

Wisdom and curiosity? I remember them well

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Academic inquiry has two basic inter-related aims. Both are at present betrayed.

One is to explore intellectually aspects of our world of intrinsic interest and value, for its own sake, and to encourage non-academics to participate in such exploration, thus improving our knowledge and understanding. The other is, by intellectual means, to help humanity solve its problems of living, so that a more peaceful, just, democratic and environmentally enlightened world may be attained.

But both aims are more or less betrayed by academic inquiry as it exists now. Instead of passionate intellectual exploration of the world, there is all too often routine esoteric research conducted to further careers and reputations. Instead of responding to, and stimulating, curiosity and wonder, academics produce too much that is unnecessarily obscure and jargon-ridden, sometimes unintelligible even to experts.

Instead of education, there is training, even a kind of indoctrination, in the more arcane rituals of academic disciplines. Academics all too rarely strive to provoke serious discussion of scientific and scholarly issues in the public domain.

And again, when it comes to helping humanity create a better world, all too often academic research responds to the requirements of commerce and government, instead of to the best interests of humanity.

Medical research is biased towards tackling first world rather than third world diseases. A kind of creeping commercialization is overtaking modern science. Instead of active, professional concern to help identify and solve our most urgent problems of living, there is research that responds to the pressures of careers, funding, bureaucracy, fashion and the market.

All science and scholarship, in one way or another, ought to seek to contribute to the quality of human life. A piece of "pure" research, just as much as a technological discovery, is of value only in so far as it is able, potentially or actually, to contribute to what is of value in life. The over-arching aim of inquiry, one might say, ought to be to promote wisdom: the capacity to achieve what is of value in life, for oneself and others (thus including knowledge). But current academic inquiry, by and large, does not attempt to promote wisdom (in a sense that is over and above knowledge).

What has gone wrong? Part of the answer lies with the current dominant conception of what the aims and methods of academic inquiry ought to be. This holds that the proper intellectual aim is to acquire knowledge. The hope is that once knowledge has been acquired, it will be used for humanitarian purposes, to help enhance the quality of human life. According to this view, values must be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry.

Values ought not to influence judgements of fact. But there is one entirely uncontroversial way in which values inevitably, and quite properly, do influence the intellectual domain of inquiry - namely, in influencing decisions about research aims and priorities.

Such decisions are inherently problematic, partly because they concern the domain of our ignorance and partly because issues concerning human values are inevitably involved. Here, above all, there ought to be explicit, imaginative and critical discussion, open to academics and non-academics alike. But the dominant conception of inquiry, in excluding values from the intellectual domain, prevents academia from engaging in, and promoting, such open discussion of problematic aims. Such discussion scarcely exists at present, and research aims and priorities suffer as a result.

This is not the only reason for the failings of current academic inquiry. In Britain at least, during the last decade, a bureaucratic revolution has imposed procedures for assessing research and teaching. This has tended to stifle curiosity, creativity and innovation.

What can be done? My idea is to create a forum devoted to promoting discussion of aims which is capable of improving aims actually being pursued. The idea is to exchange ideas and to act as some kind of pressure group for the adoption of better aims more successfully pursued in academic practice.

The hope is that, one day, aims will be decided by an interplay between those who make the decisions (individual academics, research groups, funding bodies) and the best academic and public discussion of what the aims of academia ought to be.

The hope would be to contribute to the creation of a more morally and politically enlightened, and a more active, kind of academia, than what we have at present.

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