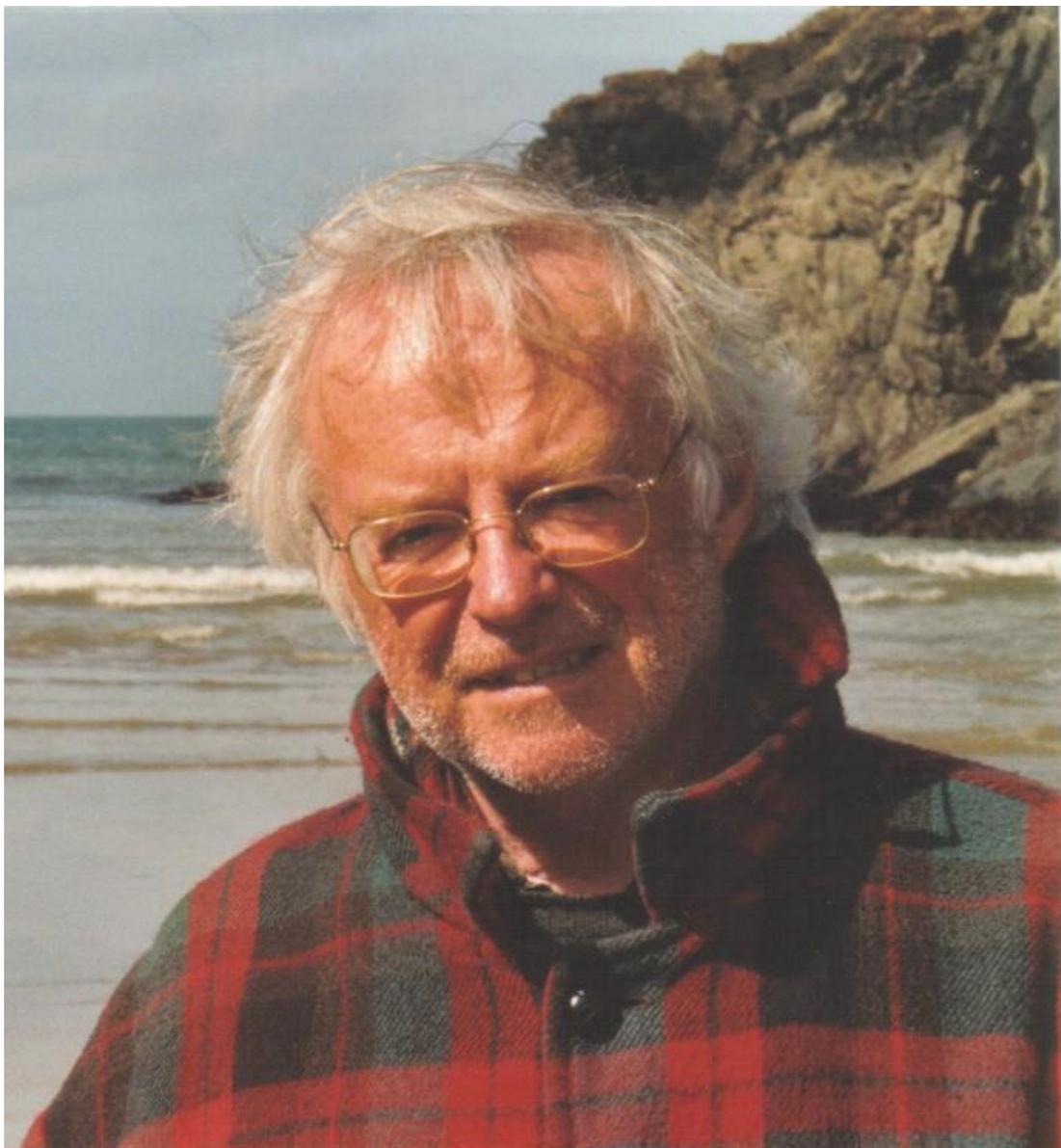


Is Bad Philosophy Responsible for the Climate Crisis?

NICHOLAS MAXWELL, Science & Technology Studies Dept., University College London.

[Nicholas Maxwell](#) completed an undergraduate course in philosophy at Manchester University, where he obtained a BA. He then spent two years at Manchester working on a thesis entitled “Physics and Common Sense”, and obtained his MA. There was an interlude in which he was an occasional student at the LSE attending Karl Popper’s Lectures and Seminar. He then became a lecturer in philosophy of science in the Philosophy Department at Manchester University for a year, before taking up a position in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at University College London in 1966. There he taught philosophy of science for just under thirty years and is now an Emeritus Reader in the Department.



