

In Defence of Seeking Wisdom

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Abstract: Steven Yates has criticized my claim that we need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods of academic inquiry, so that the aim becomes to promote wisdom rather than just acquire knowledge. Yates's main criticism is that the proposed revolution does not have a clear strategy for its implementation, and is, in any case, Utopian, unrealizable and undesirable. It is argued, here, that Yates has misconstrued what the proposed revolution amounts to; in fact it is realizable, urgently needed, and involves exploiting the kind of strategies utilized so effectively by the *philosophes* of the 18th century French Enlightenment.

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A month or two ago, quite by accident, I stumbled across Steven Yates's essay-review, published in this journal (Yates 1989) of my book *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Maxwell 1984). My book was published some time ago, and Yates review was published some time ago too: both book and review may now seem ancient history. But two things make both relevant to today. First, the thesis and argument of my book are just as relevant today as they were in 1984; if anything, more so. Second, Yates's criticisms of my book apply equally to my paper "Is Science Neurotic?", published recently in this journal (Maxwell 2002) before I became aware of Yates's review: see also (Maxwell, forthcoming). In the circumstances, it would be high-handed and irrational in the extreme for me to repeat my argument without attempting to respond to Yates's criticisms.

My book

"argues for the need to put into practice a profound and comprehensive intellectual revolution, affecting to a greater or lesser extent all branches of scientific and technological research, scholarship and education. This intellectual revolution differs, however, from the now familiar kind of scientific revolution described by Kuhn. It does not involve a radical change in what we take to be knowledge about some aspect of the world, a change of paradigm. Rather it involves a radical change in the fundamental, overall intellectual aims and methods of inquiry. At present inquiry is devoted to the enhancement of knowledge. This needs to be transformed into a kind of rational inquiry having as its basic aim to enhance personal and social wisdom. This new kind of inquiry gives intellectual priority to the personal and social problems we encounter in our lives as we strive to realize what is desirable and of value - problems of knowledge and technology being intellectually subordinate and secondary. For this new kind of inquiry, it is what we do and what we are that ultimately matters: our knowledge is but an aspect of our life and being" (Maxwell 1984, v).

Yates gives a good and quite detailed account of the thesis and argument of my book, and has quite a lot to say in praise of it. But he also says:

"Maxwell's is a very ambitious project. Were it entirely successful in its aims, it would be among the most important works in recent philosophical writing. I will argue that while it fails as a grand strategy, there is nevertheless much of value in this book which therefore merits more attention than it will probably receive" (Yates, 371).

Yates begins his criticism by pointing out that what is of value in life is highly diverse in character, it not being "clear either that some can be reduced to others or that the same methods of achieving them will be successful" (Yates, 382). I am not quite sure why Yates thinks this is an objection: I too emphasize that what is of value is, as I put it, "inconceivably, unimaginably, richly diverse in character" (p. 248), although I also go on to say:

"The poles of value are life and love on the one hand, suffering and death on the other. The supreme good in existence is living life lovingly, actively loving that which is lovable in existence; and the supreme evils are suffering and death. Everything else of value in existence is organized around these two poles of good and evil" (p. 258).

Perhaps what Yates has in mind is that if what is of value is highly diverse in character, then wisdom - the capacity to realize what is of value - must be highly diverse in character as well, and a kind of inquiry devoted to promoting wisdom would fragment into endlessly many disassociated sub-disciplines.¹ But this ignores what I say about rationality, the *methods* of the kind of inquiry I advocate. The rules of reason, designed to help us solve our problems, realize aims of value, are what may be called *meta*-rules: they "presuppose that we can already successfully solve problems in the world; they are designed merely to help us marshal our already existing problem-solving power in order to solve new problems" (p. 70: see also pp. 67-74, 85-91 and chapter 5). Wisdom, likewise, can be regarded as a *meta*-capacity, one which enables us to marshal our other more specific skills and capacities so that, in general, we can utilize them so as to realize what is of value, in diverse, specific contexts.

Yates objects that "nowhere [do I] establish that "values" have an objective existence in a sense in which they would hold in the same way for all people and hence could be called discoveries rather than inventions or creations" (Yates, 384). This I hold to be impossible. What one can do, however, is formulate value-realism in such a way that it is immune to standard objections, and then demolish objections when directed against this view. This is what I set out to do in chapter 10, entitled "How Can There Be Life of Value in the Physical Universe?". (The task is taken up in very much more detail in Maxwell 2001.)

