The Menace of Science without Wisdom

Nicholas Maxwell

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 23 September 2012, and published in *Ethical Record*, vol. 117, no. 9, October 2012, pp. 10-15.

We urgently need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods of science – and of academic inquiry more generally. Instead of giving priority to the search for knowledge, universities need to devote themselves to seeking and promoting wisdom by rational means, wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, wisdom thus including knowledge, understanding and technological know-how, but much else besides. A basic task ought to be to help humanity learn how to create a better world.

Acquiring scientific knowledge dissociated from a more basic concern for wisdom, as we do at present, is dangerously and damagingly irrational.

Natural science has been extraordinarily successful in increasing knowledge. This has been of great benefit to humanity. But new knowledge and technological know-how increase our power to act which, without wisdom, may cause human suffering and death as well as human benefit. All our modern global problems have arisen in this way: global warming, the lethal character of modern war and terrorism, threats posed by modern armaments (conventional, chemical, biological and nuclear), vast inequalities of wealth and power round the globe, rapid increase in population, destruction of tropical rain forests and other natural habitats, rapid extinction of species, even the AIDS epidemic (AIDS being spread by modern travel). All these distinctively modern crises have been made possible by modern science dissociated from the rational pursuit of wisdom. If we are to avoid in this century the horrors of the last one – wars, death camps, dictatorships, poverty, environmental damage – we urgently need to learn how to acquire more wisdom, which in turn means that our institutions of learning become effectively, rationally, devoted to that end.

My Call for a Revolution

The revolution we need would change every branch and aspect of academic inquiry. A basic intellectual task of academic inquiry would be to articulate our problems of living (personal, social and global) and propose and critically assess possible solutions, possible actions, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life. This would be the task of social inquiry and the humanities. Tackling problems of knowledge would be secondary. Social inquiry would be at the heart of the academic enterprise, intellectually more fundamental than natural science. On a rather more long-term basis, social inquiry would be concerned to help humanity build cooperatively rational methods of problem-solving into the fabric of social and political life, so that we may gradually acquire the capacity to resolve our conflicts and problems of living in more cooperatively rational ways than at present. Natural science would change to include three domains of discussion: evidence, theory, and aims - the latter including discussion of metaphysics, values and politics. Pursued for its own sake, science would be more like natural philosophy, intermingling science, metaphysics and philosophy as in the time of Newton. Academic inquiry as a whole would 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. Academia would

actively seek to educate the public by means of discussion and debate, and would not just study the public. Above all academia, internationally, would be devoted to helping humanity learn what we need to do in response to the impending crisis of global warming. This intellectual/institutional revolution, from knowledge to wisdom, has dramatic consequences both for the internal structure and organization of academia, and for its relationship with the rest of the social world.

These changes are not arbitrary. They all come from demanding that academia cure its current structural irrationality, so that reason – the authentic article – may be devoted to promoting human welfare.

The upshot is a new kind of inquiry – *wisdom-inquiry* – of which natural science forms an integral part. Wisdom-inquiry puts into the hands of humanity, for the first time, an instrument of learning rationally designed to help us realize what is of most value to us as we live – rationally designed to help us make progress towards as good a world as possible.

I should perhaps confess that I have been arguing for nearly 40 years now that we urgently need to transform academia so that *knowledge-inquiry* (what we have at present, inquiry devoted in the first instance to the pursuit of knowledge) becomes *wisdom-inquiry* – inquiry rationally devoted to seeking and promoting wisdom. Has my campaign to transform universities met with success? The answer, I am afraid, is: No. I have not even managed to get the idea across to my fellow philosophers, let alone to the rest of my academic colleagues. I have failed, even, to get philosophers to take seriously, as a fundamental problem of the discipline, the question: *What kind of inquiry can best help us make progress towards a wise world?*

