space in our culture? And then owning the narrative and response and would more awareness give us a more merger of the two hemispheres in a healthy way?

Iain McGilchrist (01:03:27):

What I'd certainly say is that, that is a wonderful quote that I know from Viktor Frankl who is a very, very great man, of course. And I think that what I'm suggesting without going one way or other on the hemispheres is that we are too ready to jump in, we have lost the art of thinking deeply, of pondering, of embracing silence, of thinking in a longer term over a broader span, which you narrow spatially and temporally if you like, in the way in which we think we're too committed to a point of view that we may never have been taught to challenge and so forth. So what I'm saying is that we live in a society that is becoming stupid because reflective reading, proper acquaintance with history, not in some ridiculous propagandizing way in which we either uncritically accept it or uncritically despise it, but in fact, trying to understand the people who are not necessarily any less wise than we were who came before us and what they created for us and what we owe to them.



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(01:04:54):

So not having, not having been taught to think on two sides of a question, we're reacting in two peremptory way and slowing down would be a very, very fine thing. Most of what we do would be better done more slowly. There are very few things that are done well by just speeding them up. And yet we live in a world which is constantly demanding more and more speed, less and less reflection.

Nate Hagens (01:05:21):

Right, and so we're compelled to use the devil's tools to do Gaia's work of a sort. I mean I feel that every day. I mean, look at us, we're using high technology to communicate these ideas to more people in an attempt to hopefully have people learn and slow down in their own lives. So getting to that, one of my prior guests who I believe is a friend of yours, Tomas Bjorkman, he's an advocate of nurturing inner development skills, which he categorizes as being, thinking, relating, collaborating and acting. So do you think reflective practices and teachings such as those can reconnect the balancing of the two hemispheres? Or leaving this hemispheres aside just make us more holistic human beings in this time of tumult?

Iain McGilchrist (01:06:24):

Yes, I do. There are certain things we can't experience unless we slow down and that we must experience when we speed up. When we speed up, we become fearful, we become panic-stricken and I think we should stop panicking, which is not to say anything about being aware of the gravity of our situation. In fact, we'll be more aware of the gravity of our situation if we stop and reflect. I think we should cultivate things like gratitude, which we won't do if we're rushing through life, appreciating what we have while we still have it, appreciating silence. Silence is like water to me, it's like some delicious nourishing liquid. I can't get enough of it. It's one of the reasons I live where I do in a rather remote part of a Scottish island. And when I have to go, as I quite often do back into modern urban life, I'm initially overwhelmed by its madness.

(01:07:45):

I'm sure there are pockets where people can find the necessary stillness, but unless they do, they're going to rush headlong to their deaths and they're going to push us all over that cliff faster than ever. If we have a chance to stop, it would be a very good

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thing to do. I think we should reconnect, as I say with the natural world, spend more time there and listen to it. We should pray and meditate more. And that also means listening, not talking, it means adapting your ear to hear what is constantly being said to you by the universe, by what exists. We have a, I'm saying everything is in relationships and those relationships are always two-way. They're always reverberate and we drive out what we could learn by constantly talking. And so what we need to do is to cultivate mindfulness, if you like, or an attitude of prayer, which is also a matter of listening, not demanding anything, but trying to reflect on what one can know in relation to spiritual values particularly.

(01:09:09):

So a slower culture would be a great thing. And when we are actually hurtling towards the precipice, why would we try and speed it up by inventing ever more sophisticated technology that will push us faster and faster that way? Technology is just a way of giving people power. And power is neither good nor bad, it depends on who's wielding it and to what end. It needs wisdom. And at the moment what we're doing is we are creating very powerful mechanism, we're giving them to people who haven't any of the wisdom to use them properly.

(01:09:46):

And so what we need is more wisdom, not more power. And I'm afraid the way we're talking at the moment, it's all about increasing our power to do things. This has got us into the mess and as Einstein famously said, "We don't get out of the mess by the same means that got us into it." We need to be starting to simplify. I think one of your terms is the great simplification. We need to simplify our lives, our goals, what do we expect out of life? And in some ways sophisticate what we feel we can give to life.

