Review of *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy* by Peter G. Brown and Geoffrey Garver, with Keith Helmuth, Robert Howell, and Steve Szeghi

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For the past 350 years the Quakers (Religious Society of Friends) have had an impact on society out of proportion with their small numbers. The Quakers have championed the cause of peace since the 17th century, began working for the abolition of slavery in the 18th century, and have championed the rights of prisoners and mental patients since the 19th century (Brinton, 1965).

In the 20th century, the Quakers continued their work for peace and against racism and added concerns about genetically modified organisms, intellectual property rights, aboriginal rights, and other moral issues. In 2003, a group of Quakers met at Pendle Hill, a retreat centre in Pennsylvania, to talk about the environmental crises. This meeting led to the creation of a new organization, the Quaker Institute for the Future (www.quakerinstitute.org), and to this book, *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy.*

The coauthors are all Quakers with backgrounds in public policy, business administration, economics, agriculture, cooperatives, ethics, and economics. They come from the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. In developing their concept of "right relationship" they make the surprising claim that they see a convergence between religion, science, and ethics. They support this claim by building their ethical vision not on the words of Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammed, but on the words of ecologist Aldo Leopold.

Leopold (1949) wrote, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." The authors of this book reflect contemporary systems theory in slightly rewording Leopold’s statement in their definition of right relationship: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the commonwealth of life. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." They show how this definition is consistent with the ethics of a number of contemporary religious thinkers.

Ehrlich and Holdren (1971) proposed the following equation: \[ I = f(PAT), \] where \( I \) is environmental impact, \( P \) is population, \( A \) is affluence, and \( T \) is technology. These authors add \( E \) for ethics, making the equation \( I = f(PATE) \). The concept of "right relationship" and "whole earth economy" now become factors in measuring ecological impact.

Using this ethical lens, they reframe some basic questions about economics in surprising ways:

- What is the economy for? To support the integrity, resilience, and beauty of the commonwealth of life.
- How does the economy work? It is more relevant to ask: How does the Earth work?
- How big is too big? Can the commonwealth of all life support our patterns of consumption and waste?
- What is fair? Do we include all beings, present and future, humans and nonhumans, in our ethical vision?

The discussion of all these issues, along with many examples, is deep and well informed and leads, on almost every page, to new and surprising insights. By shifting the goal from economic growth (or even sustainability) to right relationship, the book is able to lead the way...
toward a whole earth economy. They have taken the ethical principles reflected in the Earth Charter (2000) and successfully mapped them on to the world economic, political, and ecological systems.

The book discusses in depth the governance needs of a whole earth economy and the limitations in existing institutions and then moves on to a vision of how this ethical vision can be implemented. They elaborate on four potential global institutions, being clear that this is a sketch of one possible vision, not a dogmatic blueprint for the future:

1. The Global Reserve—an independent agency for research and monitoring.
2. A Trusteeship system for the planetary commons such as the atmosphere and the oceans.
3. A global federation for government.
4. A global court for resolving disputes and enforcing trust violations and decisions of the global federation.

The book then moves on from this vision for future governance to suggest four steps we can all take to bring about the needed change. This final chapter is explicitly modeled on the campaign for the abolition of slavery initiated by the Quakers and Anglicans in England in 1787. They suggest the following four steps:

1. Grounding and clarification: All societies need to subscribe to ethics similar to those of the Earth Charter.
2. Design: We need to explore and implement models for governance and institutions based on right relationship.
3. Witness: We need to commit, as individuals and communities, to living in right relationship with earth.
4. Nonviolent reform: We need an assertive program of nonviolent advocacy.

This book provides a superb analysis of the world environmental and ecological situation informed by both ethics and science. It paints a beautiful picture of world government built on ecological principles and a firm ethical foundation. They provide a path toward this future based on education, experiment, individual responsibility, and collective action.

This book is interesting, well researched, and informative. I recommend it to anyone who cares about their children or grandchildren, other people, or other species. It is convincing and inspiring. The concept of right relationship, like the golden rule, gives us a simple and straightforward ethical meter stick to evaluate our personal and collective decisions.

I was positively moved by the book as I read it, but after finishing the last chapter I felt profoundly depressed. The gap between the ethical vision of a whole earth economy and the world in which we live just seemed too huge. Is it possible to inject ethics into an economy dominated by consumption and militarism and managed by financial elites? Recent history seems to be short of successful examples of the enlightened governance they recommend. If such a future is possible, is there time? The nonviolent movement to abolish slavery in the British Empire took 46 years to achieve partial success and abolition in the United States required another 29 years and a bloody civil war.

These negative feelings passed after a few days. Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy is a wonderful guide to ethics for the 21st century. It points us in the right direction even if it does not tell us how to overcome the obstacles we will find along the way.

REFERENCES


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