The Wisdom-Inquiry Agenda

Viewed from another perspective, however, my call for a revolution, for the implementation of wisdom-inquiry, has been astonishingly successful. During the last ten to twenty years, all sorts of changes have taken place in academia that amount to putting aspects of wisdom-inquiry into practice – even if in complete ignorance of my work. In universities all over the world, departments, institutions and research centres have been created actively concerned with problems of social policy, climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, war and peace, community health and medical ethics. Scientists, especially climate scientists, nowadays actively seek to engage with politicians, the media and the public about issues that arise from their scientific research. At my own university, for example – University College London – there are some 140 research institutes and centres, some only recently founded, many interdisciplinary in character, devoted to such themes as ageing, cancer, cities, culture, public policy, the environment, global health, governance, migration, neuroscience, and security. In addition, in the last few years, the attempt has been made to organize research at UCL around a few broad themes that include: global health, sustainable cities, intercultural interactions, and human wellbeing. This is being done so that UCL may all the better contribute to solving the immense global problems that confront humanity. There is even an input, here, from my own work. On the UCL website there is a policy document entitled "The Wisdom Agenda" (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/wisdom-agenda/2011-wisdom-agenda.pdf).

Here, to conclude, is a list of 23 changes that need to be made if what we have at present, knowledge-inquiry, is to become what we so urgently need, wisdom-inquiry.

1. There needs to be a change in the basic intellectual *aim* of inquiry, from the growth of knowledge to the growth of wisdom — wisdom being taken to be the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, and thus including knowledge, understanding and technological know-how (but much else besides).
2. There needs to be a change in the nature of academic *problems*, so that problems of living are included, as well as problems of knowledge – the former being treated as intellectually more fundamental than the latter.
3. There needs to be a change in the nature of academic *ideas*, so that proposals for action are included as well as claims to knowledge – the former, again, being treated as intellectually more fundamental than the latter.
4. There needs to be a change in what constitutes intellectual *progress*, so that progress-in-ideas-relevant-to-achieving-a-more-civilized-world is included as well as progress in knowledge, the former being indeed intellectually fundamental.
5. There needs to be a change in the idea as to where inquiry, at its most fundamental, is located. It is not esoteric theoretical physics, but rather the thinking we engage in as we seek to achieve what is of value in life. Academic thought is a (vital) adjunct to what really matters, personal and social thought active in life.
6. There needs to be a dramatic change in the nature of social inquiry (reflecting points 1 to 5). Economics, politics, sociology, and so on, are not, fundamentally, *sciences*, and do not, fundamentally, have the task of improving knowledge about social phenomena. Instead, their task is threefold. First, it is to articulate problems of living, and propose and critically assess possible solutions, possible actions or policies, from the standpoint of their capacity, if implemented, to promote wiser ways of living. Second, it is to promote such cooperatively rational tackling of problems of living throughout the social world. And third, at a more basic and long-term level, it is to help build the hierarchical structure of aims and methods of aim-oriented rationality into personal, institutional and global life, thus creating frameworks within which progressive improvement of personal and social life aims-and-methods becomes possible. These three tasks are undertaken in order to promote cooperative tackling of problems of living — but also in order to enhance empathic or "personalistic" understanding between people as something of value in its own right. Acquiring knowledge of social phenomena is a vital but subordinate activity, engaged in to facilitate the above three fundamental pursuits.
7. Natural science needs to change, so that it includes at least three levels of discussion: evidence, theory, and research aims. Discussion of aims needs to bring together scientific, metaphysical and evaluative consideration in an attempt to discover the most desirable and realizable research aims. It needs to influence, and be influenced by, exploration of problems of living undertaken by social inquiry and the humanities, and the public.
8. There needs to be a dramatic change in the relationship between social inquiry and natural science, so that social inquiry becomes intellectually more fundamental from the standpoint of tackling problems of living, promoting wisdom. Social inquiry influences choice of research aims for the natural and technological sciences, and is, of course, in turn influenced by the results of such research. (Social inquiry also, of course, conducts empirical research, in order to improve our understanding of what our problems of living are, and in order to assess policy ideas whenever possible.)
9. The current emphasis on specialized research needs to change so that sustained

