

Are Universities Undergoing an Intellectual Revolution?

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For over 30 years I have argued, in and out of print that, for both intellectual and humanitarian reasons, we urgently need a revolution in the aims and methods of academic inquiry. Now I find the revolution is underway – entirely independent of my own efforts to promote it.

My claim is that instead of giving priority to the search for knowledge, academia needs to devote itself 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 includes knowledge but much else besides. A basic task of academia would 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. Just this has occurred. Indeed all our modern global problems have arisen in this way: global warming, the lethal character of modern war and terrorism, vast inequalities of wealth and power round the globe, rapid increase in population, rapid extinction of other species, even the aids epidemic (aids being spread by modern travel). All these have been made possible by modern science – especially science dissociated from a more fundamental 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 devoted to that end.

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. 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. 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. Academia would have just sufficient power to retain its independence from government, industry, the media, public opinion, but no more.

These changes are not arbitrary. They all come, I have argued, from demanding that academia cure its current structural irrationality, so that reason – the authentic article – may be devoted to promoting human welfare.¹

My efforts to start up a campaign to transform academia so that it becomes an educational resource to help humanity learn how to create a better world have not met with much success. I am not aware of any discipline, or any department in any university, that has changed in any way as a result of my work. Few are the academics who have even heard of my work. Even philosophers seem to be, by and large, ignorant of it, or indifferent to it – especially disappointing in view of the fact that the argument for the intellectual revolution is profoundly philosophical in character. And not just the argument: the outcome, the new conception of inquiry I argue for – *wisdom-inquiry* as it may be called – is, I claim, quintessentially philosophical in that it is the solution to a profoundly significant philosophical problem, namely: *What kind of inquiry can best help us make progress towards a civilized world?*

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 what follows I concentrate on universities in the UK.

Perhaps the most significant steps towards wisdom-inquiry that have taken place during the last twenty years are the creation of departments, institutions and research centres concerned with social policy, with problems of environmental degradation, climate change, poverty, injustice and war, and with such matters as medical ethics and community health. For example, a number of departments and research centres concerned in one way or another with policy issues have been created at my own university of University College London during the last 20 years.

At Cambridge University, there is a more interesting development. One can see the first hints of the institutional structure of wisdom-inquiry being superimposed upon the existing structure of *knowledge-inquiry* (as inquiry organized around the pursuit of knowledge may be called). As I have indicated, wisdom-inquiry puts the intellectual tackling of problems of living at the heart of academic inquiry, this activity being conducted in such a way that it both influences, and is influenced by, more specialized research. Knowledge-inquiry, by contrast, organizes intellectual activity into the conventional departments of knowledge: physics, chemistry, biology, history and the rest, in turn subdivided, again and again, into ever more narrow, specialized research disciplines. But this knowledge-inquiry structure of ever more specialized research is hopelessly inappropriate when it comes to tackling our major problems of living. In order to tackle environmental problems, for example, in a rational and effective way, specialized research into a multitude of different fields, from geology, engineering and economics to climate science, biology, architecture and metallurgy, needs to be connected to, and coordinated with, the different aspects of environmental problems. The sheer urgency of environmental problems has, it seems, forced Cambridge University to

create the beginnings of wisdom-inquiry organization to deal with the issue. The “Cambridge Environmental Initiative” (CEI), launched in December 2004, distinguishes seven fields associated with environmental problems: conservation, climate change, energy, society, water waste built environment and industry, natural hazards, society, and technology, and under these headings, coordinates some 102 research groups working on specialized aspects of environmental issues in some 25 different (knowledge-inquiry) departments: see <http://www.cei.group.cam.ac.uk/>. The CEI holds seminars, workshops and public lectures to put specialized research workers in diverse fields in touch with one another, and to inform the public. There is also a CEI newsletter.

