

# Are Philosophers Responsible for Global Warming?

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Nicholas Maxwell says we need a total rethink concerning the way we think

Are we philosophers responsible for global warming? It sounds absolutely crazy to suggest we are. How could our harmless, minute community of scholars, agonizing about abstruse intellectual problems, have any major role in bringing about global warming?

But consider... Humanity has known about global warming for a long time. John Tyndall discovered that carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas as long ago as 1859, and Svante Arrhenius realized in 1896 that we would cause global warming. Living in Sweden, he thought it would be a good thing. But the first person really to discover that we are *causing* global warming was Guy Callendar, who gave a lecture to the Meteorological Society in London on the subject in 1938. He was not believed. Of course, 1938 was not the best time to make the announcement! Any lingering doubts should have been removed, however when, in the early 1960s, Charles Keeling made extremely accurate measurements of the increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere [there is an article by his son in this issue - Ed].

What is so shocking is that it has taken so long - several decades - for humanity to begin to take the impending threat seriously; let alone work out what needs to be done; let alone do it. But for adequate action to have occurred several decades ago, we would have had to have had traditions and institutions of inquiry devoted to helping humanity learn what our problems of living are and what we need to do about them. Global warming is the outcome of the way we live, and in order to arrest it we need to *change* the way we live. Having a kind of academic inquiry that gave intellectual priority to articulating, and working out how to tackle, problems of living, would have helped enormously with alerting the public to the problem of global warming, and to what needs to be done in response to it.

But we have not had, and still do not have, academic inquiry of this type - devoted to helping humanity learn how to tackle its problems in increasingly rationally cooperative ways. Instead we have *science* - this long tradition of inquiry devoted to improving knowledge and technological know-how. But the successful pursuit of knowledge dissociated from a more fundamental concern for problems of living is a recipe for disaster. Science and technology massively increase our power to act. Inevitably, given human nature and human fallibility, this unprecedented increase in our powers has both good and bad consequences - and that is just what has occurred. Modern science and technology have made possible all the multitude of blessings of the modern world: but they have also made possible the lethal character of modern war and terrorism - the threats posed by modern armaments, conventional, chemical, biological and nuclear. Science without wisdom has led to the pollution of sea, air and land; rapid human population growth; rapid extinction of other species and destruction of natural habitats such as tropical rain forests; and the intensification of inequalities of wealth and power around the globe. In fact it is hardly too much to say that scientific and technological research have made possible all our current global problems. Above all, they have made

possible global warming, the product of population growth, industry and modern transport.

It is here that we philosophers enter the picture. Humanity is suffering from a massive, institutionalized philosophical blunder. The pursuit of scientific knowledge dissociated from the more fundamental tackling of problems of living is, as we have seen, a recipe for disaster. Judged from the highly conventional standpoint of helping to promote human welfare, inquiry devoted overwhelmingly to acquiring *knowledge* is damagingly - even disastrously - *irrational*. If academic inquiry were to help promote human welfare *rationally*, then at the very least, it would give intellectual priority to the tasks of

- (1) articulating and clarifying problems of living; and
- (2) proposing and critically assessing possible solutions — possible and actual *actions*.

Tackling problems of technological know-how would be important, but secondary. In short, humanity urgently needs a kind of inquiry rationally devoted to *helping us create a better -world*. This is a type of inquiry that we do not at present have. We do not have it because academia has institutionalized a seriously defective and damaging conception of inquiry. This is a *philosophical* blunder. It is a blunder about what the aims and methods of science, and of academic inquiry more generally, ought to be. Philosophers ought to have cottoned on to this blunder long ago, and done everything in their collective power to alert humanity to just how damaging and dangerous this blunder is. They ought to have shouted from the rooftops about the *philosophical* disaster that lies behind so many of our human disasters!

Philosophers have done nothing of the kind. In particular, philosophers have failed to grasp, let alone communicate, this simple message: We need a new, more rational kind of academic inquiry that gives intellectual priority to tackling problems of wise living over problems of technical knowledge. In particular, we need this if we are to learn in time what we need to do to avoid the worst that global warming may inflict upon us. So we philosophers *are*, in a way, responsible for global warming. We are responsible for having failed decades ago to warn humanity that it possesses only a dangerously irrational instrument of learning, and urgently needs to develop one that is more rational, better designed from the standpoint of helping people learn how to live well.

Back in 1976 I argued for the need to develop the new kind of inquiry in my first book *What's Wrong With Science?* (Bran's Head Books). And in the Orwellian year of 1984 I spelled it out in a much more detailed way in *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Blackwell). Since then, I have reformulated and developed the argument in further books, papers, lectures, articles, letters to newspapers, radio interviews, email discussion groups — every way I know how. As far as the philosophy community is concerned, by and large, the message has fallen on deaf ears. However, I feel I must persist as the dangers from global warming in particular are getting very close.

Given the urgency of our situation - the unprecedented perils associated with the new, immense powers bequeathed to (some of) us by science - we philosophers ought to do everything we can in our professional capacities to get the message across: there is a very serious *philosophical* disaster at the root of many of our current human disasters - at the root of our current incapacity to respond adequately to our current global problems. We need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods - the *philosophy* - of the academic enterprise so that it takes up its proper task of helping humanity learn how to

create a better world - or at least avoid some of the worst possible futures.

I hope my fellow philosophers will at least turn their attention to the argument that we urgently need to transform the academic enterprise. Anyone interested need only click on [www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk](http://www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk) to find out more.

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