Iain McGilchrist

To experience beauty, we need the right hemisphere of the brain

Humans have two hemispheres—a left and a right. We need both hemispheres to function properly. But according to Scottish neuroscientist and former literary scholar Iain McGilchrist, for the third time in Western history, the left hemisphere is dominating us. It's a hemisphere we can't do without, but only when the right hemisphere is at the helm. "Now the left hemisphere is acting as the master." With disastrous consequences.



A long, winding road at Quiraing on the Isle of Skye, Scotland

on the balance between the left and right hemispheres



“People often ask me what they can do. And then they expect me to come up with a list of actions—a dozen action points that can pull society out of its slump. But that’s just left-brain thinking.”

"Ever since my teenage years, I've felt that something is wrong with the way we view the world"

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channelmcgilchrist.com

I might as well get right to the point. The theme of this article is the most important topic I've encountered in 25 years. That's how it strikes me. That's also why I would have gladly made the trip to Scotland for it. I had even set aside the month of July for it, just in case the invitation from the Isle of Skye had come through after all. Which, in the end, it didn't , despite all my efforts.

For weeks, a thick book sat on the corner of my desk. Iain McGilchrist's second work. So thick—1,500 pages—that the publisher couldn't fit it into a single volume and ended up splitting it into two books. The bibliography alone spans dozens of pages. Let's just come right out and say it. It's an intimidating work.

And yet, anyone who starts leafing through it or opens the book to a random page is quickly rewarded. It's brimming with surprising perspectives, insights, and personal revelations. Iain McGilchrist, a neurologist, psychiatrist, and former literary scholar, has been regarded as the world's leading expert on the left and right hemispheres of the brain ever since the publication of his first book, **The Master and His Emissary**, in 2009.

Why on earth do humans have two hemispheres? Why not one large brain mass? Why two hemispheres, which are also so vastly different from one another? Please forget most of the popular explanations in circulation, says Iain McGilchrist. Is the left hemisphere a bit boring but reliably rational? Is the right hemisphere emotional? None of that is true, the Scottish psychiatrist emphatically states. The left hemisphere is often actually very emotional and gets angry very quickly; and it is precisely the right hemisphere that controls inappropriate or excessive expressions of emotion.

Spotlight

To understand the difference between the two hemispheres, Iain McGilchrist uses the image of a spotlight on a stage that illuminates an actor on stage. Think of the left hemisphere, he says, as a beam of light moving across the stage. "A beam of light that constantly illuminates different parts of the stage. The dark part of the stage hasn't disappeared; it's just not being seen."

This is also how we can understand the left hemisphere: "A very sharply defined, narrow beam of attention that enables us to grasp what is important for our survival. And that doesn't apply only to humans. In all the animals we've studied, one of the hemispheres is focused on grasping and acquiring."

Imagine a bird scanning the ground in search of seeds, says McGilchrist in a new attempt at clarification. The problem for the bird is that the seeds aren't just sitting in a pile waiting for it, but are scattered across the ground—among all sorts of inedible pebbles. What the bird needs to distinguish the seed from the pebbles is a focused kind of attention that allows the animal to concentrate entirely on distinguishing between "useful" and "useless."

McGilchrist: "The left hemisphere thus focuses attention on a very small part of the environment: something it wants to pick up and eat, something it wants to pick up to build a nest, something it wants to manipulate and exploit. But if this focus is the only form of attention that humans or animals possess, they won't last long, because while they're gathering their lunch, they themselves are on a predator's menu." In other words: "Survival is about grabbing things, but also about remaining open to what else is happening in your environment."

Gorilla

So there must be another way of looking at things, and that way of looking comes from the right hemisphere of the brain. "At first," says McGilchrist, "I didn't realize myself how important this difference in attention is. Until it dawned on me that the way we pay attention to the world determines what we see in the world."

In this context, McGilchrist cites a 1999 psychological study called **Gorillas in Our Midst**. It's easy to find on YouTube. In a video, we see two teams passing a basketball back and forth. One team wears white shirts; the other wears black shirts.

The viewer is asked to keep track of how many times the ball is passed among the white team.

Iain McGilchrist: "I don't remember exactly how many times the ball goes back and forth—fourteen or fifteen times. But then the researchers ask, 'And what about the gorilla?' You think, 'Gorilla?' Then you get to see the same clip again. And it turns out that someone in a gorilla suit walked across the screen while you were counting. A gorilla that briefly beats its chest and then disappears from the screen, utterly exhausted. But who saw that gorilla? Because our attention was focused on the ball, we simply didn't register the gorilla."