A similar coordinating, interdisciplinary initiative exists at Oxford University. This is the School of Geography and the Environment, founded in 2005 under another name. This is made up of five research “clusters”, two previously established research centres, the Environmental Change Institute (founded in 1991) and the Transport Studies Institute, and three inter-departmental research programmes, the African Environments Programme the Oxford Centre for Water Research, and the Oxford branch of the Tyndall Centre (see below). The School has links with other such research centres, for example the UK Climate Impact Programme and the UK Energy Research Centre.

At Oxford University there is also the James Martin 21st Century School, founded in 2005 to “formulate new concepts, policies and technologies that will make the future a better place to be”. It is made up of fifteen Institutes devoted to research that ranges from ageing, armed conflict, cancer therapy and carbon reduction to nanoscience, oceans, science innovation and society, the future of the mind, and the future of humanity. At Oxford there is also the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment, founded in 2008 to help government and industry tackle the challenges of the 21st century, especially those associated with climate change.

Somewhat similar developments have taken place recently at my own university, University College London. Not only are there 141 research institutes and centres at UCL, 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, very recently, 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.

All these developments, surely echoed in many universities all over the world, can be regarded as first steps towards implementing wisdom-inquiry.

Equally impressive is the John Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, founded by 28 scientists from 10 different universities or institutions in 2000. It is based in six British universities, has links with six others, and is funded by three research councils, NERC, EPSRC and ESRC (environment, engineering and social economic research). It “brings together scientists, economists, engineers and social scientists, who together are working to develop sustainable responses to climate change through trans-disciplinary research and dialogue on both a national and international level – not just within the research community, but also with business leaders, policy advisors, the media and the public in general” (<http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/general/about.shtml>). All this is strikingly in

accordance with basic features of wisdom-inquiry.² We have here, perhaps, the real beginnings of wisdom-inquiry being put into academic practice.

A similar organization, modelled on the Tyndall Centre, is the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC), launched in 2004, and also funded by the three research councils, NERC, EPSRC and ESRC. Its mission is to be a “centre of research, and source of authoritative information and leadership, on sustainable energy systems” (<http://www.ukerc.ac.uk/>). It coordinates research in some twelve British universities or research institutions. UKERC has created the National Energy Research Network (NERN), which seeks to link up the entire energy community, including people from academia, government, NGOs and business.

Another possible indication of a modest step towards wisdom-inquiry is the growth of peace studies and conflict resolution research. In Britain, the Peace Studies Department at Bradford University has “quadrupled in size” since 1984 (Professor Paul Rogers, personal communication), and is now the largest university department in this field in the world. INCORE, an International Conflict Research project, was established in 1993 at the University of Ulster, in Northern Ireland, in conjunction with the United Nations University. It develops conflict resolution strategies, and aims to influence policymakers and others involved in conflict resolution. Like the newly created environmental institutions just considered, it is highly interdisciplinary in character, in that it coordinates work done in history, policy studies, politics, international affairs, sociology, geography, architecture, communications, and social work as well as in peace and conflict studies. The Oxford Research Group, established in 1982, is an independent think tank which “seeks to develop effective methods whereby people can bring about positive change on issues of national and international security by non-violent means” (www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/). It has links with a number of universities in Britain. Peace studies have also grown during the period we are considering at Sussex University, Kings College London, Leeds University, Coventry University and London Metropolitan University. Centres in the field in Britain created since 1984 include: the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies at Warwick University founded in 1999, the Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace, established in 2004 at Liverpool Hope University; the Praxis Centre at Leeds Metropolitan University, launched in 2004; the Crime and Conflict Centre at Middlesex University; and the International Boundaries Research Unit, founded in 1989 at Durham University.³