Nate Hagens (01:10:25):

I have four questions in response to what you just said. My first one is, what sort of megafauna and wildlife do you have on the Isle of Skye? What's interesting there that you periodically or rarely see?

Iain McGilchrist (01:10:39):

Above all, we have very interesting bird life. There are eagles that nest on the mountain behind my house, golden eagles. We also have fish eagles, we have raptors

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of various kinds, but we also have marsh birds, we have woodland birds. In my garden, you get garden birds. So we have an extraordinarily rich panoply of bird life. There are animals, there are deer, wild deer, of course, on the island, much of the land is cultivated where it can be or at least given over to sheep and cattle. So the kind of farm animals. But there is a range of wildlife, as you know if you try to keep chickens as I do, and sometimes the wild mammalian life is not necessarily on your side or not on your chicken side anyway. So there's a lot of that. And very beautiful landscape. I mean it's just a staggering mixture of things that I never get used to, I see it and it takes my breath away.

Nate Hagens (01:11:52):

Yeah, I am blessed to live where I do on the Mississippi River and there are lots of wild animals here and it's my biggest joy in life is to see something like a fox when I'm on a bike ride, et cetera. So I just wanted to ask you that. So you talked about a slower culture, I agree with that, but how would that come about? It's certainly not from any top down regulations or laws or rules. It almost has to come about from individual humans realizing this, starting to listen more, starting to focus on relationships and maybe that expands outward to a critical mass, do you have any speculation on that?

Iain McGilchrist (01:12:41):

Well, I think you're exactly right that it must start with individual people, but that sounds like a very tall order and we've got to make things happen. Yes, we are in a crisis, but we won't be so effective if we think we need to rush to make things happen. If only 3% of the population saw the kind of vision of the world, the kind of meaning in the world that I hope to unveil to readers, we would automatically move, not by top down control, but by an inner desire. We would be led to things that I can't now specify what they will be because they will be different from every person, that is the wonderful thing about it, of something that is generated from within and goes outwards rather than something that is a straight jacket that comes down from above. And I think there's something to be said for relaxing some of the controls because we need to learn how to discipline ourselves.

(01:13:53):

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The culture of, particularly, my grandparents and of my parents was so very much more one of self-discipline and selflessness than the culture that I now inhabit. And it meant that a lot of things didn't have to be policed or ruled or legislated about in the way that they are now. Of course, it wasn't a perfect world, I'm certainly not suggesting that for a minute, and in the background all sorts of things were undoubtedly going on. But the fact is that we've become morally like somebody who's decided for no very good reason, that they need a wheelchair. And after they've been in the wheelchair for quite a long time, they would be much better off without the wheelchair. But they can't now stand without that wheelchair. And we are like that, morally speaking. We need all these props and supports to keep us on the right line.

(01:14:50):

But if we're to survive, we need to get back to a place in which we reintegrate into our personality and into our sense of ourselves. Some sense of what is now seems so old-fashioned, like being a decent person, like being an honorable person, being magnanimous, by being generous, by being faithful. All these things that we now think, we're far cleverer than that. That's the kind of stuff that stupid people who don't really know how to win, we are going to win. And of course, that attitude has destroyed a society that was actually working relatively well. So I think we've got to get back there. The bad news is that I don't think that's going happen until some sort of catastrophe has happened, which will insist on it that we learn again how to look after one another in small groups, to trust one another, to work together to have much simpler ambitions and demands on the planet to be able to grow our own food, to relearn skills that our ancestors had but we thought we didn't need because we got machines.

(01:16:05):

And generally I think... People say, well, what's going to happen? Will life die out? I don't see any evidence that life will die out. I think our way of life as it now is must die out, it can't go on. And I think that a lot of humans sadly, will not survive, but I think that humanity will probably survive and we'll be the better for it. We're so badly adrift now that we need something that will inspire us to re-embrace our deeper humanity, that's really what I'm saying.

