Our Fundamental Problem: A Revolution for Philosophy and the World

Published in *Humanities, Arts and Society Magazine*, issue 3, May 2021

Nicholas Maxwell
Science and Technology Studies, University College London
nicholas.maxwell@ucl.ac.uk

How can our human world – the world we experience and live in – exist and best flourish embedded as it is in the physical universe? That is Our Fundamental Problem. It encompasses all others of science, thought and life.

It is the proper task of philosophy to try to improve our conjectures as to how aspects of Our Fundamental Problem are to be solved, and to encourage everyone to think, imaginatively and critically, now and again, about the problem. We need to put the problem centre stage in our thinking, so that our best ideas about it interact fruitfully, in both directions, with our attempts to solve even more important more specialized and particular problems of thought and life. Philosophy pursued in such a fashion would have fruitful implications for science, for scholarship, for education, for life, for the fate of the world.

If everything is made up of fundamental physical entities, electrons and quarks, interacting in accordance with precise physical law, what becomes of the world we experience – the colours, sounds, smells and tactile qualities of things? What becomes of our inner experiences? How can we have free will, and be responsible for what we do, if everything occurs in accordance with physical law, including our bodies and brains? How can anything be of value if everything in the universe is, ultimately, just physics? These are some of the questions that fall within Our Fundamental Problem.

These questions arise because of this great fissure in our thinking about the world. Our scientific thinking about the physical universe clashes in all sorts of ways with our thinking about our human world. The task is to discover how we can adjust our ideas about both the physical universe, and our human world, so that we can resolve clashes between the two in such ways that justice is done both to what science tells us about the universe, and to all that is of value in our human world – the miracle of our life here on earth – and the heart-ache and tragedy.

René Descartes may be interpreted as attempting to solve Our Fundamental Problem with the doctrine we now call "Cartesian Dualism". According to this view, physics will one day in principle describe, predict and explain everything that exists in the material world. All that which physics does not and cannot predict – such as the colours, sounds, smells and tactile qualities of things, as we experience them, and our inner sensations, feelings, imaginings and thoughts that we are conscious of – have no existence in the physical universe whatsoever. They all exist in an entirely distinct realm of the Mind. Minds are, according to Descartes, linked to the physical universe via brains. There are, thus, according to Descartes, these two distinct realms: the physical universe, and the Mind.

This doctrine of Cartesian Dualism, if successful, solves Our Fundamental Problem at the expense of creating a new problem: the problem of how the Cartesian Mind can be related to the brain. If Cartesian Dualism is correct, then almost everything that we seem to perceive does not really exist. Our perceptions are perpetually delusional. Colours, sounds, smells and tactical qualities of things, that we seem to experience, do not really exist out there in the world. It is all inside our Cartesian conscious Minds. But presumably something of what we perceive does exist: the size and shape of things in visual perception, perhaps. But if that is the case, then physical processes going on in our brains must cause visual experiences to occur in our conscious, Cartesian Minds. There must be a causal link between physical brain and Mind. Furthermore, if free will is to be a reality, then it must be the case that decisions to act – mental events occurring in our Cartesian Minds, must cause physical processes to occur in our brains that in turn cause our bodies to do what our mental decisions to act intended them to do. The Cartesian Mind must interact with the physical universe. Inside our heads,

tiny, poltergeist events must occur persistently, minute versions of the poltergeist events that occur in horror films, when an angry adolescent causes items of furniture to fly about the room by thought alone.

Thus, if Cartesian Dualism solves Our Fundamental Problem, it does so by creating a new, very serious problem: the problem of how the Cartesian Mind can be related to the physical brain. The impact of Cartesian Dualism is thus to transform Our Fundamental Problem – an immense problem that encompasses all other problems of thought and life – into an intense but tiny and quite specific problem, that of how the Cartesian Mind is related to the physical brain.

Most philosophers who came after Descartes rejected Cartesian Dualism. But then a quite extraordinary thing happened. Instead of returning to the original problem that Cartesian Dualism tried, and failed, to solve, subsequent philosophers continued to struggle with the problems that Cartesian Dualism created. John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and many philosophers who came after them, continued to struggle with problems created by Cartesian Dualism *even though they all rejected the very view – Cartesian Dualism – that gave rise to these problems in the first place.* What these philosophers failed to do is return to the problem that we may take, and should take Cartesian Dualism as trying, and failing, to solve, namely Our Fundamental Problem. Even worse, the doctrines that these philosophers developed made it impossible even to *formulate* Our Fundamental Problem. In order to formulate the problem it is necessary to specify, in general terms, what it is that physics tells us about the universe: it exists entirely independently of us, and is made up of fundamental physical entities interacting in accordance with precise laws, with exclusively physical properties, such as mass and electric charge. Berkeley denies that there is any such physical universe; Hume and Kant (influenced here by Cartesian Dualism) don't deny that physical reality exists, but they deny that we can know anything about it since, according to them, we can have no experience of it. And many philosophers, and even some physicists, who came after Hume and Kant, echoed this sort of viewpoint.

