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How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World

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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 terrifyingly lethal character of modern war and terrorism, vast differences in wealth and power around the globe, destruction of tropical rain forests and other natural habitats, rapid extinction of species, pollution of sea, earth and air, and above all the impending disasters of climate change: all these relatively recent crises have been made possible by modern science and technology.

This is to be expected. Successful science produces knowledge, which facilitates the development of technology, all of which enormously increases our power to act (for some of us at least). It is to be expected that this power will often 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.

Many blame science, but that misses the point. The fault lies with science dissociated from a more fundamental concern to help humanity learn how to tackle problems of living in increasingly cooperatively rational ways, so that we may gradually discover how to make progress towards a better, wiser world. Knowledge and technological know-how are important. But in the end it is what we do, or refrain from doing, that enables us to achieve what is of value in life. Even when new knowledge is vital, as it is in connection with agriculture or medicine, it is always what this knowledge enables us to *do* that procures what is of value in life, not knowledge as such (except when knowledge is itself of intrinsic value).

We need an academic revolution, one which puts problems of living - personal, social and global (such as those indicated above) - at the heart of the academic enterprise. The basic task of universities needs to become to help humanity solve, in increasingly cooperatively rational ways, those problems of living we need to solve to achieve what is genuinely of value in life. The central, fundamental concern needs to be to articulate, and improve the articulation of, our problems of living, and propose and critically assess possible solutions - possible *actions*, policies, institutional and social changes, political programmes, ways of living, philosophies of life. Our best ideas about what to *do* need to influence the priorities of scientific and technological research and, of course, deliberations concerning actions and policy need to take the results of scientific research into account.

The revolution we require would, above all, transform social inquiry and the humanities so that their basic task becomes to articulate problems of living, propose and critically assess possible actions. The pursuit of knowledge would be secondary, conducted to improve understanding of what our problems of living are, and what we need to do about them. The natural sciences need to change too, so that three domains of discussion are recognized: evidence, theory, and aims - the latter having, inherent in them, problematic assumptions concerning metaphysics, values and politics. And it is not just in science that

basic aims are problematic: this is the case in life too. Aims need sustained imaginative and critical exploration, within and without academia, the hope being that we can, as a result, improve our aims and so improve our lives. Every university needs a symposium, open to everyone, devoted to the exploration of our fundamental global problem, encompassing all other disciplines from physics to the humanities: How can what is of value in life exist and best flourish embedded as it is within the physical universe? Each nation needs, within its university system, a virtual government that, free of the constraints of the actual government, seeks to work out what the actual government ought to do. Something similar is needed for the world. 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. The fundamental concern would be to help the public world educate itself about what needs to be done to make progress towards as good a world as possible.

Does this mean all scientific research would be related to practical problems of living? Of course not! We need pure research for two reasons. First, scientific knowledge and understanding can be of intrinsic value for all of us. Second, pure research often leads unexpectedly to solutions to practical problems of living.

Does recent emphasis on the importance of the social "impact" of research amount to a step towards the kind of university I have in mind? Not really. "Impact" does not involve the university giving priority to tackling problems of living over problems of knowledge. What constitutes social "impact" is characterized in rather broad terms, and may be such as to contribute to the intensification of global problems. And there is a failure to do justice to research of great value that may have no "impact" whatsoever, or only potential or long-term "impact".

Of greater relevance are projects such as the Grand Challenges Programme developed by University College London, which aims to bring specialists together to work on global problems. There is here an input from my own work: UCL speaks, on its website, of "The Wisdom Agenda" and "Delivering a culture of wisdom". Important as this Programme is, UCL as a whole does not give intellectual priority to tackling problems of living. This could not be done by one university alone, as disciplines need to change, as well as university organization.

Suppose this academic revolution (discussed in much greater detail in my recently published book *How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World*) has taken place. How would this contribute to resolving the grave global problems with which we began?

Our only hope of solving problems of population growth, global warming and the rest is to do so *democratically*. It is, however, unreasonable to suppose that governments will be much more enlightened than electorates. We require, then, that electorates have a good understanding of what our problems are and what we need to do about them. But it is just this that is lacking at present. People either do not have a good understanding of what our problems are and what we need to do about them, or do not know how to act with others so as to ensure their government does what it needs to do. Public understanding of what we need to do in response to our problems, public capacity to act intelligently and effectively in response to these problems, are catastrophically lacking in our modern world. It is just this lack that would be met by universities reformed in the way I have indicated. The basic task of universities would be to help people discover what needs to be done to ensure that governments (and industry, agriculture, commerce and so on) begin to do what needs to be done to resolve our global problems.

But it is just this that universities fail to do at present. Devoted as they are primarily to the pursuit of knowledge, they fail to do what most needs to be done, namely help people learn how to tackle problems of living, including our global problems, so that we may make

progress towards a better, wiser world. Not only that; even worse, as we have seen, universities devoted primarily to the pursuit of knowledge are designed, if anything, to intensify our global problems.

As far as the long-term interests of humanity are concerned, there is no more important task than to reform our universities so that they put tackling problems of living, and the improvement of problematic aims, at the heart of the academic enterprise.

Nicholas Maxwell's latest book *How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World: The Urgent Need for an Academic Revolution* is published by Imprint Academic priced at £9.95. For more, see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/from-knowledge-to-wisdom>.