Nate Hagens (01:16:45):

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Well, it's no wonder that you like Patrick Ophuls's writing. He says very similar things and I say very similar things. You are inspiring to me. This conversation is inspiring. What we're trying to do is change the initial conditions of that catastrophe or that moment in the future so that there's a wider array of positive or more benign outcomes that happen.

Iain McGilchrist (01:17:14):

Absolutely.

Nate Hagens (01:17:15):

One of the other constraints that I see is there are people listening to this and nodding their heads and saying, "This makes sense. I want to move my life in this direction a little bit, I want to be one of those 3%." But then a few hours later, Candy Crush and their little social media feeds and the things on their phone and in our pall-mall Smorgasbord tech culture, virtual world shouts louder to our brains than the reality that you are describing, so we get pulled back into that vortex. Do you have recommendations for people on how to push that aside or how to inhibit that craving a little bit towards this longer term path?

Iain McGilchrist (01:18:08):

Well, I think as usual, it's a matter of finding a balance, but a balance is very far from where we are now. So I think that my advice would be drastically to reduce any use of social media, whatever. I don't actually use it myself at all, somebody does my publicity for me so that's nice. That's kind of if you like hypocrisy for me that I need the message to get out there, but I don't want to be on social media. However, I work hard at putting the message out there by doing things like exactly what we are doing now. And some of my friends say they can't go anywhere on the internet without bumping into me, so you can't please everybody, anyway.

(01:18:57):

I think grossly limiting-

Nate Hagens (01:18:59):

But that's what it takes.

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Iain McGilchrist (01:19:01):

... or eliminating altogether. Eliminating social media would be a very good thing. Perhaps limiting how much and in what way you use the internet, trying not to fuel despair, but instead to think of ways in which you can increase love and the embrace of things that are beautiful and good and truthful and to eliminate resentment from your life and try instead to see what is good and to listen to other people even if they say things very different from you. One of the great calamities of the public debate at the moment is if we don't do a very, very simple thing that any therapist who's ever done couple therapy knows, which is you get one person talking and you say, no, let him talk and you'll have your turn in a minute. And then at the end of that, you turn to the other partner and say, "So what did you hear your partner just say?" And that's very instructive for everybody.

(01:20:06):

And if we did that more, we would get round misunderstanding because you say, "Well actually that's what you heard me say, but that's not what I meant. What I meant was this." And I see, and then you've got a dialogue going. But at the moment we are just shouting one another down. And anybody who has a certain kind of opinion, which embraces many opinions that seem to me to be full of wisdom must be an outcast. And so it's extraordinary situation in which the people that need to be heard can't speak without being shouted down by those who are full of their own importance and narcissistically sure that they are the good people who are fighting for the good only.

(01:20:48):

One thing I'd like to get across is the idea of the dark side. Very important idea, again in psychology, everybody has a dark side and there's a dark side to everything that we promote is good. And there's a good side often to things that we want to eliminate. I mean, there are certain things that are non-negotiable, I agree and we're better without them, but usually it's complicated and there's good and bad mixed in most of the things that we need to be thinking about here. But anyway, that's the kind of advice that I'd give. Embrace stillness, embrace peace and love your friends and love nature and love life.

Nate Hagens (01:21:28):

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I just started three weeks ago on the advice of another coach silent Saturdays where I turned my phone and computers off and it's been way more difficult than I would've thought. But that's a story for another day. But I totally agree with everything you just said. Another follow-up question to your previous thing that you mentioned, AI again. So is this another thing that in our race to develop artificial intelligence, are we in effect hyper charging this left brain dynamic that you're talking about and further atrophying the right brain's contribution? And second part of the question, do you think it's possible to create an AI or an AGI that does contain a balance of right and left brain and imbues more wisdom into the system? Or would that only happen after we changed the goals of the system away from unbridled economic growth? Any thoughts there?