All this has been a disaster for the whole philosophical tradition.[1] It has meant that philosophy has lost sight of its fundamental task: to keep alive imaginative and critical – that is, rational – thinking about Our Fundamental Problem, and to keep alive rational thinking about how Our Fundamental Problem interacts with more specialized and particular problems of science, thought and life. Instead, it has been much preoccupied with much more specific problems generated by Cartesian Dualism, even though Cartesian Dualism itself is rejected. This has led to a disastrous trivialization of philosophy, academic philosophy lost in a tangle of esoteric puzzle solving that seems to have nothing to say for anything beyond philosophy, whether that be science, politics, or life.[2]

In my recently published book *Our Fundamental Problem*,[3] I argue that philosophy needs to return to what ought to be its central concern: keeping alive rational thinking about Our Fundamental Problem, and how it interacts with the more specialized and particular problems of science, thought and life. Our Fundamental Problem arises because these two great continents of thought clash – our scientific thinking about the universe, and the way we ordinarily think about the world we experience and live in. It is all-but inevitable that even the smallest adjustments to what we take science to tell us about the universe, or to what we hold to be the nature and value of our human world, will have all sorts of repercussions, potentially, for all sorts of fields outside philosophy – for science, for thought, for life. And indeed revolutionary ideas do emerge in the book I have just published which sets out to explore, and to try to solve, aspects of Our Fundamental Problem.

First, there is a revolution for philosophy and education. A new kind of philosophy emerges which I call *Critical Fundamentalism*. This tackles Our Fundamental Problem, and in doing so seeks to resolve the fundamental fissure in the way we think about the universe and ourselves in such a manner that this resolution has multiple, fruitful implications for thought and life. Critical Fundamentalism has the important task of ensuring that Our

Fundamental Problem has a central role in education. Children should have the opportunity to encounter and think about the problem at school. Every University should have a Symposium, to which everyone at the University is invited, that meets regularly, and that is devoted to the imaginative and critical exploration of Our Fundamental Problem, and how it interacts, in both directions, with more specialized and particular problems of thought and life. Such a Symposium is urgently needed, to counteract rampant specialization, and to explore how universities might do more to help humanity solve grave global problems such as the climate crisis.[4]

Second, there is a revolution in what we take physical science to tell us about the world: it is concerned, not with everything about everything, but only with a highly specialized aspect of everything – that aspect that determines, perhaps probabilistically, how events evolve with the passage of time. Physical science is concerned exclusively, in other words, with what may be called the *causally efficacious* aspect of things. Once this point is recognized, it becomes obvious that the silence of physical science about other aspects, such as experiential aspects, provides no grounds whatsoever for holding that these other aspects do not really exist.[5]

Third, there is a revolution in our whole conception of science, and the kind of science we should seek to develop. Science does not just seek truth; rather it seeks truth *presupposed to be unified or explanatory* – explanatory truth in other words. More generally, it seeks truth *that is of value* in one way or another. Furthermore, science seeks truth of value so that, ideally, it may be used by people, culturally or practically, to enrich their lives. There are, in short, highly problematic assumptions concerning metaphysics, values and politics inherent in the aims of science. If science is to serve the best interests of humanity, it is vital that the scientific enterprise seeks to improve its problematic aims as it proceeds, scientists and non-scientists cooperating in this aims-improving effort. We need to adopt and implement a new conception of science that recognizes that the aims and methods of science need to be improved as an integral part of science itself, science and philosophy fusing together to form a modern version of natural philosophy.[6]

Fourth, there is a revolution in biology, in Darwin's theory of evolution, so that the theory does better justice to helping us understand how life of value has evolved. According to this view, the purposive actions of living things influence the course of subsequent evolution. Thus, a change in where an animal lives or what it eats can have an impact on what has survival value, and so on the course of subsequent evolution. The stretching of the proto-giraffe to eat leaves high up in trees does not cause the necks of offspring to be longer, but it is a vital factor. If the proto-giraffe were not striving to eat leaves high up in trees, mutations for longer necks, when they came along, would have no survival value, and so would not persist. We need to interpret Darwinian theory, not as eliminating purposiveness from nature, but rather as providing an explanation of how and why purposiveness has evolved in the way it has, to take on the multitude of living forms that it does today, the purposive actions of living things themselves contribution to the path that evolution takes. The Darwinian mechanisms of evolution themselves evolve, as evolution proceeds![7]

Fifth, there is a revolution in the social sciences. When done properly, these are not sciences; rather, their proper basic task is to promote the cooperatively rational solving of conflicts and problems of living in the social world. In addition, they have the task of discovering how progress-achieving methods, generalized from those of natural science (as these ought to be conceived) can be got into social life, into all our other social endeavours, government, industry, the economy and so on, so that social progress towards a more enlightened world may be made in a way that is somewhat comparable to the intellectual progress in knowledge made by science. Social inquiry emerges as social *methodology* or *philosophy* and not, fundamentally, social science.[8]