discussion and tackling of broad, global problems that cut across academic specialties is included, both influencing and being influenced by, specialized research.
10. Academia needs to include sustained imaginative and critical exploration of possible futures, for each country, and for humanity as a whole, policy and research implications being discussed as well.
11. The way in which academic inquiry as a whole is related to the rest of the human world needs to change dramatically. Instead of being intellectually dissociated from the rest of society, academic inquiry needs to be communicating with, learning from, teaching and arguing with the rest of society — in such a way as to promote cooperative rationality and social wisdom. Academia needs to have just sufficient power to retain its independence from the pressures of government, industry, the military, and public opinion, but no more. Academia becomes a kind of civil service for the public, doing openly and independently what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments.
12. There needs to be a change in the role that political and religious ideas, works of art, expressions of feelings, desires and values have within rational inquiry. Instead of being excluded, they need to be explicitly included and critically assessed, as possible indications and revelations of what is of value, and as unmasking of fraudulent values in satire and parody, vital ingredients of wisdom.
13. There need to be changes in education so that, for example, seminars devoted to the cooperative, imaginative and critical discussion of problems of living are at the heart of all education from five-year-olds onwards. Politics, which cannot be taught by knowledge-inquiry, becomes central to wisdom-inquiry, political creeds and actions being subjected to imaginative and critical scrutiny.
14. There need to be changes in the aims, priorities and character of pure science and scholarship, so that it is the curiosity, the seeing and searching, the knowing and understanding of individual persons that ultimately matters, the more impersonal, esoteric, purely intellectual aspects of science and scholarship being means to this end. Social inquiry needs to give intellectual priority to helping empathic understanding between people to flourish (as indicated in 6 above).
15. There need to be changes in the way mathematics is understood, pursued and taught. Mathematics is not a branch of knowledge at all. Rather, it is concerned to explore problematic *possibilities*, and to develop, systematize and unify problem-solving methods.
16. Literature needs to be put close to the heart of rational inquiry, in that it explores imaginatively our most profound problems of living and aids personalistic understanding in life by enhancing our ability to enter imaginatively into the problems and lives of others.
17 Philosophy needs to change so that it ceases to be just another specialized discipline and becomes instead that aspect of inquiry as a whole that is concerned with our most general and fundamental problems — those problems that cut across all disciplinary boundaries. Philosophy needs to become again what it was for Socrates: the attempt to devote reason to the growth of wisdom in life.
18 Academic contributions need to be written in as simple, lucid, jargon-free a way as possible, so that academic work is as accessible as possible across specialties and to non-academics.

19. There needs to be a change in views about what constitute academic contributions, so that publications which promote (or have the potential to promote) public understanding as to what our problems of livings are and what we need to do about them are included, in addition to contributions addressed primarily to the academic community.
20. Every university needs to create a seminar or symposium devoted to the sustained discussion of fundamental problems that cut across all conventional academic boundaries, global problems of living being included as well as problems of knowledge and understanding.

In addition, the following three institutional innovations ought also to be made to help wisdom-inquiry to flourish:

21. Natural science needs to create committees, in the public eye, and manned by scientists and non-scientists alike, concerned to highlight and discuss failures of the priorities of research to respond to the interests of those whose needs are the greatest – the poor of the earth – as a result of the inevitable tendency of research priorities to reflect the interests of those who pay for science, and the interests of scientists themselves.
22. Every national university system needs to include a national shadow government, seeking to do, virtually, free of the constraints of power, what the actual national government ought to be doing. The hope would be that virtual and actual governments would learn from each other.
23. The world's universities need to include a virtual world government which seeks to do what an actual elected world government ought to do, if it existed. The virtual world government would also have the task of working out how an actual democratically elected world government might be created.

Note
There is more about the wisdom-inquiry campaign on my website: www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk. Much of my work is available online free at the following websites: http://philpapers.org/profile/17092
http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/view/people/ANMAX22.date.html