

The World Crisis and the Key to Its Resolution

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Nicholas Maxwell

Abstract

Humanity faces two basic problems of learning: learning about the universe, and learning how to become civilized. We have solved the first problem, but not the second, and that puts us in a situation of great danger. Almost all our global problems have arisen as a result. It has become a matter of extreme urgency to solve the second problem. The key to that is to learn from our solution to the first problem how to solve the second one. This was the basic idea of the 18th century Enlightenment, but in implementing it, the Enlightenment blundered. Their mistakes are still built into academia today. In order to create a civilized world, it is essential we cure academia of the structural blunders inherited from the Enlightenment. We need to bring about a revolution in science, and in academia more broadly so that the basic aim becomes wisdom, and not just knowledge.

Keywords: World Crisis, Resolution, Enlightenment, Academia, Wisdom, Knowledge

Humanity faces two absolutely fundamental problems of learning: learning about the universe and ourselves and other forms of life as a part of the universe; and learning how to create a genuinely good, civilized, wise world. We have solved the first problem of learning. We did that in the 17th century when we created modern science. But we have not yet solved the second problem.¹ This puts us in a situation of unprecedented danger. For, as a result of solving the first problem and creating modern science and technology, we have enormously increased our power to act. We have employed this vastly increased power to act to enhance human welfare in endlessly many ways, via the development of modern medicine and hygiene, modern industry and agriculture, modern transport and communications, and in countless other ways. But, in the absence of the solution to the second great problem of learning, these very successes, the outcome of our enhanced power to act have, as often as not, also led to harm and death. They have led to population growth, environmental degradation, loss of wild life, mass extinction of species, gross inequality, the lethal character of modern war, the threat of nuclear weapons, pollution of earth, sea and air, and above all to the impending disasters of climate change. All these global problems come from a single source: our immense success in solving the first great problem of learning and our lamentable failure to solve the second great problem of learning.

It is this deadly combination of science without civilization that is at the root of all our global problems. Before science, lack of wisdom did not matter too much. We lacked the power to do too much damage to ourselves, or to the planet. Now that we do have science, and the power to act that it bequeaths to us – to some of us at least – lack of wisdom has become a menace. Wisdom has ceased to be a private luxury and has become a public necessity.

As a matter of extreme urgency – now we have solved the first great problem of learning – we must discover how to solve the second one. If we do not learn soon how to make progress towards a wiser, more civilized world, we may well end up destroying ourselves. But how is this to be done? Prophets and philosophers have been holding forth on the need for wisdom for millennia, without much apparent success. The very idea that humanity can make social progress towards a better, wiser world has become thoroughly dubious in recent times, even disreputable.

Here is the key to the solution of this crisis. *We need to learn from our solution to the first great problem of learning how to go about solving the second great problem.* As a result, we

might get into efforts to achieve social progress towards a good world some of the incredible success of science in achieving intellectual progress in knowledge.

This is not an entirely new idea. It goes back to the 18th century Enlightenment. A key idea of the Enlightenment, especially the French Enlightenment, was to learn from scientific progress how to make social progress towards an enlightened world.²

In order to put this idea into practice properly, so that we really do learn from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards a good, enlightened world, there are three crucial steps that must be got right. First, we must capture correctly the progress-achieving methods of science – that which makes scientific progress possible. Second, we must generalize these progress-achieving methods of science correctly, so that they become applicable in a potentially fruitful way to all worthwhile, problematic human endeavours. Third, we need to get into personal, institutional and social life these progress-achieving methods arrived at by generalizing the methods of science – so that we can get into our efforts to achieve what is of value in life some of the success and progress achieved by science.

Put these three steps correctly into practice, and we would have what humanity so urgently needs: a kind of inquiry devoted to helping humanity make progress towards a civilized, enlightened, wise world.