He has published fifteen books and over eighty papers in scientific and philosophical journals on problems that range from consciousness, free will, value, and art; to the rationality of science, simplicity, scientific realism, explanation, time and quantum theory.

He was a visiting research fellow at the Center for the Philosophy of Science, University of Pittsburgh, from 1987 to 1988, and then again a visiting scholar at the Center in 1999. He was an academic visitor in the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at the LSE from 1994 to '97, a tutor in the Department of Continuing Education at Oxford University from 2000 to 2003, and an honorary senior research fellow in the Department of Education and Professional Development at UCL, from 2002 to 2005. In 2003 he founded Friends of Wisdom. For more about his education and research see [HERE](#).

Introduction

I have recently published a book to which I gave the title: *Is Bad Philosophy Responsible for the Climate Crisis?* But this proved to be too inflammatory for Palgrave Macmillan, and they changed it to the anodyne [The Philosophy of Inquiry and Global Problems: The Intellectual Revolution Needed to Create a Better World](#). In the book I argue that academic philosophy has a certain responsibility for the failure of humanity to put a stop to the climate and nature crises, in failing even to notice that a bad philosophy of inquiry dominates academic inquiry – one that prevents universities from engaging actively with the public domain to ensure action is taken to prevent the climate and nature crises from developing, or intensifying. *The Philosophy of Inquiry and Global Problems* spells out what has gone wrong that has reduced academic philosophy to its present pitiful state, and what needs to be done to restore philosophy so that it becomes again a discipline with profoundly fruitful intellectual and humanitarian implications. This Opinion Piece is the Preface to the published book.

Nicholas Maxwell, *The Philosophy of Inquiry and Global Problems*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024; ISBN 978-3-031-49490-1; ISBN 978-3-031-49491-8; <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49491-8>.

Science and the Situation of the World

The world is in a state of crisis. This all too apparent in the impending catastrophe of climate change. But it is also manifest in other environmental crises: the destruction of natural habitats, the devastating loss of wildlife, the impending mass extinction of species. And there are other global problems that threaten our future: lethal modern war; the spread of modern armaments; the menace of nuclear weapons; pollution of earth, sea and air; rapid rise in the human population; increasing antibiotic resistance; the degradation of democratic politics, brought about in part by the internet.

It is not just that universities around the world have failed to help humanity solve these global problems; they have made the genesis of these problems possible. Modern science and technology, developed in universities, have made possible modern industry and agriculture, modern hygiene and medicine, modern power production and travel, modern armaments, which in turn made possible much that is good, all the great benefits of the modern world, but also all the global crises that now threaten our future.

What has gone wrong? The fault lies with a bad philosophy of inquiry – a bad view as to what the aims and methods of inquiry ought to be – built into universities around the world. The basic idea of

this bad philosophy is that universities should help promote human welfare by, in the first instance, acquiring scientific knowledge and technological know-how. First, knowledge is to be acquired; once acquired, it can be applied to help solve social problems, and promote human welfare. We may call this bad philosophy of inquiry *knowledge-inquiry*.

What is Wrong with Knowledge Inquiry in the Academy?

Knowledge-inquiry is an intellectual disaster. Judged from the standpoint of promoting human welfare, it is profoundly and damagingly irrational, in a structural way. Three of the four most elementary rules of rational problem solving are violated. Reason is betrayed and, as a consequence, humanity is betrayed as well. As a result of being restricted to the tasks of acquiring and applying knowledge, universities are prevented from doing what they most need to do to help humanity solve global problems, namely, *engage actively with the public to promote action designed to solve global problems*. Universities do not take their basic task to be public education about what our problems are, and what we need to do about them. As a result of giving priority to the pursuit of knowledge, universities do not even give priority within academia to the vital tasks of articulating problems of living, local and global, and proposing and critically assessing possible solutions – possible and actual *actions*, policies, political programmes, ways of living.

A bad philosophy of inquiry, built into universities around the world is, in short, in part responsible for the genesis of many of our global problems, and our persistent failure subsequently to solve them. Bad philosophy is, in short, responsible in part for many of the ills of the modern world.

But if that really is the case, why has academic philosophy not highlighted this disastrous state of affairs long ago, and spelled out for everyone to understand what needs to be done to put matters right?