Teenage Years

And the same is true of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, argues Iain McGilchrist. "To the left hemisphere, the world seems to consist of particles—defined, tiny bits—perceived sharply and in detail, static, unconnected to anything else, taken out of context, abstracted, and explicit."

The right hemisphere views the world differently, says McGilchrist. "An open and broad attention in which nothing is definitively known and nothing is certain, in which things are constantly changing and flowing; in which everything is connected to everything else and must also be seen in its context."

"Ever since my teenage years, I've had the feeling that something was wrong with the way we view the world," McGilchrist explains in a personal conversation with British author Paul Kingsnorth. "I just felt that the world wasn't as lifeless as I was led to believe in my science classes at school."

He then went on to study English literature at Oxford, followed by a position at the prestigious *All Souls College*, Oxford, where he was able to conduct research for seven years without the pressures of teaching or a job. It was during that time that the question first occurred to him: why do we "destroy" literature and poetry "when we study a literary story or a poem"?

This is how he sees it now: "When you take a poem apart, it loses its power. And that actually applies to all the things that are truly important to us. The moment you analyze a work of art—or, really, anything whose value is implicit and unique—you turn it into something general. What is implicit becomes explicit. In doing so, it loses its meaning—just as a joke is no longer funny once you have to explain the punchline."

At the age of 28, he switched from English literature to medicine for that very reason. "At the ripe old age of 28, I returned to the lecture halls as a first-year medical student." After completing that second degree, he began working at a London psychiatric institution, where he would become increasingly fascinated by the differences between the two hemispheres of the brain. It marked the beginning of a thirty-year research period that would make him the world's leading authority in this field.

Trouw Interview

To be honest, until early 2026, I had never heard of the Scottish psychiatrist and neuroscientist.



Silver coin, Athens, 5th century B.C.



Flower Market in Athens, 5th century B.C.



Roman Forum, Rome, with the Temple of Saturn, 497 B.C.

Three Harmonic Periods

We live in an era dominated by the left hemisphere of the brain. Has it ever been any different? Absolutely, argues McGilchrist. "If, for the sake of convenience, we limit ourselves to the Western world, there have been three eras in which something astonishing took place. First, the sixth century B.C. in Greece, and then around the beginning of our era in Rome. And many centuries later, starting in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, once again in Italy, France, and more generally in Western Europe—the Renaissance.

"What seems to happen in small societies, when they are at the beginning of their development, is that life as a whole flourishes—a flourishing of all forms of creativity, such as science and art, theater, music, poetry, and cartography, astronomy, navigation, law, and citizenship—all of these things developed in a refined manner during these three periods. A wonderfully creative experience.

"In all these areas, progress was made, only to then, very gradually, over the course of a few hundred years, decline again. The system fell into decay; everything became cruder; society shifted more and more toward a left-brain perspective on things. Whereas before, the left and right hemispheres had worked together in such a fruitful way: the right hemisphere overseeing the whole, and the left hemisphere handling much of the executive work."

See: *The Master and His Messenger* and *Why the West Is Losing Meaning*: Luke Martin in conversation with Iain McGilchrist on March 24, 2026



"Sometimes the heart receives messages that the intellect does not understand"

James Stringer: Glendale, Skye | CC BY-NC 2.0

The light only went on with the interview that two Trouw journalists conducted with him in early 2026. A rather astonishing interview, I thought, given the way McGilchrist, with just a few strokes of the pen, interpreted the times in which we live. A diagnosis of Western society. A diagnosis, but actually also a cure. A direction. A way out of the quagmire.
Or does it just seem that way?

After that Trouw interview, it was my fervent wish to travel to Scotland, meet Iain McGilchrist, and present him with my now rapidly growing list of questions. But I'm clearly not the only one. The Scottish psychiatrist had, incidentally, seen the interest in his work coming a long way off.

After the publication of his first book, **The Master and His Emissary**, in 2009 (recently, in May 2026, published in Dutch as **De meester en zijn afgezant**), he stepped away from his clinical work as a psychiatrist to respond to the flood of emails, letters, invitations, and requests that his first book had unleashed. He retreated to his home on the remote island of Skye.

And that anticipated interest certainly materialized—not only from the professional community but also from "ordinary" readers. Among all the mail and emails he has received in recent years, the responses that stand out are those from people telling him what an incredible impact his book has had on their lives. "And that's something I didn't see coming," McGilchrist admits. "In my years as a doctor and psychiatrist, I did feel I had made a difference in people's lives. But I hadn't expected my book to have a therapeutic effect as well."