Iain McGilchrist (01:22:36):

Well, I have a view that maybe unpopular with some, but is that when we talk of artificial intelligence, we're not really talking about intelligence at all. We're talking about a following of certain procedures that gives a simulacrum of intelligence but is not intelligence. And in some sense that is important because I don't think that ever-increasing sophistication of AI will help us because it can never be wise. For that it would have to have a body, it would have to have emotions, it would have to be a truly social being. It would have to have empathy, it would have to have suffered. I don't want to be consoled by an AI mechanism created by some clever psychology that talks me through a crisis. I want to know that the person I'm talking to is a fellow member of humanity that has suffered as I suffer and knows that I know that I'm going to die.

(01:23:42):

So I think that is a dead end for what we need. What I worry it will do is make us think that it's intelligent and give it more credence than it should get. And even if that doesn't happen, what is very worrying is that we are seeing people and even talking more and more like machines, we're seeing people as machines. We're becoming more like machines. The language in which we talk about human functions is now the language of AI, one's data banks and uploading things in one's mind.

(01:24:19):

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And because we're in everyday life forced to interact with incredibly stupid mechanisms that are on the internet. I mean the people who used to ring up to solve a problem weren't Einstein, they probably had a fairly low IQ, but in five minutes they could sort out... Understand exactly what you wanted and get it done. Now you can spend not only a morning, but I've discovered trying to get one thing changed on Amazon, a whole team of us have spent nearly eight weeks trying to get it fixed, and it's very simple. We can do all this clever stuff like create a robot that looks somewhat like a kind of an abortion of a human being, but nonetheless we can't do simple stuff. And that has an immense impact on daily life. I haven't got much time left to live, but an unreasonable amount of it is taken up in doing procedural stuff that bulks now vastly greater in my life.

(01:25:18):

I was just talking to my daughter who is training as a psychotherapist, and she was saying, "The trouble is I have to spend so much time filling in things on the internet, going on platforms, doing this, that and the other." Crikey, when I was training, there was absolutely none of that. So we've got ourselves into a really stupid corner. It's artificial stupidity that is taking us over, and it's artificial so we don't have to obey it. We need to embrace our own capacity for wisdom, which is in a bringing together, intuition and imagination, not fantasy, but true imagination to get you into the heart of reality. Our only chance of doing so along with science and reason. So sorry, that was a bit of a splurge there. But I think that it's important that we can't rely on AI for any of these things and that the effort that goes into it would be much better put into things that are quite practical that we could do.

Nate Hagens (01:26:17):

So my contribution will be to no longer call it artificial intelligence or AI, but ASI, artificial simulacrum intelligence, thereby naming the beast.

Iain McGilchrist (01:26:29):

Ok.

Nate Hagens (01:26:31):



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So you mentioned imagination along with intuition and in one of your videos or something I read from you, how important is the need for the space to allow creativity in developing the health of an individual? Do you have any stories of that and how does allowing that space contrast with the expectations and trajectories that we currently put on our youth, especially in the United States context where young people get into debt and get addicted and distracted and all that. Do you have any stories on the importance of imagination and creating space?

Iain McGilchrist (01:27:22):

I do indeed. It's often said that science was very creative in the period between say the twenties and the sixties or seventies. But since then, what has mainly happened is technological refinements rather than real breakthroughs in science. And what happened during that period very often was that people worked either alone or in small groups of perhaps two or three people, but mainly something like the RAND Corporation took bright people, gave them an office and a desk and a salary, and said, do whatever it is that you think is important to do. And there's a risk involved in that. But one of the problems with our culture is it's so risk averse. And there is a risk that somebody will abuse it. But if you don't take that risk, then we're onto a hiding to nothing because nothing will come of micromanaging people towards an outcome.