Academic philosophy has become esoteric, effete, lost in intricate puzzle solving, remote from the burning issues of the times, blind and dysfunctional – so outrageously blind and dysfunctional, indeed, that it hasn't even noticed that universities are dominated by a profoundly irrational and damaging philosophy of inquiry.

Once upon a time, philosophy was a profoundly significant, potent discipline. It made discoveries that transformed the path of human history. In the 16th and 17th centuries, natural philosophy – the philosophical study of nature – discovered the secret of how to improve dramatically our knowledge and understanding of the natural world, and in doing so, created modern science, a creation that transformed subsequent history, and made possible the modern world.

Three Philosophical Blunders

But then philosophy made three monumental intellectual blunders: The post-Cartesian blunder, the post-Newtonian blunder, and the Enlightenment blunder, all still unacknowledged and uncorrected right down to today.

These three blunders, unacknowledged and uncorrected, had a devastating effect on philosophy. They trivialized the discipline, or reduced it to a discipline that peddled obscure absurdity and fantasy. Philosophy lost its way. And because the three intellectual blunders, made long ago, have still not been acknowledged and corrected today, philosophy still remains locked in trivial puzzle-solving, or bombastic obscurity, hopelessly dysfunctional, blind to the bad philosophy of inquiry of knowledge-

inquiry that, built into universities, prevents them from devoting themselves, rigorously and effectively, to helping humanity learn how to make progress to a better world.

Correct the three intellectual blunders made by philosophy long ago, put right the bad repercussions that stem from these blunders, and extraordinarily fruitful consequences emerge, for philosophy itself, but also for domains that lie far beyond what would ordinarily be thought to be the territory of philosophy: For physics, for natural science, for social science, for academic inquiry as a whole, for education, for our social and cultural life, for our capacity to solve grave global problems that at present we seem incapable of resolving. Ultimately, for our capacity to make progress towards a genuinely good, civilized world. Correcting the three intellectual blunders properly, so that all the implications and repercussions are corrected as well, has profoundly fruitful implications for our entire social and cultural landscape. Philosophy becomes again the potent enterprise it once was. And, in particular, correcting the three ancient blunders would enable us to reshape universities so that they become actively, rationally and effectively devoted to helping humanity learn how to put a stop to the disaster of climate change.

Here, in brief, is an indication of what correcting these three ancient intellectual blunders would accomplish.

Post-Cartesian Blunder

First, correcting the post-Cartesian blunder has fruitful consequences for philosophy itself. It leads to a new kind of philosophy, *Critical Fundamentalism*, that takes, as its basic task, to promote imaginative and critical – that is, rational – thinking about how to solve our most urgent and fundamental problems of thought and life. A basic job of the academic philosopher is to promote this imaginative and critical speculative thinking, this fundamental problem-solving, so that it becomes a part of such fields as: education; science; academic thought more generally; and entirely generally, personal and public life, so that anyone in many a context may feel free to do philosophy in this way, not obsessively, but from time to time.

Critical fundamentalism, puts centre stage our fundamental problem – the problem that encompasses all others of thought and life: How can our human world, the world we see and touch, the world of consciousness, free will, meaning and value, exist and best flourish embedded as it is in the physical universe?

Critical Fundamentalism has further fruitful implications for philosophy itself. It leads to the solution to one of the most substantial, long-standing problems of philosophy, the philosophical problem of consciousness – what has been called “the hard problem of consciousness”.

But fruitful implications of Critical Fundamentalism go far beyond philosophy itself. There are implications for the fields I have already mentioned, but also for much more: natural science; social science; the humanities; the arts; education; personal, social and political life; our capacity to achieve civilization.

Post-Newtonian Blunder

Second, correcting the post-Newtonian blunder, adds to, and reinforces the fruitful implications and repercussions of correcting the post-Cartesian blunder. It leads immediately to a new conception, and kind of, theoretical physics. Physics becomes a modern version of what it once was, *natural philosophy*, a synthesis of physics, metaphysics, methodology, epistemology, and philosophy. It

emerges that rigour requires that physics must make explicit, and so criticizable, a problematic, influential but at present implicit metaphysical – i.e. untestable – assumption about the nature of the physical universe: it is such that physical laws governing the way physical phenomena occur are (more or less) *unified*. In other words, the universe is *physically comprehensible*.

