Do Philosophers Love Wisdom?

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There is an urgent need to bring about a revolution in the overall aims and methods of academic inquiry, its whole character and structure, so that it takes up its proper task of promoting wisdom rather than just acquiring knowledge.

Academia as it exists today is the product of two past great intellectual revolutions.

The first is the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, associated with Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Boyle, Newton and many others, which in effect created modern science. A method was discovered for the progressive acquisition of knowledge, the famous empirical method of science. Philosophers still debate today about the nature of the methods of science; there can be no serious doubt, however, that scientific method works in practice, whatever its precise character may be.

The second revolution is that of the Enlightenment, especially the French Enlightenment, in the 18th century. Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and the other *philosophes* had the profoundly important idea that it might be possible to learn from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards an enlightened world. They did not just have the idea: they did everything they could to put the idea into practice in their lives. They fought dictatorial power, 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 reason and enlightenment in personal and social life.

Unfortunately, in developing the Enlightenment idea intellectually, the *philosophes* blundered. They botched the job. They thought the proper way to implement the Enlightenment Programme of learning from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards an enlightened world is to develop the social sciences alongside the natural sciences. If it is important to acquire knowledge of natural phenomena to better the lot of mankind, as Francis Bacon had insisted, then (so, in effect, the *philosophes* thought) it must be even more important to acquire knowledge of social phenomena. First, knowledge must be acquired; then it can be applied to help solve social problems. They thus set about creating and developing the social sciences: economics, psychology, anthropology, history, sociology, political science.

This traditional version of the Enlightenment Programme, despite being damagingly defective, was immensely influential. It was developed throughout the 19th century, by

men such as Saint-Simon, Comte, Marx, Mill and many others, and was built into the intellectual-institutional structure of academic inquiry in the first part of the 20th century with the creation of departments of the social sciences in universities all over the world.

Thus academic inquiry today, devoted primarily to the pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how, is the outcome of two revolutions: the scientific revolution, and the later profoundly important but very seriously defective Enlightenment revolution. It is this situation which calls for the urgent need to bring about a *third* revolution to put right the structural defects we have inherited from the Enlightenment - the point with which I began.

But what, it may be asked, is wrong with the traditional Enlightenment Programme? Almost everything. In order to implement properly the basic Enlightenment idea of learning from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards a civilized world, it is essential to get the following three things right.

1. The progress-achieving methods of science need to be correctly identified.
2. These methods need to be correctly generalized so that they become fruitfully applicable to any worthwhile, problematic human endeavour, whatever the aims may be, and not just applicable to the one endeavour of acquiring knowledge.
3. The correctly generalized progress-achieving methods then need to be exploited correctly in the great human endeavour of trying to make social progress towards an enlightened, wise world.

Unfortunately, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment got all three points wrong. And as a result these blunders, undetected and uncorrected, are built into the intellectual-institutional structure of academia as it exists today.

First, the *philosophes* failed to capture correctly the progress-achieving methods of natural science. From D'Alembert in the 18th century to Popper in the 20th, the widely held view, amongst both scientists and philosophers, has been (and continues to be) that science proceeds by assessing theories impartially in the light of evidence, *no permanent assumption being accepted by science about the universe independently of evidence.* But this standard empiricist view is untenable. If taken literally, it would instantly bring science to a standstill. For, given any accepted scientific theory, T, Newtonian theory say, or quantum theory, endlessly many rivals can be concocted which agree with T about observed phenomena but disagree arbitrarily about some unobserved phenomena. Science would be drowned in an ocean of such empirically successful rival theories.

In practice, these rivals are excluded because they are disastrously disunified. *Two* considerations govern acceptance of theories in science: empirical success and unity. But in persistently accepting unified theories, to the extent of rejecting disunified rivals that are just as, or even more, empirically successful, science makes a big persistent assumption about the universe. The universe is such that all disunified theories are false. It has some kind of unified dynamic structure. It is physically comprehensible in the sense that explanations for phenomena exist to be discovered.

