**How Wisdom-Inquiry Could Help Us Cope with the Coronavirus Pandemic**

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For 44 years I have argued that we need urgently to bring about a revolution in academia, so that problems of living are put at the heart of the enterprise, and the basic aim becomes wisdom, and not just knowledge.[[1]](#footnote-1) My articles are published in reputable academic journals, and my books receive praise, but academia as a whole blandly ignores what I have to say. And yet, if my argument had been heard, and the revolution I have been calling for had been put into academic practice, we would now be in a much better position to deal effectively and intelligently with the current pandemic, even though we are burdened with the incompetent government of Boris Johnson.

What is the revolution that I have been calling for? It amounts to this. Academia at present sets out to help promote human welfare by, in the first instance, seeking knowledge. First, knowledge is to be acquired; once acquired, it can be applied to help solve social problems. We may call this view *knowledge-inquiry*. Not everything that goes on in universities conforms to the edicts of knowledge-inquiry, but nevertheless the view exercises a pervasive influence over much that does go on. Knowledge-inquiry is, however, profoundly and damagingly irrational. If the basic task of academia really is to help promote human welfare, then the problems that academia must, fundamentally, be concerned to help solve are problems of *living*, not problems of *knowledge* – problems of human suffering, poverty, injustice, avoidable death. Such problems of living are solved by human *actions* – by what we do, or refrain from doing, not by mere knowledge. Even when knowledge and technological know-how are relevant, as they are in medicine for example, or agriculture, it is always what the knowledge or technology enables us to *do* that solves the problem of living, not the knowledge as such.

A kind of academic inquiry that sought to help promote human welfare *rationally* would thus give absolute intellectual priority to the tasks of (1) articulating, and improving the articulation of, our problems of living, including our global problems, and (2) proposing and critically assessing possible solutions – possible *actions, policies, political programmes, strategies, ways of living, philosophies of life.* A basic task would be public education about what our problems are, and what we need to do about them, to be conducted by means of discussion and debate, learning going in both directions. The pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how would be important, but secondary. The social sciences would not, fundamentally be *sciences* at all. Their basic task would be to promote increasingly cooperatively rational resolving of conflicts and problems of living in the social world. Social science would be much more like social methodology or social philosophy than science. Insofar as social inquiry does seek knowledge of social phenomena, this would be done to discover, and clarify the nature of, our problems of living, and assess the viability of proposals as to how they are to be solved. Let us call this conception and kind of inquiry *wisdom-inquiry*.

In my work I have shown, in my view decisively, that wisdom-inquiry is both more rigorous intellectually, and of greater potential human value, than knowledge-inquiry. It does better justice to both aspects of inquiry – inquiry pursued for its own sake (for intellectual or cultural ends), and for the sake of other human goals (such as human welfare).

Let us suppose that the academic revolution, from knowledge-inquiry to wisdom-inquiry, had taken place a decade or so ago – no doubt after furious debate, cries of outrage, disruption of teaching and research. How would wisdom-inquiry put us into a better position to deal effectively with the pandemic than knowledge-inquiry?

I must say at once that I have long argued that wisdom-inquiry is far better than knowledge-inquiry at helping us solve much more serious, intractable, long-standing global problems than the current pandemic – problems such as the population explosion, destruction of natural habitats, catastrophic loss of wild life and extinction of species, the lethal character of modern war, the menace of nuclear weapons, pollution of earth, sea and air and, perhaps most serious of all, the climate crises. That said, wisdom-inquiry would also help us deal with the pandemic, in two crucial ways.

First, wisdom-inquiry, in giving a fundamental role to the tasks of articulating problems of living, and proposing and critically assessing possible solutions, would create a store of critically scrutinized ideas about what needs to be done to cope intelligently and effectively with a pandemic. The importance of having relevant equipment in place ahead of time would be apparent. It would be appreciated that it is vital to act immediately, the moment the first hints of a forthcoming pandemic begin to emerge. And strategies would be developed for academics to get through to a government ignorant of, and indifferent to, an impending pandemic, as a result of having other things on its mind, such as Brexit.

Second, wisdom-inquiry would help with the pandemic in having, within its structure, a virtual government. In expounding wisdom-inquiry, I have listed 23 basic intellectual/institutional changes that need to be made to universities for knowledge-inquiry to become wisdom-inquiry.[[2]](#footnote-2) The last two are as follows:-

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.

How would these virtual governments help? Each national virtual government would be in a position to help in that, free of all the constraints that actual governments suffer from, it would be able to take seriously potential dangers such as pandemics, and explore, imaginatively and critically, how they might most effectively be dealt with, strategies and policies being developed to cope with the potential problems, with all relevant experts being called upon to help. The virtual government would also be in a position to warn the media and the actual government about steps that need to be taken in advance to prepare for possible future pandemics. The world virtual government would, in addition, have the capacity, potentially, to contribute to the development of an intelligent, coordinated global response to the pandemic – much needed since the pandemic is a global problem.

If we had had universities devoted a bit more intelligently to the pursuit of human welfare, we might have been able to follow Taiwan’s example[[3]](#footnote-3), and avoid thousands of deaths that the UK and some other nations have suffered.

1. See Maxwell, N.: 1976, *What’s Wrong With Science?*, Bran’s Head Books, Hayes; *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, 1984, Blackwell, Oxford; *Is Science Neurotic?*, 2004, Imperial College Press, London; *How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World*, 2014, Imprint Academic, Exeter; *Science and Enlightenment*, 2019, Springer, Cham. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Maxwell, N., 2017, *In Praise of Natural Philosophy*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, pp. 235-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Taiwan has had a total of 6 deaths up to the 25th April, and no lockdown. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)