Yates's fundamental criticism, however, is that what I am proposing is neither "realizable nor necessarily desirable" (Yates, 383); it is Utopian and lacks "a realistic strategy for putting [the] program into practice" (Yates, 385). I have seven comments to make about this, which in sum constitute my rebuttal of Yates's objection.

1

In chapter three of *From Knowledge to Wisdom* I show decisively that academic inquiry as

1. This could, of course, be said with equal force of knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge.

it exists at present, dominated by "the philosophy of knowledge", is very seriously irrational in a wholesale, structural way, granted that it has, as a basic humanitarian aim, to help promote human welfare by intellectual means. I demonstrate that academic inquiry violates the following three absolutely elementary, banal, uncontroversial rules of rational problem solving. (a) articulate, and seek to improve the articulation of, the basic problems we hope to solve; (b) propose and critically assess possible solutions; and (c) tackle subordinate problems in close association with our primary problems, so that subordinate and primary problems continue to be relevant to each other as we proceed (p. 47). Yates does not contest these claims; if anything, he endorses them. But if that is the case, I am at a loss to understand how Yates can oppose the program to put this structural irrationality to rights, and develop a more intellectually rigorous kind of inquiry, which is all that my "very ambitious project" amounts to.

2

I go on, in chapter three, to point out that this wholesale, structural irrationality of academic inquiry is no mere formal matter; given the impact that scientific and technological research has on the social world, the irrationality of academia, being built into its institutional structure, has massive, long-term, damaging social repercussions (see pp. 49-64). It means that scientific knowledge and technological know-how are developed in a way which is dissociated from a more fundamental concern with how we can tackle our conflicts and problems of living in more just, humane, cooperatively rational ways (in violation of (a), (b) and (c)). As a result, the immense increase in our power to act that we have gained via modern science and technology is used, as often as not, to do harm, whether intended or not, as it is to do good. "In a world where there are immense injustices, persistent, violent conflicts between people, and where national and international politics are often conducted at the moral level of gang warfare, the products of scientific and technological progress, however nobly sought, and however potentially beneficial to humanity, will be used to imprison, enslave and kill" (p. 52). What is culpable, in other words, is not the pursuit of knowledge, but the damaging irrationality of the pursuit of knowledge *dissociated from a more fundamental active concern to help humanity learn how to resolve its problems gradually in more just, rationally cooperative ways*. Again, Yates does not contest this quite detailed thesis and argument of my book; if anything, he endorses it. But this, I would have thought, provides overwhelming grounds for trying to develop a more intellectually rigorous and humanly desirable kind of inquiry, less irrational and socially damaging, than what we have at present (which, again, is all my "very ambitious project" amounts to). It is as if I have discovered some seriously false assumptions in current engineering, which are leading to the collapse of bridges, the crashing of aeroplanes, and the deaths of thousands of people, and a critic, agreeing with all this, nevertheless objects that it is Utopian to expect engineering to correct its mistakes, and I have failed to specify a strategy for persuading engineers to do this.

3

In arguing that my program lacks a realistic strategy, and is Utopian, Yates conflates, or slides between, two quite different things: (i) the program to change the overall aims and methods of academic inquiry (so that it puts "the philosophy of wisdom" into practice instead of "the philosophy of knowledge"); and (ii) the program of "philosophy of wisdom" academic

inquiry itself to help humanity tackle its problems of living in more cooperatively rational ways than at present. For example, Yates writes at one point:

"What Maxwell nowhere gives us is a realistic strategy for putting his program into practice. Thus we are forced to conclude that Maxwell's call for intellectual revolution is the sort of proposal that looks good on paper but will not work in the world of flesh-and-blood human beings anymore than earlier proposals for Utopia from Plato down through Marx have worked." (Yates, 1989, p. 385.)