Unfortunately, the *philosophes* of the 18th century French Enlightenment, Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and the rest, in developing and implementing this profoundly important idea of learning from scientific progress how to achieve social progress towards an enlightened world, made dreadful blunders. They got all three steps drastically wrong. First, they failed to capture correctly the progress-achieving methods of science. Second, they then failed to generalize scientific method correctly so as to facilitate progress in other fields of human endeavour besides science. Third, and most disastrously, they failed to apply progress-achieving methods, generalized from science, to the social world, and above all to the task of making progress towards an enlightened world. Not only did they fail to formulate correctly progress-achieving methods, generalized from those of natural science, fruitfully applicable potentially to all worthwhile, problematic human endeavours. Far worse, they did not even conceive of the task in this methodological way. Instead, they thought the task was to develop the social sciences alongside the natural sciences. Thus the *philosophes* set about creating and developing the social sciences: economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and the rest. Instead of attempting to apply reason, extracted from science, to the task of making progress towards an enlightened world, the *philosophes* sought merely to make progress in *knowledge* about the social world. They thought that such knowledge had to be acquired as an essential preliminary to the task of making social progress towards enlightenment and civilization.

This botched version of the profound, basic Enlightenment idea was developed throughout the 19th century by J.S. Mill, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and others, and was then built into academia in the early 20th century with the creation of academic social sciences: economics, anthropology, psychology, sociology and the rest. As a result, modern science, and modern academic inquiry more generally, still embody the three ancient blunders of the 18th century Enlightenment. Academic inquiry as it exists today is the outcome of an attempt to put the profound, basic Enlightenment idea into practice – the idea of learning from our solution to the first great problem of learning how to solve the second one. Unfortunately it is a very seriously *botched* attempt. As a consequence, academia today does not, as it should, actively seek to help humanity solve those problems of living, including global problems, that need to be solved if humanity is to make progress towards a better, wiser, more civilized and enlightened world. Instead, it devotes itself to acquiring *knowledge* – knowledge of the natural world, and knowledge of the social world. Judged from the standpoint of helping humanity learn how to create a better world, academic inquiry, devoted primarily to the pursuit of knowledge, is damagingly irrational in a wholesale, structural way, and this irrationality of our institutions of learning has much to do with the

dangerous situation we find ourselves in today. We fail to learn how to make progress towards a better world because our institutions of learning are profoundly dysfunctional intellectually. They have in them three structural blunders inherited from the Enlightenment.

It is these three blunders that we need to put right to develop a kind of academic inquiry rationally devoted to helping humanity make progress towards as good, civilized and wise a world as possible. First, we need to adopt and implement a new conception of science that acknowledges profoundly problematic metaphysical, value and political assumptions inherent in the aims of science and, as a result, adopts a meta-methodology designed to facilitate improvement of aims as science proceeds. Second, this aims-improving, progress-achieving conception of scientific method needs to be generalized to form a new, aims-improving, progress-achieving conception of rationality, fruitfully applicable, potentially, to all worthwhile endeavours with problematic aims. And third, social inquiry and the humanities need to be transformed so that they take up the task of helping humanity get this new conception of rationality into the fabric of social life, into all our other human endeavours besides science: politics, industry, agriculture, economics, the media, the law, finance, international affairs. As a result, humanity would have what it so urgently needs, a kind of academic enterprise rationally devoted to helping us make social progress towards a genuinely civilized, wise, enlightened world – a world that has the capacity to discover undesirable consequences of new actions made possible by new technology, and then modify actions before their undesirable consequences become too widespread.³

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Notes

¹ The problem of creating a good, civilized, wise world is not *just* a problem of learning: endlessly many actions are required that do not in themselves constitute actions of learning. Even if, overnight, every member of humanity had miraculously learnt everything that is to be learnt about how to go about creating a wise world, that does not mean a wise world would emerge the next day! But if learning how to create a wise world is not *sufficient* to create wise world, it is, I shall argue, *necessary*. And it is clear from current events that a big percentage of the world's population has not (yet) learned how to act together to create a wise world. I return to this issue below.

² For The Enlightenment see Gay (1973); Israel (2013).

³ This is an argument I have spelled out, in one form or another, in book after book, article after article, since 1984: see references for a selection. For a vivid account of this work over nearly 50 years, and its failure to alert the academic establishment to the urgent need for change, see Maxwell (2021a).