(01:28:23):

If you take creative people and tell them they've got to publish a paper every few months explaining what they're doing, they will never reach the point from which they can actually see a picture that coheres. Now, I've been fortunate in that I've gone into various things quite deeply, but I've also been able to see the big picture. And one of the reasons why is that in all my education from my teens onwards, I was allowed an enormous amount of freedom. I was expected to work very hard at technical things. At maths, at ancient languages and so on, which are not a piece of cake. And that's fine. That was part of my education. But I was also left with an immense amount of free time to read as I thought best and follow up things that I was being taught.

(01:29:07):

And that went on through university and eventually ended in my getting a kind of fellowship, which a version of which still exists, but I think they're trying to make it

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more left hemisphere I'm afraid, which is a prize fellowship of all souls, which you got after sitting a three-day exam, if you were lucky.

(01:29:25):

And that gave me seven years and nobody insisted that I published anything. In fact, I did publish a book about five years or so into the fellowship, or maybe it was a bit longer than that. And at the time, I wondered what I was doing because I was following many things. I followed science, I went to philosophy seminars. I found a teacher so that I could learn Russian. I did all kinds of things. And then at the end of it, I thought I needed to train in medicine, which I did, and then in psychiatry and neuropsychiatry and all the rest. But that was because I plowed a very unconventional furrow and the system was flexible enough to allow it. I don't think that system is any longer so flexible. I think people will want somebody to account for themselves all the time.

(01:30:10):

Now, the thing that's important to know is that great scientists and mathematicians of whom I cite many examples in the matter with things usually found out their great discoveries after a fallow period in which they really were either of a dead end or they'd stopped thinking about it and their mind had moved on to something else. And then suddenly one day, famously, as his foot landed on the bus, the solution to fuchsian equations came to... Oh God, I've forgot my own name now. But anyway, you know who I mean Poincaré. So this freedom is really important. And in retrospect, for a long time I wondered perhaps I wasted that time, but now I know that I didn't waste it because it enabled me to write books that are both deeply grounded in the kind of technical stuff, but also spacious enough to bring together psychology, history, anthropology with art and Persian music and so on.

(01:31:18):

And some people think, well, that must mean that they don't want to read it and it can't be any good because how can anybody seriously know anything about all those things? But fine, I don't speaking to them, I'm speaking to people who want to know something that's come from having a lot of free time to think. It's not really free in the sense of pointless, or it is free in the sense that I can be the decider as to what I do.

Nate Hagens (01:31:49):

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So in a way though, that's one linkage between your story and mine, is the energy surplus of the industrial revolution and late 20th century enabled someone like you to have the creativity and the space to lay the foundations of writing two, well, three really, because your last book is in two pieces, tomes on the human condition and the human brain, which is kind of a product of energy surplus, which isn't going to be with us for long. This is it. This is our species level moment to know, to potentially know where we came from, how we got here, what we're doing, what we really need, what the impacts are, what is open to us in the future. And it's both unbelievably tragic and stunningly beautiful and profound at the same time.

Iain McGilchrist (01:32:51):

You call it energy surplus, which is very much a way of thinking about it. I understand that. But what I would call it is a sophisticated civilization, the legacy of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Victorian hard work, and that the kind of institutions that are now busily trying to destroy their excellence that can provide that, if you like, you can call all civilization to do with the kind of energy surplus that was true in the Renaissance and so forth. I understand that, but it wasn't to do with energy surplus in the sense that we mean since the Industrial Revolution, it had very little to do with that. The kind of work I was encouraged to do and the kind of conversations I was encouraged to have apart from the fact that they included up-to-date science were very much the sort of continuation of a tradition of scholarship, really.

(01:33:56):

And we seem to have turned our backs on that, except in some rather wonderful places where people are now starting up colleges that really are serious about learning in a broad sense and not just passing on propaganda, but actually enabling people to think freely and in a balanced way about the predicament we find ourselves in. So that's a good sign. There are good signs. I mean, one of the things that really encourages me is the number of young people who write to me, often scientists and say, this stuff that you're writing is so fantastic and I'm starting to do a project on this and can you advise? And so on, which usually I can't. But nonetheless, the enthusiasm for it is extremely important to me and gives me hope for the future.

