

ARTICLE

Knowledge or Wisdom?

(Former working title: Does Philosophy Betray Both Reason and Humanity?)

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Abstract

A bad philosophy of inquiry, built into the intellectual/institutional structure of universities round the world, betrays both reason and humanity.

Our world suffers from bad philosophy. Universities around the world have, built into their intellectual/institutional structure, a seriously defective philosophy of inquiry. This holds that, in order to help promote human welfare, academia must devote itself to the pursuit of knowledge. First, knowledge is to be acquired; then, once acquired, it can be applied to help solve social problems. It is this “knowledge-inquiry” philosophy that betrays both reason and humanity.

The extraordinarily successful pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how has been of immense benefit, and has made the modern world possible. It has also made possible all our current global problems. Modern science and technology have made possible modern industry, agriculture, medicine and hygiene, which in turn have made possible global warming, lethal modern warfare, explosive population growth, destruction of natural habitats and rapid extinction of species, pollution of earth, sea and air, vast inequalities of wealth and power around the globe.

The problem is the gross and very damaging irrationality of knowledge-inquiry. What we need is a kind of academic inquiry that puts problems of living at the heart of the enterprise, and is rationally designed and devoted to helping humanity learn how to make progress towards as good and wise a world as possible. The basic intellectual aim should be to seek and promote wisdom, understood to be the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, thus including knowledge and technological know-how, but much else besides. “Wisdom-inquiry” along these lines would differ dramatically from what we have at present, academia organized in accordance with the edicts of the false philosophy of knowledge-inquiry.

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This at least has been argued for during the last forty years in book after book,¹ scholarly paper after paper,² and in lecture after lecture in Universities and Conferences in the UK, Europe, the USA and Canada.

The charge is very, very serious. Bad philosophy lies at the heart of our current global problems. It is at the root of our current incapacity to tackle them effectively and wisely. One might think that philosophers would be eager either to show what is wrong with the argument, if that is what it deserves, or – if the argument is valid – to proclaim to fellow academics, politicians and the public that our future is threatened by a bad philosophy built into universities around the world, and we urgently need to bring about an academic revolution.

Not a bit of it. The case for the urgent need for an academic revolution, from knowledge to wisdom, has not been taken up, criticized, proclaimed, attacked, fought over. It has been ignored. The silence is deafening.

Do we have the kind of academic inquiry we really need? Is knowledge-inquiry really damagingly irrational, and at the root of many of our current crises, or is it, on the contrary, the best that we can have? What grounds are there for holding that wisdom-inquiry serves the interests of reason and humanity better than knowledge-inquiry? What kind of academic inquiry do we really need? What kind of inquiry could best help us make progress towards as good a world as possible?

These questions ought to lie at the heart of philosophy. At present they are all but ignored. I suggest that philosophers should start to take very seriously the possibility that a bad philosophy of inquiry, inherited from the past, and built into the intellectual/institutional structure of universities round the world, is at the root of many of the troubles of our world today. What philosophers do should take account of this possibility – if philosophy is not to be the intellectual equivalent of Nero fiddling while Rome burns.

Notes

¹ See N. Maxwell: *What's Wrong With Science?*, Bran's Head Books, Hayes, 1976; *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984; 2nd ed., Pentire Press, London, 2007; *The Comprehensibility of the Universe: A New Conception of Science*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pbk., 2003; *The Human World in the Physical Universe: Consciousness, Free Will and Evolution*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2001; *Is Science Neurotic?*, Imperial College Press, London, 2004; *Cutting God in Half – And Putting the Pieces Together Again*, Pentire Press, London, 2010. See also L. McHenry, ed., *Science and the Pursuit of Wisdom: Studies in the Philosophy of Nicholas Maxwell*, Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt, 2009.

² See, for example, N. Maxwell: 'Science, Reason, Knowledge and Wisdom: A Critique of Specialism', *Inquiry* 23, 1980, pp. 19-81; 'What Kind of Inquiry Can Best Help Us Create a Good World?', *Science, Technology and Human Values* 17, 1992, pp. 205-227; 'What the Task of Creating Civilization has to Learn from the Success of Modern Science: Towards a New Enlightenment', *Reflections on Higher Education* 4, 1992, pp. 139-157; 'Can Humanity Learn to Become Civilized? The Crisis of Science without Civilization', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17, 2000, pp. 29-44; 'A new conception of science', *Physics World* 13, no. 8, 2000, pp. 17-18; 'Philosophy Seminars for Five Year Olds', *Learning for Democracy*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2005, pp. 71-77; 'From Knowledge to Wisdom: The Need for an Academic Revolution', *London Review of Education*, 5, 2007, pp. 97-115, reprinted in R. Barnett and N. Maxwell, eds., *Wisdom in the University* (Routledge, 2008, pp. 1-19) 'Do We Need a Scientific Revolution?', *Journal of Biological Physics and Chemistry*, vol. 8, no. 3, September 2008, pp. 95-105; 'Arguing for Wisdom in the University', *Philosophia* vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 663-704.