This criticism only looks plausible because it conflates, or slides between, the quite distinct programs (i) and (ii). The reference to my "call for intellectual revolution" sounds like (i) (to reform academic inquiry), but the comparison with Plato and Marx sounds like (ii) (to reform the social world). The crucial point, here, is simply this. As far as program (i) is concerned, the only strategy available is the one that is everywhere apparent throughout my book: to spell out, in academic contexts, in books, papers, lectures, seminars and elsewhere, *what* needs to be changed, and *why* it needs to be changed. Intellectual revolutions occur when enough scientists or academics become convinced that the proposed "revolutionary" change is desirable and needed, the way forward, and proceed to teach, argue and do research in the new, revolutionary manner. Kuhn has familiarized us with the kind of battles, rearguard actions and circular disputes that take place when such revolutions occur, at least in science (Kuhn 1970). As far as program (ii) is concerned - the program of philosophy of wisdom academic inquiry of helping humanity resolve its conflicts and problems of living in increasingly cooperatively rational ways - it is a part of the task of the new kind of inquiry to work out how to do this. In general terms, what is required is quite clear: academia needs to engage in active public debate with the public, government, industry, and other influential institutions and aspects of social life. As I say at one point, academia needs to act as a sort of people's civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for government. In addition, I indicate the different approaches of the philosophies of knowledge and wisdom by contrasting the different ways a sociologist would tackle the problem of inner city dereliction, a problem much in the news when my book was published (see pp. 162-6). (More on this below, in point 6.)

4

Yates suggests at one point that the philosophy of wisdom is Utopian in the sense of Popper's "Utopian social engineering" (Popper 1961, 67-93; Popper 1966, 157-68). But this is quite wrong (as even Yates himself goes on to acknowledge). Popper's "Utopian social engineer" sets out to seize power and impose an overall plan, an ideology, on society by force. Philosophy of wisdom inquiry seeks to promote more cooperatively rational resolving of social conflicts and problems by means of imaginative and critical exploration of possibilities, debate, argument, learning from past successes and failures, the active engagement in and promotion of rationally cooperative discussion with the public and all those concerned. As I say at one point "Granted that a choice must be made, then clearly cooperative, rational, social problem-solving, as characterized in this book, is very much more like [Popper's] piecemeal than Utopian social engineering" (p. 192). But I then go on to point out that Popper's distinction between the two is much too crude, and misses out a third strategy, namely the one argued for in my book of cooperatively rational problem-solving,

employing aim-oriented rationality² (see pp. 189-99). Yates's suggestion that what I am arguing for amounts to "Utopian social engineering" in Popper's sense could not be more mistaken.

5

Yates creates the impression that the task for philosophy of wisdom inquiry of promoting wisdom and cooperative rationality in the social world is hopelessly unrealistic and unrealizable (and "Utopian" in that sense) by making it an all or nothing affair. It is as if Yates imagines that I am arguing that a transformed academic inquiry could create a wholly cooperative world overnight. But I make it dazzlingly clear in my book that what I am arguing for is that academic inquiry should seek to help humanity resolve its conflicts and problems of living gradually, step by step, in a somewhat more cooperatively rational way than at present, in so far as this is desirable and achievable. Thus, at one point, I write:

"putting aim-oriented rationality into practice enables us ... to develop gradually more cooperative ways of resolving our conflicts. In roughly increasing levels of desirability, conflicts between people are settled by: force, threat, manipulation, some more or less arbitrary procedure (such as tossing a coin or voting), bargaining, the cooperative discovery of the most desirable, just resolution. The general adoption of the aim-oriented conception of reason is in all our long-term interests in that it offers us the best hope of increasing our capacity to resolve our conflicts in rather more desirable ways - even though, of course, it provides no magic procedure for resolving conflicts." (pp. 109-110.)

Increasing our capacity, gradually, to resolve conflicts in more cooperatively rational, just ways, in so far as this is desirable and realizable (which is what I am advocating), does not seem to me to be an unrealizable, Utopian aim at all. By distorting what it is that I am advocating, Yates creates the (false) impression that what I am arguing for is unrealistic and unattainable.

Yates points out that I hold that cooperative rationality requires that people acquire empathic, or what I call "person-to-person" understanding of each other (Yates, 382-3). He then goes on to argue that it is not clear that person-to-person understanding "will cross either personal or cultural divides", and that it is not clear that this latter divide *should* be crossed: doing so might inevitably involve the imposition of one set of "values" lifted from Western science on a culture which wishes no such imposition" (Yates, 383). Here, again, Yates argues as if what is at issue is an all or nothing affair, whereas what I am arguing for is that our institutions of learning should be designed to help us progressively *increase* our capacity to understand each other in a person-to-person way. I find the suggestion that this would involve the imposition of values lifted from Western science extraordinary. "Western scientific culture" is surely not alone in valuing mutual understanding, cooperation, and