Nate Hagens (01:34:43):

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I agree with that. I get similar feedback all the time. I want to be respectful of your time, but I do have some closing questions that I ask all my viewers. But before that, building on what you just said, how would you, in a perfect world, redesign the education system if you were in charge so that you would take into account a lot of the wisdom and the science that you've discovered over decades towards better preparing young human beings towards the future of the 21st century, to be left brain, right brain, more balanced, to be slower, to spend time in nature, to meditate? What would you do to change the education system? Because in my view, the education system itself has become a out of control superorganism that feeds on its own demands, et cetera.

Iain McGilchrist (01:35:46):

Well, in short, I'd rehumanize it. The emphasis only on STEM subjects is a product of this feeling that we need to increase productivity, but that will get us nowhere on its own. We desperately need to have intelligent, knowledgeable human beings who are aware of the culture to which they owe so much and they're not taking a sledgehammer to it. And so I would reintroduce the humanities, including some emphasis on music, on drama, on poetry, and on philosophy in the sense that there are different ways in history of thinking about things. And to see some of them, you'll think like this and to see others, you'd think like that. And thus broadening people's horizons and seeing that there's often many sides to any one question. I think that would be a very important thing.

(01:36:50):

I think that young people should be taught mindfulness in school from an early age. I think the whole rhetoric of mechanistic determinism should not be the assumed model for the cosmos. And that really means introducing, I don't know how it would best be done, but something of spirituality again into the curriculum, the exact how's and wherefores are not for me to stay, but I think that that would be good. I also think that emphasis on the being right answers in the exams rather than demonstrating intelligent thinking, that that should be played down.

(01:37:39):

There are ways in which you can be wrong but have given a fantastically interesting answer to a question, whereas somebody else who just follows everyone else and says

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the right thing may have been very unintelligent in their response. So that's the way I'd look at it. We need to be freer, we need to trust. We need to trust teachers, for God's sake. We need to trust university lecturers. We need to trust doctors. We shouldn't be telling them all the time how to do that. Let's managerialise out of existence. I mean, who would want to be a teacher now who'd want to be a doctor?

(01:38:15):

It is a reality that started in the eighties that managers started to tell doctors how to do their job. And there are more of them now than the doctors, and they're better paid than the doctors. And their culture is a nonsense because it's not the culture that you work extremely hard to have the experience and knowledge of a doctor. And the same is true of a teacher. A teacher makes a gift of a relationship with a child. The people who really taught me anything were on fire with the things that inspired them and they communicated that spark to me. And it might not have been on the curriculum, but I will remember it all my life.

Nate Hagens (01:38:52):

We've turned the planet into a business as a species. And I agree with you regarding teaching. I may have no money at all, but it was the most rewarding thing I've ever done with these 17, 18, 19 year olds. Ancient wisdom from my understanding in India have long known about the brain hemispheres. Just a penultimate question here. From a western medical and psychological perspective, are there specific practices recommended for rebalancing the hemispheres? You mentioned a few of them earlier, but could the wisdom of the eastern religions, you mentioned Taoism, Buddhism, be integrated with the modern imbalance of the West, and how would that come about?

Iain McGilchrist (01:39:45):

Well, absolutely, people just need to acquaint themselves with this. At school, I got to know Heraclitus, and I thought he was far more interesting than Plato. And then about 20, I read Alan Watts's *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, and that reconnected me with the pre-Socratic philosophers like Heraclitus. And it was another life-changing moment when I read that book. And since then Taoism has always been part of my thinking. So people can start by picking up books, but it's not about reading a book.

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It's like you can't learn to swim by reading a book about it. You need to get in the water and do it.

(01:40:26):

And you can't actually experience what people mean by religious life by simply reading about it. You have to start committing yourself to something. So that's a very important insight on how this sort of thing works. But what I would say is that I've mentioned already things like mindfulness, which is almost the clearest example I can give of recruiting the right hemisphere and trying to silence the ever chattering, ever judgmental left hemisphere and allowing things, as Heidegger says, to presence before us rather than simply be represented in our minds.