In some cases, you were even told that you had saved their lives, says British host Luke Martin in an interview with McGilchrist in 2026. *How can that be explained?*

"I can only speculate. But what I gather from the responses I received is that those people felt their lives seemed to have no meaning. What I try to explain in my books is that the meaninglessness presented to us by some in the scientific world—namely, that the meaning and purpose of life are fabrications designed to make life more bearable—is untenable.

"No scientist can prove that. Why not? Because science doesn't deal with values at all. Science looks purely at mechanisms. And it has been very successful in that regard. But then, as a scientist, you're also unable to say anything meaningful about the meaning of life. It's as if a police officer were to stop all traffic on a certain street and then solemnly note that the silence on that street is very suspicious."

"I'm a big believer in science and reason, but they can't tell the whole story. In addition to reason and science, we need intuition and imagination. And let's face it, the power of the heart should not be underestimated. Sometimes the heart receives messages that the intellect cannot understand. That may sound a bit sentimental, but it isn't. I'm not a fan of sentimentality, but I am a fan of the heart.

"All my life, I've had the feeling that certain things spoke to me or called out to me. In my teenage years, this was especially true of nature. When I walked through meadows or forests, I felt as though they

were alive and speaking to me. They were calling to me, and it was up to me to answer. And that love for nature has stayed with me throughout my life."

Skye

Iain McGilchrist lives in the northwest of Scotland, on the Isle of Skye, in a white country house, as I gather from the reports; not far from the sea, on a deserted country road, full of potholes—where the wind blows hard. "To the left and right, a rugged landscape with majestic mountains in the distance—shrouded in mist."

Yes, how I would have loved to have made the trip there. An initial interview request submitted via his website came to nothing. But then, by chance, I came into contact with the president of an international club of holistically oriented scientists—to whom I mentioned my desire to interview Iain McGilchrist.

"Mention my name," he suggested. "McGilchrist serves on the Academic Advisory Board of our scientific platform. Feel free to say that, as chairman, I support your interview and that it could help spread his insights throughout the Dutch-speaking world."

But even this recommendation doesn't lead to the desired invitation. As a "final push," I finally reach out to the publisher of McGilchrist's book **The Master and His Messenger**, which has just been published in Dutch—who immediately offers to contact his literary agent in England to advocate for an interview through that channel as well.

The wish has been put out into the world! Let's not keep pestering them. Now the trick is to let go. The left hemisphere of the brain knows only the straight line, as I understand from McGilchrist's first book. "Whereas the right hemisphere never heads straight for its goal."

His popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world, incidentally, also has a positive side. It turns out to be anything but difficult to find fascinating podcast conversations with him. Some of the most interesting conversations form the basis for this article. Not to mention the 2,300 pages from his two books—though I must admit that I haven't been able to read them all.

Disruptive

Let's start with the question that futurist Nate Hagens posed to McGilchrist in a great interview in 2026:

With your gorilla example, are you saying that, from the perspective of the left hemisphere of the brain, we tend to let our attention be hijacked by economic values—profit, money—and, as a result, overlook other values?

"Absolutely right. In fact, our attention is constantly being hijacked by something or someone who wants to sell us something, and that is extremely disruptive. The prevailing mindset of our time is that there must be 'more' of everything. There must be *more*, and it must happen *faster*. And I say: no, there must actually be *less*, and it must happen *more slowly*."

According to McGilchrist, that is the beginning of wisdom: emptying yourself. "Think of the womb as an example of a space where new life can grow. If that space is full, nothing new can emerge. Let's silence that chatty voice of the left hemisphere instead, so that something else—something we hadn't anticipated—gets the chance to emerge. That is the creative process. We're all capable of it, but in the modern world, we give it so little space.'

But in our time, it's hard to allow that silence; we seem to always have to be productive.