2. Basic idea: when the aim of an endeavour is problematic, it needs to be represented as a hierarchy of aims and associated methods, these aims becoming less specific and problematic as one goes up the hierarchy, in this way a framework of more or less unproblematic and permanent aims and methods being created within which more specific and problematic aims and methods may be improved in the light of the successes and failures of the endeavour: see (Maxwell 2002, 286-9). Scientific method is, in my view, a special case of this, called by me "aim-oriented empiricism": see (Maxwell 2002, 268-71, and Maxwell 1998).

justice. If aim-oriented rationality, arrived at by generalizing the progress-achieving methods of science, helps mutual understanding, cooperation and justice to flourish, surely the fact that modern science was first developed in Europe or "the West" should not mean that other cultures are to be deprived of benefiting from employing aim-oriented rationality. The only way we can put a stop to Western culture dominating and crushing out of existence all others, on our crowded planet, is to develop more cooperative modes of interaction, based on the development of mutual understanding and justice.

6

Yates complains that I fail to say how my "third method for solving social problems" (p. 193) can acquire force, how the desires of the wealthy and powerful to preserve the status quo can be overridden." (Yates, 384.) I find this complaint extraordinary. In my book I make it clear that what I am advocating is in effect a version of the Enlightenment program of the 18th century. The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and others, had this magnificent idea to learn from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards world enlightenment. The best of the *philosophes* did what they could to put this immensely important idea into practice, in their lives. They fought dictatorial power, dogma, privilege, superstition, and injustice with weapons no more lethal than those of argument and wit. They gave their support to the virtues of tolerance, openness to doubt, readiness to learn from criticism and from experience. Courageously and energetically they laboured to promote rationality in personal and social life. And, despite being few in number, and living in an undemocratic, tradition-bound society, they had a fantastic impact. Our modern world of liberal, tolerant democracies is scarcely conceivable without their effort (see Gay 1973). The *philosophes* had their hearts in the right place but, unfortunately, made a number of serious intellectual blunders in developing the Enlightenment program. Their biggest blunder was to develop social inquiry as social *science* rather than social *methodology* or *philosophy*. These blunders were perpetuated throughout the 19th century by those who, like Marx, Mill and others, sought to develop further the social sciences; and the blunders were built into the institutional-intellectual structure of academic inquiry in the first part of the 20th century with the creation of departments of social science. The result is what my book criticizes and seeks to replace, academic inquiry restricted to the pursuit of knowledge. But I repeatedly emphasize, in my book, that despite their mistakes, what the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment sought to do was profoundly important, and what I am advocating is a continuation of their program *transformed and revitalized by having the philosophes' blunders removed* (see p. 13, 44, 117, 147 and 156). And almost at the conclusion of my book I declare "Academics today might well regard the life-work of 'philosophes' like Voltaire and Diderot as paradigmatic of what academic work ought to be" (p. 282). My book seeks to galvanize academics today into continuing, in their professional lives, the life-work of the *philosophes*, fighting "power, dogma, privilege, superstition, and injustice with weapons no more lethal than those of argument and wit." (The norms of philosophy of knowledge inquiry prohibits academics from engaging in such activity, in their professional lives, one reason for overthrowing this orthodox view of academic life.) In response to the charge that I have failed to say "how the desires of the wealthy and powerful to preserve the status quo can be overridden" I can only say this. If the few powerless *philosophes*, in undemocratic, tradition-bound 18th century France, can have had such an impact, employing nothing more than argument and wit, what possible grounds could today's mighty army of

academics have for holding they are powerless to influence the course of social events? The strategy I recommend to my fellow academics is I hope clear: become an Enlightenment *philosophe* in the 21st century, but make sure you free yourself of the paralysing blunders we have inherited from the 18th century philosophes!

7

Yates asks rhetorically:

"Are the problems of third world nations, for example, *intellectual* problems? On the face of it, it would seem not. The situation in Ethiopia, to name just one obvious example, is not due to problems about the aims of inquiry but to a corrupt and incompetent government; if that government could be put out of its misery, the starvation there could be stopped within months or even weeks. This suggests that political action, and not intellectual programs attempting to redirect the aims of academic inquiry, is what is needed to redress the problems of third world nations" (Yates, 385).