(01:41:09):

So that's a good thing. And the arts in general, as I say, but also leading a certain kind of life and the ambition to lead that life being put into children at school. And it's not a fix. It's not something they can get tomorrow, but they need to begin to start the steps on a journey that will be a lifelong journey that will take them ever deeper into a country they need to know and where they belong. So it's about changing the way we think about everything's got to be a quick fix, and there's got to be an answer and a test to make sure people have got it and all that. But that is really beside what I'm talking about.

(01:41:48):

I just want to say, can I add this? That it's not just the Eastern religions that seem to show an understanding of the relationship between the hemispheres. And I quote the Tao Te Ching and I quote the I Ching and all these things in the book, because they have extraordinary insights into the relationship between the hemispheres. As soon as you know about the hemispheres, you can see that they intuited this without having brain scanners. But the most remarkable example is a story by the Onondaga people who are part of the Iroquois nation. And I tell it at some length, it's the first six pages of part three of the book. It's absolutely staggering. I can't tell it now, but these people intuited exactly the relationship between the hemispheres and what was going to happen when the brother, as they call the two brothers, with one brother who doesn't know as much as the other, when that brother starts to take control. So I mean, they foresaw all of this. Anyway, sorry, that was just an addendum to my answer.

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Nate Hagens (01:42:50):

Homo sapiens, clever, but seldom wise. So you've talked about culture and you've talked about from the perspective of education system, but what about young humans specifically? Do you have any recommendations for 18 to 25 year old human beings around the world who are aware of climate change and resource depletion and polarization in our economy and the constraints to the human enterprise that are listening to this and nodding their heads, agreeing with the wisdom that you're sharing? What advice do you have for young humans?

Iain McGilchrist (01:43:31):

Not to be afraid, to trust their intuitions, but to question them as you question everything you are told without necessarily that leading to your dismissing it, but just making sure that you've seen both sides of everything. Taking strength from a spiritual tradition, knowing the works in it, belonging to it, nourishing your soul at the fount of art and music, dedicating yourself to practical good works either locally or as part of an organization that you admire, as long as you still are in it and continue to admire it. There can come a time when you may decide, it happens so often in institutions that it's become more of a barrier to achieving its original aim than it is promoting it, as William James said already in the 19th century. Not necessarily believing everything that experts tell you, but at least while you are young thinking it's quite a good idea to listen to what experts say about this. With time, you may see what of that quote "wisdom" was really wisdom and what wasn't, and act appropriately.

(01:45:07):

Believe in the power of humanity to surprise us. There was Homo habilis and there is Homo sapiens. Clever Homo, wise Homo, and we are supposedly that Homo sapiens, but we have it in us to be wise in a way that no other creature can be wise. That wisdom is a product of hard work, long self-discipline and immersion in the glorious business of life. And it lies the other side of knowledge. So there's ignorance on one side of knowledge, and there's a kind of unknowing, which is wise on the other side, and it has nothing to do with ignorance. It's where you are in the position to be wise. And so all of these things are part of a long narrative that may be frustrating to a young person who wants wisdom now, but wisdom cannot be had now, but you won't get it unless you make the investments in it now.

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(01:46:14):

So the start of life is making investments in becoming a certain kind of person over time, and society should encourage those steps and not say the only way forward for you is to work in some vast organization in which you have no say, no ability to use your own initiative. I think we should look at organizations and a healthy one is one in which as far as possible initiative and freedom to act are passed down the tree. There's got to be some upper control. I understand that. But as far as possible to let people manage intelligently what they're dealing with and be answerable for it and be dismissed if they've done a bad job, but to take part in a life which is not just being embedded in the kind of organizations that now so many people will end up going into. And dare to be different, but it's going to be hard work.

