

## **Liberal education in crisis? Rejoinder by Maxwell**

**Article Type:** Authors' Rejoinders **From:** On the Horizon, Volume 22, Issue 1

It is argued that the plea for rational inquiry devoted to wisdom is not Eurocentric in character.

I feel a bit guilty, responding to responses without myself offering a first-order response, as it were. Nevertheless, here goes. Two comments.

Bussey (2014, p. 82) asks "How free is [critical thinking] of the Eurocentricism that suggests, as Maxwell does, that rationality lies at the heart of critical emancipation?" What an extraordinary question to ask! What exactly does "Eurocentricism" mean in this context? Presumably, the implication is that it is all very well for Europeans to hold "that reason lies at the heart of emancipation" but it is bad to think that everyone, everywhere, should hold this. Does Bussey really think that if something potentially good for everyone is discovered or invented in a particular locality, then it should be confined to that locality, others being deprived of its benefits? Should paper, the compass, fireworks, and porcelain be confined to China, the zero to India? Should democracy, philosophy, drama, and mathematics be confined to Greece?

Surely, if reason, the authentic article, really is the key to wisdom, then everyone should be able to avail themselves of this discovery, wherever they happen to live, whatever their circumstances and local culture – even if the idea first arose in Europe. Actually, my argument is that traditional conceptions of reason are damagingly irrational, in that they fail to provide means to improve aims. Aim-oriented rationality, the conception of reason I hold to be the key to wisdom, is hardly to be found being put into practice anywhere, in Europe or elsewhere, despite my 40-year campaign on its behalf (see references in Maxwell, 2014). It is a conception of reason that has its roots deep in European culture, true, in that it amounts to a kind of synthesis of Rationalism and Romanticism; it is a great improvement over both. On the other hand it is, I argue, especially relevant to acquiring wisdom, and wisdom is by no means a uniquely European notion. But if aim-oriented rationality really is the conception of reason we need to employ in seeking to achieve what is of value in life, surely the fact that it was invented in Europe should not preclude others who live elsewhere from exploiting it.

Graber (2014, p. 92) refers to my "provocative justification for excluding mathematics from" liberal studies. I provide no such justification. My point was only that some genuine understanding of what a physical theory – such as Newton's or Einstein's – asserts about the world can be achieved even if one does not possess the mathematical expertise required to derive empirical consequences from the theory. To say that some understanding of physics can be achieved without mathematics is not to say that mathematics should be excluded from liberal studies. Of course mathematics should be a part of liberal studies. Above all, everyone should read G. Polya's marvellous *How to Solve It*.

Rejoinder by Nicholas Maxwell, Emeritus Reader, Philosophy of Science, Science and Technology Studies, University College London, London, UK.

## **References**

Bussey, M. (2014), "Comment: Liberal education in crisis?", *On the Horizon*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 81–87

Graber, R. (2014), "Comment: Liberal education in crisis?", *On the Horizon*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 91–93

Maxwell, N. (2014), "How can our human world exist and best flourish embedded in the physical universe? An outline of a problem-based liberal studies course", *On the Horizon*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 35–45