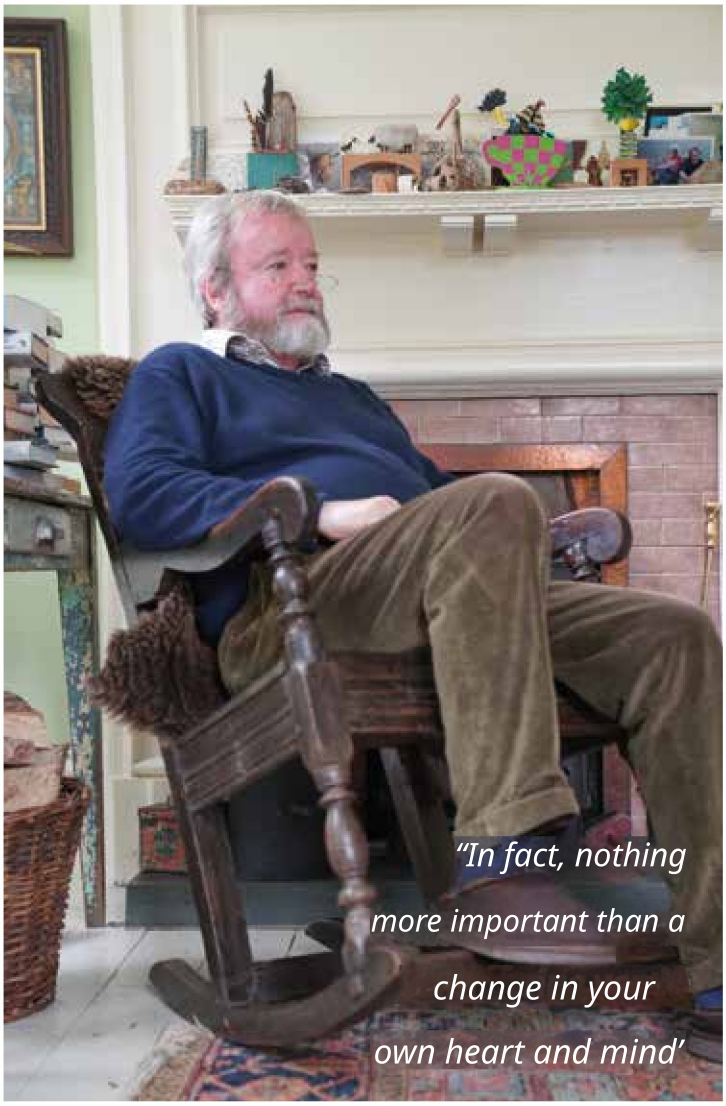
"But the fixation on productivity is, in fact, so incredibly unproductive. It only yields mediocrity. A machine can produce mediocrity, but to rise above it requires a living, imaginative human being."

Good ideas—I've noticed—do indeed seem to come to mind precisely when we're doing nothing and not trying to think about anything in particular.

"Yes, just as we might feel that new ideas come easily in the shower. Of course, that has nothing to do with the shower. But I can imagine that a shower in the morning can help you return to your normal waking consciousness after a night's sleep—at which point what you experienced in your sleep begins to speak to you... How many times have I myself had the experience of suddenly realizing, right after getting out of bed and stepping into the shower: yes, that's the answer."



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Metaphors and Stories

In all the interviews Iain McGilchrist has given in recent years, he emphasizes that we should not underestimate the importance of the left hemisphere. "We need both hemispheres. The left hemisphere has made a substantial contribution to everything humanity has achieved over the past centuries."

The left hemisphere can do many things that the right hemisphere cannot. For example, the right hemisphere has a hard time expressing itself clearly, while the left hemisphere has no trouble finding the right words. Conversely, the left hemisphere is unable to make sense of the metaphors and stories that the right hemisphere likes to use to convey messages. And that means, according to McGilchrist, that in a culture dominated by the left hemisphere, metaphors are quickly dismissed as fables—or, in the worst case, even as outright lies.

McGilchrist: "The left hemisphere is useful when we need something quickly, when we have to grab hold of something—when we want to get something done—in terms of 'utility.' But all *other* values—connection, truth, goodness, beauty, love—are better understood by the right hemisphere."

This is, in fact, the crux of the matter: "In an ideal society, the right hemisphere is the Master who appoints an Envoy to go out on his behalf and do the bureaucratic work—so that he himself can maintain an overview and allow the community of which he is the spiritual master to flourish. Now we are experiencing the reverse situation," according to McGilchrist.

"The Envoy thinks he is the Master. And although the Envoy knows less than the Master, he thinks he knows everything."

Coherence

In your view, have we once again found ourselves in a time when we've lost sight of the big picture?

"Absolutely. And not only that: we no longer perceive depth. The left hemisphere perceives no depth in space, no depth in time, and no depth in emotions. I think we've lost our ability to penetrate deeply into things—and to understand them in their context."

Moreover, the left hemisphere struggles to connect with reality. "A society dominated by the left hemisphere tends to view people as interchangeable entities." He gives the example of a Swiss farmer who suffered a stroke in the right hemisphere. "Before his stroke, he knew all his cows by name. After his stroke, he could barely tell a horse from a cow." Another example: a Swiss woman who had spent her entire life studying the birds of her native country, but "for whom, after a stroke in the right hemisphere, all birds looked the same."