Sixth, there is a much broader revolution in academic inquiry as a whole. We need a new kind of academic enterprise rationally designed and devoted to helping us resolve the grave

global conflicts and problems that confront us: habitat destruction, loss of wild life, extinction of species, the menace of nuclear weapons, the lethal character of modern war, gross inequality, pollution of earth, sea and air, and above all the impending disasters of climate change. These problems have arisen in part because of the gross structural irrationality of our institutions of learning devoted as they are to the pursuit of knowledge instead of taking, as their basic task, to help humanity resolve conflicts and problems of living in increasingly cooperatively rational ways, thus making progress towards as good, as wise, a world as possible.[9]

Seventh, there is the all-important social revolution that might gradually emerge if humanity has the wit to develop what it so urgently needs: academic inquiry rationally devoted to helping us make progress towards a better, wiser, more civilized world.[10]

Academic philosophy, whether so-called analytic or Continental philosophy, is not noted for its fruitful implications for other areas of thought and life. How come, then, that Critical Fundamentalism has these dramatic revolutionary implications for science, for academic inquiry, for our capacity to solve the global problems that menace our future? The answer, in essence, is that Critical Fundamentalism, unlike academic philosophy as it is mostly pursued in universities today, gives absolute priority to Our Fundamental Problem, the problem of how our human world can exist and best flourish embedded as it is in the physical universe, and sets out to solve aspects of this problem with unflinching honesty, all the more specialized and particular problems of science, scholarship and life being kept clearly in view, as a part of, and as interacting with, Our Fundamental Problem. According to Critical Fundamentalism, philosophy, when done properly, is a vital, integral part of science, scholarship, politics, life. It sets out to help us discover how we may best cherish and love that which is genuinely of value in the real world.

References

Kaufman, D. 2019. "The Decline & Rebirth of Philosophy." *Philosophy Now* 130, Feb/March https://philosophynow.org/issues/130/The_Decline_and_Rebirth_of_Philosophy.

Lycan, W. G. 2019. "Permanent Contributions in Philosophy". *Metaphilosophy* 50, no. 3, 199-211.

Maxwell, N., 1984, *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution for Science and the Humanities*, 2nd edition, 2007, revised and enlarged, Pentire Press, London. https://philpapers.org/archive/MAXFKT-2.pdf (available online free).

Maxwell, N., 2014, *How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World: The Urgent Need for an Academic Revolution*, Imprint Academic, Exeter.

Maxwell, N., 2017a, *In Praise of Natural Philosophy: A Revolution for Thought and Life*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal.

Maxwell, N., 2017b, *Understanding Scientific Progress: Aim-Oriented Empiricism*, Paragon House, St. Paul, MN.

Maxwell, N., 2019a, *The Metaphysics of Science and Aim-Oriented Empiricism: A Revolution for Science and Philosophy*, Synthese Library, Springer, Switzerland.

Maxwell, N., 2019b, "Natural philosophy redux", *Aeon* 13 May, https://aeon.co/essays/bring-back-science-and-philosophy-as-natural-philosophy .

Maxwell, N., 2019c, How Wisdom Can Help Solve Global Problems. In Sternberg, R., Nusbaum, H., Glueck, J. (Eds.), *Applying wisdom to contemporary world problems.* (pp. 337-380). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Maxwell, N., 2020, *Our Fundamental Problem: A Revolutionary Approach to Philosophy*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, Canada. See: https://www.mqup.ca/our-fundamental-problem-products-9780228001522.php

Notes

[1] For a much more detailed account of the decline and trivialization of philosophy since Descartes, see Maxwell (2020, especially appendix). See also Maxwell (2017a, especially chs. 3 and 4; 2019b).

[2] Philosophers themselves have begun to complain about the triviality, the uselessness, of contemporary academic philosophy. Thus Daniel Kaufman, in a recent article, declares "philosophy's decline within the Academy is already well underway", and goes on to say "Daniel Dennett recently said that 'a great deal of philosophy doesn't really deserve much of a place in the world' and has become 'self-indulgent, clever play in a vacuum that's not dealing with problems of any intrinsic interest.' Jerry Fodor wondered why 'no one reads philosophy' and could not 'shake the sense that something has gone awfully wrong.' Just last year, Susan Haack went so far as to publish an essay entitled 'The Real Question: Can Philosophy be Saved?' She is not hopeful." (Kaufman 2019). William Lycan, in a recent article, argues that there has been no contribution to philosophy, made in recent times, which would be generally recognized as undeniable and really important: see Lycan (2019).

[3] Maxwell (2020).

[4] See Maxwell (2020, ch. 9).

[5] See Maxwell (2020, ch. 3). See also Maxwell (2019a, ch. 1).

[6] See Maxwell (2020, ch. 4). See also Maxwell (2017a; 2017b).

[7] Maxwell (2020, ch. 6).

[8] Maxwell (2020, ch. 7).

[9] Maxwell (2020, ch. 7). See also Maxwell (1984; 2014; 2019c).

[10] See note 9.