Of course political action is needed to redress the problems of the third world. Yates writes here as if he thinks I am arguing that academic thought in itself can somehow solve problems of living. Nowhere do I suggest anything so absurd. On the other hand, if political action is to redress the problems of the third world, it needs to be appropriate political action, not just any old action, and it is here that appropriate academic inquiry may be relevant. The Ethiopian government to which Yates refers professed to be, I believe, a Marxist government; ideas, here (of the wrong kind) are clearly highly relevant to the suffering of the Ethiopian people.

Yates's choice of Ethiopia is in fact extremely pertinent. The Marxist government to which Yates refers was defeated in 1991 after a 17 year long guerrilla war. Joseph Stiglitz, in his recent book (Stiglitz 2002, 25-36), gives an account of how he, as newly appointed senior vice president of the World Bank, visited Ethiopia in 1997, and met Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, generally regarded as intelligent, knowledgeable, honest and capable. Stiglitz describes excellent policies initiated by the Ethiopian government designed to relieve poverty and hunger, and promote agriculture.³ But the IMF, because of its commitment to right wing, free market dogma, wanted to impose wholly inappropriate policies on the Ethiopian government, and sought to penalize the government for pursuing its sensible policies. And quite generally, in the IMF:

"Decisions were made on the basis of what seemed a curious blend of ideology and bad economics, dogma that sometimes seemed to be thinly veiling special interests. When crises hit, the IMF prescribed outmoded, inappropriate, if "standard" solutions, without considering the effects they would have on the people in the countries told to follow these policies. Rarely did I see forecasts about what the policies would do to poverty. Rarely did I see thoughtful discussions and analyses of the consequences of alternative policies. There was a single prescription. Alternative opinions were not sought. Open,

3. It must be admitted, however, that hunger persists in Ethiopia, and there have been serious civil rights violations in that country since 1997.

frank discussion was discouraged - there was no room for it. Ideology guided policy prescription and countries were expected to follow IMF guidelines without debate” (Stiglitz 2002 xiii-xiv).

And the consequences have been dire, often for the lives of the poorest people on earth, as Stiglitz makes clear. There could scarcely be a more lucid illustration of the way bad ideas, and irrational, dogmatic modes of thought, once they get a grip on powerful governments, institutions and bureaucrats, can have devastating human consequences. What Stiglitz says also makes clear just how profoundly important it is that those people and institutions who exercise such power in the modern world should put into practice the elementary principles of rationality of philosophy of wisdom inquiry.

In order to create a better world with as little human pain as possible, it is essential that bodies such as the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organization, together with governments - especially governments of the powerful, technologically advanced first world - implement policies intelligently designed to move us towards such an end, policies openly discussed and critically assessed, especially against experience, in a way that is so deplorably absent in the IMF as depicted by Stiglitz. But this is unlikely to come about without appropriate education giving priority to the tackling of problems of living rationally - philosophy of wisdom education, in other words, rather than philosophy of knowledge education, which is what we largely have at present. And if all this is to be achieved democratically, with the endorsement of the electorate, then it is not just the politicians, the business men, the civil servants and bureaucrats who need philosophy of wisdom education, but all of us, so that we may all come to have a better understanding of what our problems are, and what needs to be done to help resolve them.

We need an academic enterprise prepared to take up the educational-political task of actively campaigning for a more rational and just, a freer, a more democratic, a wiser world. This in turn requires that we have in existence the kind of academic enterprise that I am arguing for, devoted to the active promotion of global wisdom. What we have at present, a kind of academic inquiry devoted to the pursuit of knowledge, cannot engage in the kind of debate that is required, with government, public opinion, big business, the military, the media: to do so would violate the edicts of the philosophy of knowledge. As I say in my book, the intellectual revolution that I am arguing for is certainly not *sufficient* to bring about a better world, but it may be *necessary*. In order to create a better world humanity needs to learn how to do it, and for that humanity needs traditions and institutions of learning rationally designed and devoted to that end. This is what we do not have at present.

In conclusion, then, Yates's criticisms seriously misrepresent what I actually argue for in my book. Nothing that he says in any way undermines my claim that the revolution I argue for, from knowledge to wisdom, is urgently needed, wholly desirable, and entirely realizable and practical. So far, it is not the powerful and wealthy who have ensured that what I am arguing for has not got a hearing, but reviewers like Yates, who have so seriously misinterpreted my thesis and argument that it comes over as nonsense. Twenty years after first being published, and despite some favourable reviews and two paperback editions, the book is now out of print, its message largely still unknown, even among philosophers who are supposed to "love wisdom": (see Maxwell 2003).

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