All subtlety is lost in a society dominated by the left hemisphere, McGilchrist explains. "It's a way of looking at life in which it's either this or that. There is no room for nuance, no room to bridge opposites. And that, I think, is where we stand today: a world ruined by excessive scaling up, a thirst for power and control, with a bureaucracy that has taken over life in the belief that everything can best be regulated this way. In reality, creativity is being stifled."

Would it be an exaggeration to say that such a society is mentally ill?

"Well, that's a pretty accurate way of putting it. As humanity, we're not thriving. In fact, we're in the process of destroying ourselves. And when it comes to self-destruction, you naturally tend to think of a mental disorder in the case of an individual.

"When it comes to a culture that is in the process of ruining itself, you think of a society that is alienating itself from its past, despising its heritage, and ignoring what it owes to the future. A culture in which people are driven apart, the cohesion of the community is disrupted—the importance, for example, of eating and talking together. In which nature is pushed aside and artificial living environments are created out of straight lines and abstract experiences. And in which people are led to believe that only simple souls believe that human existence could have anything sacred or divine about it."

So much nihilism, according to McGilchrist, would lead to an epidemic of existential anxiety, a sense of hopelessness, and meaningless depression. "All those things, in fact, that we see around us now."

It reminds me of a story a friend told me



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She told me recently. She was hosting a children's party; the kids were playing when one of them came up to her and said, "We're being naughty, but we don't know how to stop being naughty."
"That's very honest."

They could see that what they were doing was actually wrong and leading nowhere; they just didn't know how to get out of the mess they'd gotten themselves into. Doesn't that also apply to modern Western culture? We're misbehaving, but we don't know how to stop.
"Indeed, indeed. The problem with that," says McGilchrist, "is that the left hemisphere doesn't see the gravity of the situation. Left to its own devices, the left hemisphere is like a sleepwalker who just keeps going in the same direction, unaware that he's heading straight for the abyss."

Paralysis

To illustrate the one-sidedness we've fallen into, during a public interview in Spain in 2026, he shares an anecdote from his life as a doctor. It was an experience that made a deep impression on him. At the hospital where he was working at the time, he was introduced during his rounds to a man who had suffered a stroke in the right hemisphere the previous night—the left side of his body had become paralyzed.
McGilchrist asked the man how he was doing. The man replied that he was "doing fine." McGilchrist said, "Great! So there's no problem?" No, no, the man agreed. "No problem." But was there really no problem, not even with his left arm—which, after all, was completely paralyzed? "No, no," the man insisted. But could he move that arm? Yes, he claimed. Yet the medical staff present still saw no movement whatsoever. They then carefully placed his arm in front of him so he could see it, asking again if he could move it. To which the man replied, "Oh, but that's not my arm, doctor; it belongs to that patient over there."

Better Blind Than Deaf

What experiences in McGilchrist's own life have changed his outlook on life? "What has personally touched me the most and changed my life is music," he says in 2026 in a conversation with Luke Martin. "I would—I think—rather be blind than deaf, no longer able to hear music.
"For a long time, I sang in choirs, which brought me immeasurable joy. When I think back to the first time I heard Thomas Tallis's *Lamentations* (16^{th} century)—the mere recollection of that experience—I feel the tears welling up. It was such a profound experience. In Renaissance polyphony, I stumbled upon something that spoke to my soul—as if it were waking up and beginning to listen, eager to engage in dialogue."
Years later, Iain McGilchrist had an experience of comparable intensity in Russia. "A colleague used to travel regularly to what was then Leningrad to take photographs. One day he asked, 'Do you want to come along?' For a week, I walked through the city in temperatures of 25 or 30 degrees below zero. At one point, I entered a cathedral where an Orthodox service was just getting underway."
When McGilchrist recalls that experience and tries to put it into words, the emotion strikes him all over again. "Even though I didn't understand exactly what was being said, I understood what was happening! It moved me so incredibly. An experience I will never, ever forget. All those people who had gathered there and risked everything to be present." McGilchrist is referring here to the Soviet era, when religion was not banned but was distrusted, controlled, and discouraged, and churchgoers were monitored and intimidated by agents or informants linked to the KGB or local security services.
"As we left the cathedral, thugs in sunglasses and leather jackets were filming those present—so that their children would suffer the consequences and, for example, would never be able to attend university. Their witness to their faith and the beauty of their singing moved me deeply."
McGilchrist also describes watching Andrei Tarkovsky's **Andrei Rublev** (1966) as overwhelming. It is a film about the life of a fifteenth-century icon painter who struggles with art, faith, and the violence of medieval Russia. "But even if you know what the film is about, you still have no idea what a colossal work of art this film is. Afterward, we felt so overwhelmed that we couldn't utter a single word on the entire train ride home."
In the same way, according to McGilchrist, you can be moved by certain people and by nature. "And no, I can't see nature as something that's merely pleasant or beautiful just because I spend time in it. That's once again the narrow-minded perspective of the left hemisphere." In his experience, it's more accurate to say that "through nature, through certain people, and through great art and music, we experience something of the essence of human existence."