Additional indications of a general movement towards aspects of wisdom-inquiry are the following. Demos, a British independent think tank has, in recent years, convened conferences on the need for more public participation in discussion about aims and priorities of scientific research, and greater openness of science to the public.⁴ This has been taken up by The Royal Society which, in 2004, published a report on potential benefits and hazards of nanotechnology produced by a group consisting of both scientists and non-scientists. The Royal Society has also created a “Science in Society Programme” in 2000, with the aims of promoting “dialogue with society”, of involving “society positively in influencing and sharing responsibility for policy on scientific matters”, and of embracing “a culture of openness in decision-making” which takes into account “the values and attitudes of the public”. A similar initiative is the “science in society” research programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council which has, in the Autumn of 2007, come up with six booklets reporting on various aspects of the

relationship between science and society. Many scientists now appreciate that non-scientists ought to contribute to discussion concerning science policy. There is a growing awareness among scientists and others of the role that values play in science policy, and the importance of subjecting medical and other scientific research to ethical assessment. That universities are becoming increasingly concerned about these issues is indicated by the creation, in recent years, of many departments of “science, technology and society”, in the UK, the USA and elsewhere, the intention being that these departments will concern themselves with interactions between science and society.

Even though academia is not organized in such a way as to give intellectual priority to helping humanity tackle its current global problems, academics do nevertheless publish books that tackle these issues, for experts and non-experts alike. For example, in recent years many books have been published on global warming and what to do about it: see: http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/assets/d/da/Global_Warming_bibliography.pdf

Here are a few further scattered hints that the revolution, from knowledge to wisdom, may be underway – as yet unrecognized and unorganized. In recent years, research in psychology into the nature of wisdom has flourished, in the USA, Canada, Germany and elsewhere.⁵ Emerging out of this, and associated in part with Robert Sternberg, there is, in the USA, a “teaching for wisdom” initiative, the idea being that, whatever else is taught – science, history or mathematics – the teaching should be conducted in such a way that wisdom is also acquired.⁶ There is the Arete Initiative at Chicago University which has “launched a \$2 million research programme on the nature and benefits of wisdom”: see <http://wisdomresearch.org/>. There are two initiatives that I have been involved with personally. The first is a new international group of over 200 scholars and educationalists called Friends of Wisdom, “an association of people sympathetic to the idea that academic inquiry should help humanity acquire more wisdom by rational means”: see www.knowledgetowisdom.org. The second is a special issue of the journal *London Review of Education*; of which I was guest editor, devoted to the theme “wisdom in the university”. This duly appeared in June 2007 (vol. 5, no.2). It contains seven articles on various aspects of the basic theme. Rather strikingly, another academic journal brought out a special issue on a similar theme in the same month. The April-June 2007 issue of *Social Epistemology* is devoted to the theme “wisdom in management” (vol. 21, no. 2). On the 5th December 2007, History and Policy was launched, a new initiative that seeks to bring together historians, politicians and the media, and “works for better public policy through an understanding of history”: see www.historyandpolicy.org/.

Out of curiosity, on 18 May 2009, I consulted Google to see whether it gives any indications of the revolution that may be underway. Here are the number of web pages that came up for various relevant topics: “Environmental Studies” 9,910,000; “Development Studies” 7,210,000; “Peace Studies” 529,000; “Policy Studies” 2,160,000; “Science, Technology and Society” 297,000; “Wisdom Studies” 5,510; “From Knowledge to Wisdom” 18,100; “Wisdom-Inquiry” 625. These figures do not, perhaps, in themselves tell us very much. There is probably a great deal of repetition – and Google gives us no idea of the intellectual quality of the departments or studies that are being referred to. One of the items that comes up in Google is Copthorne Macdonald’s “Wisdom Page” – a compilation of “various on-line texts concerning wisdom, references to books about wisdom, information about organizations that promote wisdom”, and

including a bibliography of more than 800 works on wisdom prepared by Richard Trowbridge.