In order to facilitate criticism of this substantial, highly problematic assumption, that influences discovery, interpretation and acceptance of physical theories, physics needs to adopt a new meta-methodology, *aim-oriented empiricism*, which represents the metaphysical assumption of unity of physics in the form of a hierarchy of assumptions, these assumptions becoming increasingly insubstantial as one goes up the hierarchy, and so increasingly likely to be true, and increasingly such that their truth is required for science, the pursuit of knowledge, or life, to be possible at all. As we go down the hierarchy, assumptions become increasingly substantial, and thus increasingly likely to be false. It is here that physics needs to concentrate criticism in an attempt to improve the assumption that is adopted, so that it does better justice to the actual lawful structure of the physical universe. At the two lowest levels in the hierarchy we have accepted fundamental physical theories (today, general relativity and the quantum field theory of fundamental particles and the forces between them), and then, at the bottom, accepted experimental and observational results.

Associated with each metaphysical assumption there is a methodological rule which asserts: In order to be acceptable, an assumption, or physical theory, next down in the hierarchy, must (as far as possible) accord with the assumption above it. The metaphysical assumption accepted at the lowest level in the hierarchy must, in addition, be associated with the most empirically successful physical theories. The hope is that, as a result of subjecting the lowest level metaphysical thesis to sustained criticism, taking these two considerations into account, an improved metaphysical thesis will be adopted which, when made precise, becomes a new, revolutionary, empirically successful, unifying physical theory. The key idea of aim-oriented empiricism is, indeed, that as physics advances, metaphysical assumptions and associated methods improve as well. As our knowledge improves, our knowledge about how to improve knowledge improves too. As we learn more about the universe, we learn more about how to learn about it.

Aim-oriented empiricism has a number of fruitful implications. It clarifies and specifies accurately actual methods employed in physics. It solves the problem of what it means to say that a physical theory is *unified* (a problem that even Einstein did not know how to solve). It solves a long-standing and absolutely fundamental problem of philosophy: Hume's problem of induction. And it has fruitful implications for physics in that it provides a rational, if fallible, method of discovery for physics, exploited by Einstein in discovering special and general relativity, but still not recognized and understood by physicists today. Einstein exploited the method of discovery successfully, but failed to articulate it properly.

Finally, aim-oriented empiricism has vital, fruitful implications, not just for physics, but for the whole of science. For it is not just in physics that basic assumptions, or aims, are problematic. This is the case for the whole of natural science. All scientific disciplines, in their choice of research aims, inevitably make problematic assumptions about (a) what is unknown but discoverable (b) what it is of value to discover, and (c) how discoveries that are made can be of benefit to social life. These inevitable, influential, often highly problematic assumptions concerning metaphysics, values and social use, inherent in research aims, need to be made explicit, within science, so that they can be subjected to sustained criticism in the hope of improving them. We need to see science as consisting of three domains of discussion: evidence, theory, and *aims*. Subjecting problematic aims of scientific disciplines to sustained critical scrutiny in this way, within the framework of aim-oriented empiricism,

enhances the likelihood that science will discover that which is genuinely of value and use to humanity.

Third, aim-oriented empiricism, when generalized, has even broader, fruitful implications, as becomes apparent now as we consider the consequences of correcting the third monumental blunder, perhaps the most serious blunder of all.

The Enlightenment Blunder

Correcting this third, Enlightenment blunder has, potentially, enormously fruitful implications and repercussions for almost everything. The 18th century Enlightenment, especially the French Enlightenment, made a discovery of profound significance. It can be put quite simply like this. *We can learn from scientific progress how to make social progress towards an enlightened world.* In their lives, the *philosophes*, Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and the rest, did what they could to put this idea into practice. They fought dictatorial authority, dogma, and injustice with weapons no more lethal than argument and wit. Whenever possible, they promoted the virtues of doubt, criticism, learning from experience. They did what they could to get knowledge and reason taken seriously in public and personal life.

But in developing their profound discovery intellectually, the *philosophes* made three disastrous mistakes. In order to develop their discovery correctly, three things need to be got right.

- (1) The progress-achieving methods of science need to be correctly specified.
- (2) These methods need to be correctly generalized, so that they become fruitful, potentially, to any worthwhile human endeavour with problematic aims.
- (3) These progress-achieving methods, generalized from those of science, need to be got into the fabric of social life, into politics, industry, economics, finance, business, the media, the law, and above all into the endeavour to make progress towards an enlightened world, so that we may make in social life some of the progress towards enlightenment that science makes towards greater knowledge.