See also: *Why the West is losing meaning*: Luke Martin in conversation with Iain McGilchrist, March 24, 2026





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A hospital experience that, according to McGilchrist, still has much to teach us today—because it exemplifies the way we live our lives today. Without the right hemisphere of the brain, people do not take responsibility for the things that go wrong in their lives. "A problem is someone else's problem."

According to him, you see this in schizophrenia as well—a condition in which the right hemisphere isn't functioning properly. "For example, someone like that hears a voice in the room, looks around, sees no one, and then concludes that the voice must have come in through the electrical outlet. The neighbors must surely be sending messages through the outlet. The thought that this can't be right doesn't even occur to them."

Hope

You're pessimistic about the direction the Western world is currently heading. But do you also have hope?
"I have hope. That may sound strange, given the direction our society is moving in. Yet I have hope! Partly because we don't know the future, partly because hope is a duty and a virtue. I think that as human beings, we must have faith.

"There's a famous quote by the anthropologist Margaret Mead that I love: 'Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change a society.' In fact, major changes have never come about any other way. That's what I think we need to realize: that just a few percent of humanity is enough to set change for the better in motion."

When McGilchrist is asked in interviews how we can steer our society in a more positive direction, two answers invariably stand out. Time and again, he emphasizes the importance of small communities. And by that, he means communities that place less strain on the planet—that grow their own food and look out for one another.

"People often ask me what they can *do*. And then they expect me to come up with a list of actions—a dozen action points that can pull society out of its slump. But that's left-brain thinking again. That's when we think we can save the rainforest by labeling it a rich source of timber or by extolling its tourist potential. The left brain wants ready-made solutions. But that's not the direction we should be heading at all.

"The turning point will only come when we realize that things have intrinsic value. Only then can we begin to clean up the mess we've maneuvered ourselves into. If we want to survive, a few measures won't be enough. We don't need yet more quick fixes, but a paradigm shift."

Still, I can imagine there are quite a few recommendations that would fit your vision. For example, the recommendation to spend more time in nature, put down your smartphone a little more often, or eat together more frequently.
"On a certain level, that is indeed a direction worth considering. I am one hundred percent in favor of banning all phones in educational settings. And yes, it absolutely makes sense to encourage people to go outside. Just a few times a week, for twenty minutes to half an hour, already has a beneficial effect. People feel less stress, their physical health improves, and they feel less depressed.

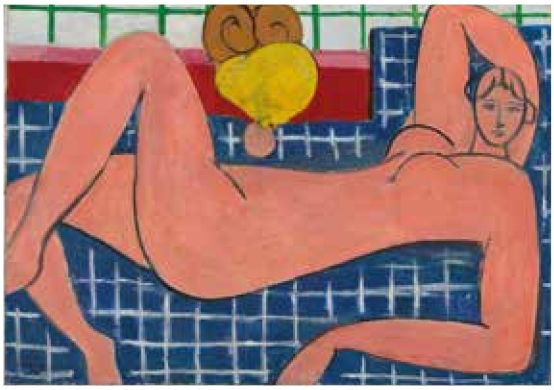
"All of this is valuable. Just as meditation and prayer have undeniable value if you're drawn to them. They're ways to quiet the chattering voice of the left hemisphere of the brain. But what I'm trying to say is that the real answer can only come through a change in our attitude toward life. If we want to survive, a few measures aren't enough. A complete transformation of heart and mind is needed."

Truth and Beauty

In this context, you refer to "truth," "beauty," and "goodness."
"Those are indeed the most important things when it comes to meaning and purpose in life. Many artists



Claude Lorrain (1648): "A magnificent example of a right-brain painting, which connects us emotionally with the world"



Henri Matisse: Large Reclining Nude (1935): "Harmony and perspective disappeared from painting once again with modernism"



Leonardo da Vinci: The Virgin of the Rocks (1485): "In the Renaissance, there was a tendency to show the left side of the face, corresponding to the right hemisphere of the brain."

have distanced themselves from this over the past hundred years. We live in a time when we don't seem to care whether something is beautiful. And yet beauty is one of the things that gives life meaning.