None of these developments quite amounts to advocating or implementing wisdom-inquiry (apart from the two I am associated with). One has to remember that “wisdom studies” is not the same thing as “wisdom-inquiry”. The new environmental research organizations, and the new emphasis on policy studies of various kinds, do not in themselves add up to wisdom-inquiry. In order to put wisdom-inquiry fully into academic practice, it would be essential for social inquiry and the humanities to give far greater emphasis to the task of helping humanity learn how to tackle its immense global problems in more cooperatively rational ways than at present. The imaginative and critical exploration of problems of living would need to proceed at the heart of academia, in such a way that it influences science policy, and is in turn influenced by the results of scientific and technological research. Academia would need to give much more emphasis to the task of public education by means of discussion and debate. Our only hope of tackling global problems of climate change, poverty, war and terrorism humanely and effectively is to tackle them democratically. But democratic governments are not likely to be all that much more enlightened than their electorates. This in turn means that electorates of democracies must have a good understanding of what our global problems are, and what needs to be done about them. Without that there is little hope of humanity making progress towards a better world. A vital task for universities is to help educate the public about what we need to do to avoid – at the least – the worst of future possible disasters. Wisdom-inquiry would undertake such a task of public education to an extent that is far beyond anything attempted or imagined by academics today. There is still a long way to go before we have what we so urgently need, a kind of academic inquiry rationally devoted to helping humanity learn how to create a better world. A university system that did that would need, for example, to create a shadow government, creating policies and possible legislation, imaginatively and critically, free of the shackles actual governments suffer from because of all sorts of pressures, honourable and dishonourable. As far as I know, there is not at present even a hint of an awareness that such an institution needs to be created within academia.

Nevertheless, the developments I have indicated can be regarded as signs that there is a growing awareness of the need for our universities to change so as to help individuals learn how to realize what is genuinely of value in life – and help humanity learn how to tackle its immense global problems in wiser, more cooperatively rational ways than we seem to be doing at present. My calls for this intellectual and institutional revolution may have been entirely in vain. But what I have been calling for, all these years, is perhaps, at last, beginning to happen, entirely independent of my ineffective shouting on the sidelines. If so, it is happening with agonizing slowness, in a dreadfully muddled and piecemeal way. It urgently needs academics and non-academics to wake up to what is going on – or what needs to go on – to help give direction, coherence and a rationale to this nascent revolution from knowledge to wisdom.

Notes

¹ This argument was first spelled out in my *What's Wrong With Science?* (Bran's Head Books, Frome, 1976), and in much greater detail in my *From Knowledge to Wisdom*

(Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984); second edition, revised throughout, with a new introduction and three new chapters (Pentire Press, London, 2007). See also my “What Kind of Inquiry Can Best Help Us Create a Good World?”, *Science, Technology and Human Values* 17, 1992, 205-27; “Can Humanity Learn to become Civilized? The Crisis of Science without Civilization”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17, 2000, 29-44; *Is Science Neurotic?* (Imperial College Press, London, 2004); “From Knowledge to Wisdom: The Need for an Academic Revolution”, *London Review of Education*, 5, 2007, 97-115 (reprinted in R. Barnett and N. Maxwell, eds., *Wisdom in the University* (Routledge, London, 2008, pp. 1-19, pbk. 2009); “Do We Need a Scientific Revolution?”, *Journal for Biological Physics and Chemistry*, 8, 2008, 95-105; and McHenry, L., ed., *Science and the Pursuit of Wisdom* (Frankfurt, Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt, 2009).

² Tyndall Centre, ed., *Truly Useful*, (UK, Tyndall Centre).

³ For an account of the birth and growth of peace studies in universities see Rogers, P. F. “Peace Studies” in A. Collins, ed., *Contemporary Security Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2006, Ch. 3).

⁴ See Wilsdon, J. and R. Willis, *See-through Science* (Demos, London, 2004).

⁵ See, for example, Sternberg, R. J., ed., *Wisdom: Its Nature Origins and Development* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶ See Sternberg, R. J. et al., “Teaching for wisdom: what matters is not just what students know, but how they use it”, *London Review of Education*, 5, 2007, 143-158.