(01:47:12):

I dare to be different. I gave up a promising academic career in order to start being a medical student when I was in my early thirties and already had a couple of children under the age of three. So I didn't know whether I was more insomniac when I was working 120 hours a week in the hospital, which in those days was legal. It isn't now. Or at home. So you live dangerously. I've lived dangerously. But you also need to work very, very hard. But if you can be prepared to work hard, be honest to yourself, be honorable to yourself and to others, to be inspired by some goal that seems to you real and valuable, that is a loving goal, not just a selfish goal, then go for it. Go for it, and may God be with you. That's all I can say, and I hope you will, because the future depends on people like you doing that.

Nate Hagens (01:48:07):

I always dared to be different, but I'm in my mid-fifties right now and I'm firstly now investing in the things that will bring me wisdom. And I wish I had started that 30 years ago. When I was in my twenties, I was much more left brain. Yeah, no, I believe that. What do you care most about in the world, Ian?

Iain McGilchrist (01:48:34):

It's a very difficult thing to say because I just care about the world, really. But I care about it under the aspect of love. I care about real love continuing and prospering and spreading. I can't say better than that. That's ultimately what life's about. You can



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do anything. You can be anything. But if you don't experience love and you don't do in your own way what seems to you to be the loving thing, then I'm not sure what point life has. I'm sounding a bit like St. Paul here, never a man I particularly have found on my wavelength, but there we are. But I'm sure he was very wise and right about many things.

Nate Hagens (01:49:27):

Is love a product of both the left and right hemispheres.

Iain McGilchrist (01:49:31):

It's much bigger than either hemisphere. It comes from somewhere very deep below the hemispheres, I believe. And it takes the whole body. It takes the whole of the embodied being, their heart, their gut, literally. Their brain, their soul, their spirit, their intelligence, their everything.

Nate Hagens (01:49:57):

If you could wave a magic wand, even though we know those don't exist, and there was no personal recourse to your decision, what is one thing that you would do to improve human and planetary futures?

Iain McGilchrist (01:50:17):

It is, again, almost impossible now to say. And one of the reasons is that of course it can't happen and one's constrained by what can happen. But I think bringing back into our lives, those things that I talked about of humility and awe, if people could be made to experience those things on the daily basis, if scientists could realize that they don't know so very much, it's wonderful that they know what they know and that I'm with them every inch of the way in the work that is done, but that really, as William James said, ignorance is an ocean, what we know is just a drop. And that's how we are. And if we had that sense before the world and we had the sense of awe and wonder in it, we would behave well to it and to one another in that aspect of love that I've described. That's all I can say.

Nate Hagens (01:51:32):

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So are you still writing? Is this going to be a trilogy? Maybe the last book will be How The Emissary Relinquished The Things?

Iain McGilchrist (01:51:43):

No, I won't be doing any more big books. I don't have the energy or the time, but I might write a few short books. I've just been reminded yesterday by Oxford University Press that I promised them a book many years ago, which would be a kind of intellectual autobiography, I hope a short one. I'd quite like to write a short book of things I'd like to say to my younger self or to people who are growing now, about the world. And it will have no footnotes and no bibliography. And it will be no more than 100 pages, probably much less.

(01:52:28):

And the other thing I've promised for a long time to write and I would very much enjoy is a book on the art created by psychotic subjects. I've collected some from patients of mine. I was fortunate enough to work at the Bethlem Royal Hospital, the most ancient mental hospital in the world, founded in the late 14th century. And it has a magnificent museum of work done by some of its patients, some of them quite well known. And I've always found it utterly fascinating and I'd like to write a relatively short monograph illustrated with some of these works because I think people would find it intriguing as I do.

Nate Hagens (01:53:08):

This has been a great conversation. It's been inspiring to me, and I'm glad that we met after all this time and hope we can continue a conversation. Thank you for your lifetime of work and for your time today, Dr. Ian McGilchrist.

Iain McGilchrist (01:53:26):

Thank you very much, Nate. And I too have found it thoroughly enjoyable talking with you.

Nate Hagens (01:53:33):

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