"What makes humans special is their ability to create beauty and to notice and appreciate that beauty. And with the appreciation of beauty comes the ability to understand truth and goodness—values that I believe were never conceived or invented at any point. So I'm not talking about what we find beautiful. I'm talking about the fact that beauty exists at all."

But —as Nate Hagens said in 2026 in his interview with McGilchrist— *beauty, love, and truth are still human constructs, aren't they?*

"Not at all. On the contrary. We did not invent beauty, love, and truth; as human beings, we were given the ability to *discover* them. And 'discover' here literally means: to bring to light. Beauty, love, and truth are there to be brought to light—to be revealed. Beauty must be received. Truth must be understood and perceived."

Personally, these words immediately remind me of what our columnist Frans Olofsen wrote in a recent VA column about beauty. How, as a "naive first-year biology student" during a tour of the Zoological Laboratory, upon seeing a drawer full of pinned butterflies and spotting a peacock butterfly, he blurted out: "How beautiful!" —whereupon a research assistant, as if stung by a wasp, sharply rebuked Frans with the words: "Beauty does not exist in nature; beauty exists only within you."

Well, I can reassure Frans Olofsen. If Iain McGilchrist had been there, that research assistant would have been in for a scolding. Is beauty subjective? On the contrary. "Beauty doesn't disappear when we ignore it," he asserts emphatically. "We may or may not notice beauty, certainly. Just as what is called beautiful can vary somewhat over the course of time."

But the core remains unchanged. Beauty, according to McGilchrist, touches the essence of our humanity.

"We can notice the extraordinary beauty of so many remarkable things in our lives, or we can fail to notice it. When we do notice it, we simultaneously contribute to the further spread of beauty. If we don't, then so be it. And that's fine. But in my opinion, we've then wasted our lives."

Renaissance

Here, too, the problem is the left hemisphere of the brain. In Western society, he argues, it has become indecent to talk about beauty or inspiration. "Beauty is rarely mentioned in contemporary art criticism. People prefer to speak of 'strong' or 'provocative.'"

In **The Master and His Messenger**, McGilchrist points to research showing that babies as young as four months old prefer consonance to dissonance (a consonance that evokes tension and often calls for resolution—ed.). Harmony activates areas of the brain associated with pleasant experiences.

According to him, harmony in music corresponds to perspective in painting. In both cases, "depth" is experienced. And both depend on the right hemisphere of the brain. "They developed together during the Renaissance and met their downfall together in modernism—when harmony was thrown into disarray by painters such as Picasso, who deliberately disoriented the viewer by manipulating perspective."



This is not a value judgment about the artworks themselves, he emphasizes, because some of those modern artworks are extraordinarily impressive and very beautiful. Nevertheless, much modern art stems from the world of the left hemisphere and has become “completely sterile.” “If a work of art is experienced as fragmented and disjointed, it ceases to be alive. It becomes opaque. The eye cannot penetrate it and remains motionless, fixated on the work itself, which no longer succeeds in revealing the world in a new way.”

“All the things that are truly important in our lives have a certain depth—which, moreover, you must leave alone. Everything in life that really matters,” McGilchrist emphasizes once again, “is implicit.” In other words: the value is hidden between the lines. “And if you try to make what is implicit explicit, you ruin it. Then it loses its appeal. That’s how it is with friendship, that’s how it is with poetry, that’s how it is with humor.”

The right hemisphere, he argues, certainly understands what’s hidden between the lines; the left hemisphere doesn’t understand any of it. “Suppose I say, ‘It’s a little warm in here.’ Then the left hemisphere interprets this as me providing meteorological information. The right hemisphere understands what I actually mean: ‘Can we open a window?’ or something like that.

“Or suppose I say that I love my wife and that she means everything to me. Then the left hemisphere asks, ‘Okay, but what does she mean to you?’ No, no—you say. She doesn’t mean something I can explain to you. And that applies to all the things that really matter in life. You shouldn’t try to make their meaning explicit. Why not? Because then you destroy their value.

“Virtually everything that matters in life loses its meaning when it is made explicit. This includes love, sex, poetry, music, architecture, art, religion, ritual, storytelling, myth, and faith. Everything that gives meaning to our lives is impoverished by the kind of attention the left hemisphere brings to it.”