But this untestable (and thus metaphysical) assumption that the universe is comprehensible is profoundly problematic. Science is obliged to assume, but does not know that the universe is comprehensible. Much less does it know that the universe is comprehensible in this or that way. A glance at the history of physics reveals that ideas have changed dramatically over time. In the 17th century there was the idea that the universe consists of corpuscles, minute billiard balls, which interact only by contact. This gave way to the idea that the universe consists of point-particles surrounded by rigid, spherically symmetrical fields of force, which in turn gave way to the idea that there is one unified self-interacting field, varying smoothly throughout space and time. Nowadays we have the idea that everything is made up of minute quantum strings embedded in ten or eleven dimensions of space-time. Some kind of assumption along these lines must be made but, given the historical record, and given that any such assumption concerns the ultimate nature of the universe, that of which we are most ignorant, it is only reasonable to conclude that it is almost bound to be false.

The way to overcome this fundamental dilemma inherent in the scientific enterprise is to construe science as making a hierarchy of metaphysical assumptions concerning the comprehensibility and knowability of the universe, these assumptions asserting less and less as one goes up the hierarchy, and thus becoming more and more likely to be true. In this way a framework of relatively insubstantial, unproblematic, fixed assumptions and associated methods is created within which much more substantial and problematic assumptions and associated methods can be changed, and indeed improved, as scientific knowledge improves. Put another way, a framework of relatively unspecific, unproblematic, fixed *aims* and methods is created within which much more specific and problematic aims and methods evolve as scientific knowledge evolves. (A basic aim of science is to discover in what precise way the universe is comprehensible, this aim evolving as assumptions about comprehensibility evolve.) There is positive feedback between improving knowledge, and improving aims-and-methods, improving knowledge-about-how-to-improve-knowledge. This is the nub of scientific rationality, the methodological key to the unprecedented success of science. Science adapts its nature to what it discovers about the nature of the universe: see references (4), (5) and (7).

So much for the first blunder of the Enlightenment.

Second, having failed to identify the methods of science correctly, the *philosophes* naturally failed to generalize these methods properly. They failed to appreciate that the idea of representing the problematic aims (and associated methods) of science in the form of a hierarchy can be generalized and applied fruitfully to other worthwhile enterprises besides science. Many other enterprises have problematic aims; these would benefit from employing a hierarchical methodology, generalized from that of science, thus making it possible to improve aims and methods as the enterprise proceeds. There is the hope that, in this way, some of the astonishing success of science might be exported into other worthwhile human endeavours, with aims quite different from those of science.

Third, and most disastrously of all, the *philosophes* failed completely to try to apply such generalized progress-achieving methods to the immense, and profoundly problematic enterprise of making social progress towards an enlightened, wise world. The aim of such an enterprise is notoriously problematic. For all sorts of reasons, what constitutes a good world, an enlightened, wise or civilized world, attainable and genuinely desirable, must be inherently and permanently problematic. Here, above all, it is essential to employ the generalized version of the hierarchical, progress-achieving methods of science, designed specifically to facilitate progress when basic aims are problematic.

Properly implemented, in short, the Enlightenment idea of learning from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards an enlightened world would involve developing social inquiry as social *methodology*, or social *philosophy*, not primarily as social *science*. A basic task would be to get into personal and social life, and into other institutions besides that of science – into government, industry, agriculture, commerce, the media, law, education, international relations – hierarchical, progress-achieving methods (designed to improve problematic aims) arrived at by generalizing the methods of science. A basic task for academic inquiry as a whole would be to help humanity learn how to resolve its conflicts and problems of living in more just, cooperatively rational ways than at present. This task would be intellectually more fundamental than the scientific task of acquiring knowledge. Social inquiry would be intellectually more fundamental than physics. Academia would be 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 have just sufficient power (but no more) to retain its independence from government, industry, the press, public opinion, and other centres of power and influence in the social world. It would seek to learn from, educate, and argue with the great social world beyond, but would not dictate. Academic thought would be pursued as a specialized, subordinate part of what is really important and fundamental: the thinking that goes on, individually, socially and institutionally, in the social world, guiding individual, social and institutional actions and life. The fundamental intellectual and humanitarian aim of inquiry would be to help humanity acquire wisdom – wisdom being the capacity to realize (apprehend and create) what is of value in life, for oneself and others, wisdom thus including knowledge and technological know-how but much else besides.