The Enlightenment *philosophes* got all three steps wrong. They got the first step wrong. Misled by pronouncements of their intellectual hero, Isaac Newton, they thought that *evidence alone* is what matters as far as scientific method is concerned, and thus failed to conceive of, adopt and implement aim-oriented empiricism. Having failed to get the first step right, they naturally failed at the second step. But it is when we come to the third step that the Enlightenment *philosophes* made their most disastrous mistake. In order to develop correctly their magnificent idea of learning from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards an enlightened world, what they ought to have done is get a generalized version of scientific progress directly into social life itself.

In their lives the *philosophes* did indeed attempt to do something like that, and for that they should be forever honoured. But when it came to developing their idea intellectually, they did something quite different. They sought to apply progress-achieving methods of natural science, not to social life directly, but rather to the task of improving *knowledge* of the social world. They set about creating the social sciences: economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science. This malformed version of the profound Enlightenment idea was then developed throughout the 19th century, by Auguste Comte, J.S. Mill, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emilé Durkheim and. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was built into universities with the creation of departments and disciplines of social science. The outcome is what we still have today, *knowledge-inquiry*, academic inquiry devoted to the acquisition and application of knowledge.

But this damagingly irrational kind of academic enterprise of knowledge-inquiry fails disastrously – as I have already pointed out – to help humanity learn how to solve global problems it has helped to create: the climate crisis, the ecological crisis, lethal modern war, the menace of nuclear weapons, pollution of earth, sea and air, rapid population growth increasing antibiotic resistance, degradation of democratic politics brought about in part by the internet.

In order to correct this third, devastating. blunder, all three steps of the profound Enlightenment idea of learning from scientific progress how to make social progress towards an enlightened world need to be put properly into practice. That requires that we do the following.

- (1) We need to characterise the progress-achieving methods of natural science correctly, In terms of aim-oriented empiricism.
- (2) Aim-oriented empiricism needs to be correctly generalized to form aim-oriented rationality, fruitfully applicable to any worthwhile human endeavour with problematic aims.
- (3) Aim-oriented rationality needs to be got into the fabric of social life, into all our other social and institutional endeavours besides science – into government, politics, industry, agriculture, business, economics, finance, the law, the media, personal and social life – so that something of the astonishing success of science in making intellectual progress towards greater knowledge may be got into the endeavour to make social progress towards an enlightened world.

The consequences of correcting the Enlightenment blunder in this way are dramatic and far-reaching. To begin with, social inquiry is transformed. Social inquiry is not social *science*; the disciplines of social inquiry are not, primarily, devoted to the pursuit of *knowledge* of social phenomena. The primary task of social inquiry – economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science and the rest – becomes to help humanity get aim-oriented rationality into the fabric of social life – above all, get aim-oriented rationality into powerful and influential institutions, businesses, organizations and activities that have worthwhile but problematic aims and methods, above all into those that have *harmful* aims and methods.

In other words, as a result of correcting the Enlightenment blunder, and correcting its implications and repercussions, social *science* becomes social *methodology* or social *philosophy*. What philosophy of science is to science (according to aim-oriented empiricism) so social inquiry is to social life: that enterprise which helps diverse aspects of social life improve aims and methods as life goes on.

Transforming the Academy

But correcting the Enlightenment blunder leads to far more than a transformation in the nature of social inquiry. It leads, as we shall see, to a transformation in the entire academic enterprise. Almost every department and aspect of knowledge-inquiry is transformed. I have already mentioned that, judged from the standpoint of helping to promote human welfare, knowledge-inquiry violates three of the four most basic rules of reason conceivable. Modify knowledge-inquiry just enough to ensure that these three rules are not violated, ensure that aim-oriented rationality is put into practice throughout, and a new kind of inquiry emerges, wisdom-inquiry as it may be called, designed and devoted to help people tackle problems of living, local and global, rationally and effectively.

Wisdom-inquiry actively engages with the social world to help people learn how to resolve conflicts and problems of living in increasingly effective and cooperatively rational ways. The basic aim of inquiry is to seek and promote wisdom, conceived of as the capacity, active endeavour, and perhaps desire to realize what is of value in life for oneself and others. Wisdom in this sense, includes knowledge and technological know-how, but much more.

Instead of helping to create global problems and subsequently failing to help solve them, as knowledge-inquiry has done, wisdom-inquiry would do all that it could to help humanity solve global problems that threaten our future, above all the climate and ecological crises. It would devote itself to helping humanity learn how to make progress towards a good, civilized, wise world.

We urgently need to bring about a revolution in our universities around the world, wherever possible, so that knowledge-inquiry becomes the more intellectually rigorous and far more humanly valuable wisdom-inquiry.