In his interview in *Trouw*, McGilchrist cites Mozart’s Quintet in G minor as an example. “That quintet changed my life. I really mean that. And yet, what is it, really? Suppose we look at it from the perspective of the left hemisphere. Then it consists of individual notes. Seventeen A’s, nine A-sharp’s, and one B. But that’s not the answer. It’s the relationships between the notes that produce the harmony, the melody, and the rhythm—the domain of the right hemisphere. You can’t measure what music does to a listener. It’s the same with love. If you’ve ever been in love, you know that it’s very real and important, but absolutely impossible to measure and impossible to reproduce in a laboratory.’

Final Question

If I could ask you one last question, it would be this: what would you like people to take away from your work?

“The most important thing is that we don’t let ourselves be misled by the idea that we ourselves can’t do anything. That idea stems from the mass society in which we live—the notion that only those at the center of power, those who pull the strings, can do anything. No, you are important—whoever or whatever you are.

“In fact, nothing is more important than a change in your own heart and mind—the orientation of your soul toward the world. And at the same time, that is the only thing over which you truly have control. You can exert only minimal influence over many other things. But here you have

You don’t need anything to do it. And certainly not money. You can start right away, because it takes place within us.

“We live in a world where consciousness doesn’t seem to matter. But we must embrace the idea that our consciousness—our heart—is of enormous importance. In a sense, that’s the only thing you can truly take care of. We aren’t asked to solve the world’s problems. That would be asking too much. But what you can do is take responsibility for yourself. In a way that suits you: for example, by opening yourself to beauty in art, by connecting with your friends, by truly connecting with people; by dedicating yourself to things you feel matter, and perhaps by leading a life of prayer or meditation. For me, it doesn’t necessarily have to be prayer, but I do feel that it adds something if we can at least be meditatively present.’

“We don’t know what the meaning of this life is, but I see it as a gift—a present. As far as I’m concerned, this is the best way to look at it. Life isn’t a problem to be solved; rather, it’s a mystery to be embraced—one we must learn to embrace anew—a gift for which we can be grateful. A gift that we can squander or put to good use.'

Bart Hommersen

Sources: *Why the West is losing meaning*: Luke Martin in conversation with Iain McGilchrist on the British platform *Premier Unbelievable*, March 24, 2026 | *The Counterintuitive Need to Slow Down and Find Spaciousness*: Nate Hagens interviews Iain McGilchrist on March 24, 2026, on *The Great Simplification Podcast* | *Change your way of seeing*: Paul Kingsnorth in conversation with McGilchrist, September 12, 2025 | *On the Nature of Reality*: The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in conversation with McGilchrist, January 23, 2024 | *We Must Teach Our Brain to Listen to Others*: BBVA interview on April 30, 2026 | Tom Zwitser: *The Brain and Our Modern World*, interview, Epoque June 24, Fall 2025 | Trouw Interview: *This Scottish psychiatrist knows why we’re becoming increasingly unhappy—and what we can do about it*, January 22, 2026



Column by Han van den Boogaard



What stands out in Han van den Boogaard’s observations is the silence. It’s great to be able to publish some of his reflections in VA.

Drinking in the Silence

The warmth of summer is still lingering this afternoon. Few people venture outside. The streets are quiet. The sun is trying to make its way through the foliage of trees and bushes everywhere. I almost feel as if I’m alone in the world—a feeling I used to have often when my attention wasn’t distracted by the sounds, activities, and expectations of others; when I could go about my business undisturbed without having to achieve anything or live up to any expectations. Warm summer days in my youth when there was no one to play with. Lazy afternoons during my college years when I’d set my books aside and just sit there staring out the window. Days filled with a void that was palpable but not sad or lonely, and in which silence very modestly took its rightful place for a moment.

It’s an afternoon like that when, a little while later, I walk through the woods without a goal or destination, in the shade of oaks and beeches. Along the way, I’m jolted out of my reverie by the languid flapping of a large bird of prey gliding low between the trees. Judging by the white undersides of its wings, it’s a buzzard. A little further on, it lands on the branch of a beech tree. As I watch it glide seemingly slowly through the air, words come to mind that don’t often occur to me when I see people moving. But this bird’s flight is truly stately—one might even call it majestic.

When I get too close to its resting spot, it moves to a tree a little further away. I don’t get the feeling that he’s afraid of me, but rather that he simply wants nothing to do with me or any other human being. But nothing exists that doesn’t touch something else. He can’t avoid us, just as we can’t avoid him. With a gaze that people often call haughty, he surveys the stretch of forest around us.

I’m reminded of the words of the poet C.O. Jellema: “To gaze is to drink silence from things.” And now I know what I’ve come here to do: to drink silence—among old trees that do nothing else. Perhaps that’s why they live much longer than we do. Just like the buzzard, they don’t need us. We aren’t as important as we always think we are.

Han van den Boogaard