

How to Create a Better World: Bring about a Revolution in Universities

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The crisis of our times is that we have science without wisdom. This is the crisis behind all the others. Population growth, the lethal character of modern war and terrorism, immense differences in wealth and power around the globe, annihilation of indigenous people, cultures and languages, impending depletion of natural resources, destruction of tropical rain forests and other natural habitats, rapid extinction of species, pollution of sea, earth and air, and above all global warming: all these relatively recent crises have been made possible by modern science and technology.

Successful science produces knowledge and technological know-how, which in turn enormously increase our power to act. It is to be expected that this power will be used beneficially (as it has been used), to cure disease, feed people, and in general enhance the quality of human life. But it is also to be expected, in the absence of wisdom, that such an abrupt, massive increase in power will be used to cause harm, whether unintentionally, as in the case (initially at least) of environmental damage, or intentionally, as in war and terror.

Before the advent of modern science, lack of wisdom did not matter too much; we lacked the means to do too much damage to ourselves and the planet. But now, in possession of unprecedented powers bequeathed to us by science, lack of wisdom has become a menace. No longer a luxury, wisdom has become a necessity. The crucial question becomes: How can we learn to become wiser?

The answer is staring us in the face. We need traditions and institutions of learning rationally designed to help us learn wisdom. This at present we do not have. Academic inquiry as it exists at present, devoted primarily to the pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how, is grossly and damagingly irrational when assessed from the standpoint of helping humanity acquire wisdom – wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value for oneself and others, and thus including knowledge, understanding and technological know-how, but much else besides.

Two elementary, banal rules of rational problem-solving are: (1) articulate the problem to be solved, and (2) propose and critically assess possible solutions. A kind of academic inquiry rationally devoted to helping humanity solve its problems of living so that that which is of value may be realized (thus enhancing wisdom) would put rules (1) and (2) into practice: it would give intellectual priority to (1) articulating our problems of living and (2) proposing and critically assessing possible solutions, possible actions, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life. This goes on, at present, within academia, but only on the fringes: the primary intellectual activity is to solve problems of knowledge, not problems of living. To pursue knowledge more or less dissociated from the attempt to help humanity resolve its conflicts and problems of living in more just and cooperative ways than at present is not only irrational; it is a recipe for disaster, as we have seen. It is this which has led to all our distinctively modern global problems.

We need to bring about a revolution in the academic enterprise so that the basic aim becomes to promote wisdom rather than just acquire knowledge. Social inquiry needs to change, so that it gives intellectual priority to problems of living over problems of knowledge about the social world. The relationship between social inquiry and natural science needs to change, the new kind of social inquiry becoming more fundamental intellectually than natural science. The natural sciences need to change so that three domains of discussion are recognized, namely evidence, theory, and aims, the latter involving problematic issues about what is unknown, values, and use. Education needs to change. The whole relationship between academia and the social world needs to change, so that academia does not just study the social world, but rather is in two-way debate with it, ideas, experiences and arguments flowing in both directions. Academia needs to become a kind of people's civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments.

Academics today have a profound responsibility before humanity to put their house in order, intellectually and morally, and create a kind of inquiry rationally devoted to helping humanity learn how to resolve its conflicts and problems of living in more just, cooperative ways than at present. When it comes to the long-term interests of humanity, there is perhaps no more important task that lies before us than to transform schools and universities so that they take the pursuit of wisdom as their primary task. All of us can help bring about this urgently needed academic revolution: students, parents, academics, politicians, industrialists, concerned citizens. We can all contribute to a campaign to wake up our institutions of learning to their primary obligation to help humanity make progress towards as good a world as possible.

Nicholas Maxwell's latest book *How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World: The Urgent Need for an Academic Revolution* will be published by Imprint Academic on 01/01/2014 priced at £9-95. For more, [see here](#)