

Wisdom-Inquiry

(Published in *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Issue 50, pp. 84-85, as one of the 50 best ideas of the 21st century.)

The most exciting and important new philosophical idea of the past decade, in my view, is the discovery that we urgently need to bring about a revolution in science, and in academic inquiry more generally, so that the basic intellectual aim becomes to seek and promote wisdom. We urgently need to transform our schools and universities so that they become rationally devoted to helping humanity learn how to tackle our grave global problems, and thus make progress towards as good a world as possible.

For the last century or so, the academic enterprise has sought to help promote human welfare by, in the first instance, pursuing the intellectual aim of acquiring knowledge. First, knowledge and technological know-how are to be acquired; then, once acquired, they can be applied to help solve social problems. We may dub this approach *knowledge-inquiry*.

Despite the fact that it has long dominated academia, knowledge-inquiry is, nevertheless, damagingly irrational. It violates the two most elementary rules of rational problem-solving one can think of, namely (1) articulate, and try to improve the articulation of, the problem to be solved, and (2) propose and critically assess possible solutions. If our concern is to help promote human welfare – help people realize what is of value in life – then the problems we need to solve are, primarily, problems of *living*, of *action*, rather than problems of *knowledge*. Academic inquiry needs to give intellectual priority to the tasks of (1) articulating problems of living – individual, social, global – and (2) proposing and critically assessing possible solutions – possible and actual cooperative *actions*, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life. The tackling of problems of knowledge and technological know-how should then emerge out of, and feed back into, this central intellectual activity. The fundamental aim of inquiry, organized along these lines, would be to help people acquire wisdom – wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, wisdom thus including knowledge and technological know-how, but much else besides. Let us call this approach *wisdom-inquiry*.

Wisdom-inquiry is more rational, more intellectually rigorous than knowledge-inquiry because, at the very least, it puts the above two basic rules of rational problem-solving into practice, whereas knowledge-inquiry does not. It is this gross irrationality of academic inquiry (implementing knowledge-inquiry) during the last two centuries or so that is so damaging. It has made possible the development of all our current global problems. The immense success of science and technological research have led to modern industry and agriculture, to modern medicine and hygiene, and to all the great benefits of these things, but also to global warming, modern armaments and the lethal character of modern warfare, vast inequalities in wealth and power around the globe, destruction of natural habitats and rapid extinction of species, pollution of earth, sea and air, depletion of natural resources such as oil, and even the Aids epidemic (Aids being spread by modern travel). Some blame science for all this. But the fault lies not so much

with science, as with the successful pursuit of scientific knowledge *dissociated from a more fundamental concern to help us resolve problems of living in increasingly cooperative ways*. The problem, in other words, is our implementation of knowledge-inquiry, and our failure to implement wisdom-inquiry. Scientific knowledge enormously increases our power to act, but not our power to act *wisely*. This is the crisis behind all the others: science without wisdom – or rather, without wisdom-inquiry.

There is a second argument in support of wisdom-inquiry which begins with a view about the nature of science. Because the aims of science are problematic, they need to be represented in the form of a hierarchy of aims, increasingly unproblematic as one goes up the hierarchy, in this way a framework of unproblematic aims and associated meta-methods being created within which much more problematic aims and methods can be developed, critically assessed, and improved. This can be generalised to apply to academia as a whole, and to all other human endeavours, wisdom-inquiry emerging as a result.

I first stumbled across the idea around 1970, as a result of looking critically at Popper's claim to have solved the problem of induction. It is only in the last decade, however, that universities have begun to put elements of wisdom-inquiry into practice, largely as a result of growing concern about environmental problems, especially global warming. Philosophers so far have shown little interest in the idea, which is surprising as it claims to be the solution to the profoundly important, ancient philosophical problem: What kind of inquiry can best help humanity learn to become civilized and wise? When the idea is eventually taken up by universities, as I believe it will be sooner or later, it will have as profound an impact as the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, or the Enlightenment.

N. Maxwell, *Cutting God in Half – And Putting the Pieces Together Again: A New Approach to Philosophy*, Pentire Press, London, 2010.