One outcome of getting into social and institutional life the kind of aim-evolving, hierarchical methodology indicated above, generalized from science, is that it becomes possible for us to develop and assess rival philosophies of life as a part of social life, somewhat as theories are developed and assessed within science. Such a hierarchical methodology

> "provides a framework within which diverse philosophies of value – diverse religions, political and moral views – may be cooperatively assessed and tested against the experience of personal and social life. There is the possibility of cooperatively and progressively improving such *philosophies of life* (views about what is of value in life and how it is to be achieved) much as *theories* are

> cooperatively and progressively improved in science. In science diverse universal theories are critically assessed with respect to each other, and with respect to *experience* (observational and experimental results). In a somewhat analogous way, diverse philosophies of life may be critically assessed with respect to each other, and with respect to *experience* – what we do, achieve, fail to achieve, enjoy and suffer – the aim being so to improve philosophies of life (and more specific philosophies of more specific enterprises within life such as government, education or art) that they offer greater help with the realization of value in life" (*From Knowledge to Wisdom*, p. 254).

All in all, if the Enlightenment revolution had been carried through properly, the three steps indicated above being correctly implemented, the outcome would have been a kind of academic inquiry very different from what we have at present: see references (1), (3), (6), (8) and (9), and especially (2).

This difference, over time, would be bound to have a major impact. What we have at present, academic inquiry devoted primarily to acquiring knowledge and technological know-how dissociated from any intellectually more fundamental concern to help us resolve our conflicts and problems of living in more cooperatively rational ways – dissociated, that is, from the pursuit of wisdom – is a recipe for disaster. Scientific knowledge and technological know-how enormously increase our power to *act*. In endless ways, this vast increase in our power to act has been used for the public good – in health, agriculture, transport, communications, and countless other ways. But equally, this enhanced power to act can be used, and has been used, to cause human harm, whether unintentionally, as in environmental damage (at least initially), or intentionally, as in war. It is hardly too much to say that all our current global problems have come about because of the successful scientific pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how dissociated from wisdom. The appalling destructiveness of modern warfare and terrorism, vast inequalities in wealth and standards of living between first and third worlds, rapid population growth, environmental damage – destruction of tropical rain forests, rapid extinction of species, global warming, pollution of sea, earth and air, depletion of finite natural resources – all exist today because of the massively enhanced power to act (of some), made possible by modern science and technology. Nevertheless, science as such is not the problem, but rather science dissociated from the pursuit of wisdom, the result of our failure to put right the structural defects in academic inquiry, inherited from the blunders of the Enlightenment.

Hence my conclusion: we urgently need to bring about a *third* intellectual revolution, one which corrects the blunders of the Enlightenment revolution, so that the basic aim of academia becomes to promote wisdom, and not just acquire knowledge. Every branch and aspect of academic inquiry needs to change if we are to have the kind of inquiry, both more rational and of greater human value, that we really need.

It deserves to be noted, finally, that it is above all a *philosophical* blunder – a philosophical *disaster* one should perhaps say – that has overtaken academia. For it is a blunder about what the overall aims and methods of academic inquiry ought to be. The

responsibility to make clear what is wrong, and what needs to be done to put things right, lies above all with philosophers. This indeed, in my view, is the fundamental task for philosophy today: to shout out, loud and clear, that we urgently need to bring about an intellectual and institutional revolution in the aims and methods, the whole structure and character, of academic inquiry, so that it takes up its proper task of helping humanity learn how to create a wiser world. This, if philosophers really were serious about their subject and really did love wisdom, is what they would do.

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