

# Universities Betray Reason and as a Result Betray Humanity

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## Abstract

If universities sought to help promote human welfare rationally, they would give intellectual priority to the tasks of articulating problems of living, and proposing and critically assessing possible solutions, possible actions. Priority would be given to public education about what our problems are, and what we need to do about them. Universities do not remotely proceed in this way. Why not? Because they are dominated by the idea that knowledge must first be acquired; once acquired, it then can be applied to help solve social problems. But this idea violates the most elementary rules of rational problem solving. Judged from the standpoint of helping to promote human welfare, universities today, devoted in the first instance to the pursuit of knowledge, are profoundly and damagingly irrational in a structural way, and it is this structural irrationality of universities that in part accounts for the genesis of global problems that threaten our future, and for our current incapacity to solve them. We urgently need to bring about a revolution in our universities so that they come to pursue the welfare of humanity in a genuinely rational, and active, way, and thus help save humanity from impending disaster.

## The University Rationally Devoted to Helping Promote Human Welfare

If universities pursued their basic task of helping to promote human welfare rationally, they would give absolute intellectual priority, not to problems of knowledge as at present, but to problems that people face in their lives, problems of poverty, injustice, deprivation, environmental degradation, and would seek to discover what needs to be done to solve these problems. Two intellectual activities would be absolutely basic to academic inquiry, namely those of 1 Articulating our problems of living, local and global, and 2 proposing and critically assessing possible actions designed to solve them – possible policies, political programmes, ways of acting and living. Public education about what our problems are, and what we need to do about them, would be an absolutely fundamental task of the university. This would be conducted intelligently, by means of discussion and debate, the university learning from the public as well as the public learning from the university. It would be recognized that what really matters is the quality of inquiry, of thinking, going on in the public world, guiding public life. It is this public thinking, guiding what people do individually, socially and institutionally, that really needs to be rationally devoted to helping people achieve what is of value to them in life. A primary task of the university is to help this public, active thinking develops in rational and desirable ways so that our capacity to achieve what is of value in life may be enhanced. The university should act as a kind

of people's civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments. The proper basic task of the university, in short, is to help humanity tackle its problems rationally-in such a way that 1 and 2 are put into practice in the diverse contexts of personal and social life [1].

The pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how would be important, but secondary. It is important to appreciate that it is always what we do, or refrain from doing, that solves our problems of living – problems of unnecessary suffering, unhappiness, oppression, or deprivation. Even when knowledge or technology is essential to help solve problems of living, as it is, for example, in connection with problems of ill-health, environmental degradation, and in many other contexts, it is always what the knowledge or technology enables us to do, or refrain from doing, that solves the problem of living, not the knowledge or technological know-how as such (unless our problem of living just happens to be a problem of knowledge!). The proper basic, central task for the university is thus to work out what needs to be done, what actions need to be performed, to solve problems of living – personal, social, national and global – so that our personal, social, national and global welfare may be promoted. The pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how is important but secondary. We are not even in a position to know what knowledge, and what technology, it is relevant to try to develop if we do not have a preliminary idea, at least, as to what

our problems are, and what we intend to do about them. That, in outline, is how universities would conduct themselves if they were devoted to helping to promote human welfare in a genuinely rational way. Those working in the humanities and the social sciences – economics, sociology, political science, psychology and the rest – would take, as their primary task, to promote effective, humane and rational resolving of conflicts and problems of living in the social world. The pursuit of knowledge of social phenomena would be very much a secondary matter, undertaken to discover what our problems of living area, and to assess the viability of actions proposed to solve them.

## The Betrayal of Reason and Humanity

What I have just depicted – in rather general terms admittedly – is what ought to go on if universities are to pursue the task of helping to promote human welfare in a genuinely rational way – observing the elementary rules of rational problem solving 1 articulate the problem to be solved, and 2 propose and critically assess possible solutions. Putting these two rules of reason into practice is no mere matter of intellectual propriety. It gives one the best chances, other things being equal, of successfully solving the problems with which one is confronted, thus successfully achieving what is of value. Any problem-solving endeavour which systematically violates one or other, or both, of these two rules of reason is bound to compromise its capacity to achieve success. Universities, as they exist today around the world, do not remotely proceed in the way. I have just depicted. They do not put problems of living, problems of action, at the heart of the academic enterprise. They do not take public education about what our problems are, and what we need to do about them, as their basic, central task. It is scarcely a task at all. Universities do not devote themselves to help public thinking, actively guiding public actions and life, to flourish in ways that would facilitate effective, rational, humane solving of conflicts and problems of living in the public domain. Universities do not function as people's civil services. They do not even conceive of themselves, of their role, in such terms. Universities today seem to do scarcely any of the things they need to do if they are to help promote human welfare rationally.

Why not? Because universities have unthinkingly put into academic practice a bad, irrational philosophy of academic inquiry – a bad, irrational view as to what the overall aims and methods of academic inquiry ought to be. This view might be called knowledge-inquiry. It holds that the rational way to proceed to help promote human welfare is, first, to acquire knowledge, and then, once knowledge has been acquired, secondarily, to apply it to help solve social problems, what I have called problems of living. The proper, primary task of the university, according to this view, is to acquire knowledge and technological know-how. Only when knowledge has been acquired can it be used to help promote human welfare. All over the world, universities are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how. That is the primary activity of the university, apart from teaching students. Research into problems of knowledge and technological know-how is what academics

primarily engage in; funds are acquired, careers made, academic status and prestige gained, as a result of the successful pursuit of knowledge. And it is not just the natural and technological sciences that pursue knowledge in this way; social sciences do too. Even economics, which one might think must be organized around attempts to improve solutions to a major problem of living – the problem of how best to create and distribute wealth-is pursued as a science, a discipline primarily devoted to the acquisition of knowledge about economic phenomena. Universities do also seek to apply knowledge to help solve social problems, but insofar as universities do seek to help solve problems of living, this tends to be restricted to the application of knowledge and technological know-how.

All over the world, universities unthinkingly take knowledge-inquiry for granted. Indeed, everyone takes knowledge-inquiry for granted as the proper procedure for the university. And the outcome is that universities betray reason, and as a result, betray humanity. Within the framework of knowledge-inquiry, universities cannot 1 articulate problems of living, and 2 propose and critically assess possible solutions-possible actions-because 1 and 2 do not contribute to knowledge. The two most basic rules of rational problem solving are violated; reason is betrayed, and the outcome is, as I have said, that humanity is betrayed as well. The world-wide failure of universities to put 1 and 2 into practice, as a matter of central and fundamental priority, has the appalling consequence that, when new global problems arise that threaten our future, often as a result of our own activities, we first of all resist acknowledging the reality of the problem, and then resist doing what needs to be done to solve it. Entirely unsurprisingly, because our institutions of learning, our universities, fail to take up, as their basic task, to help humanity tackle its problems rationally, humanity is very bad at doing just that. The population of the world begins to rise dramatically; it takes decades for this to be adequately acknowledged (if it ever has), and still, today, not enough has been done to ensure that everyone on the planet has free access to birth control. Rising population, industrialization, and modern agriculture lead to the destruction of natural habitats, the catastrophic loss of wildlife, and mass extinction of species; again, it takes decades for this to be acknowledged adequately (if it ever has) and, despite the heroic actions of individuals, humanity as a whole has scarcely begun to do what needs to be done to deal with the problem. We have manufactured vast arsenals of nuclear weapons, so that humanity could be wiped out for ever, at the touch of a button.

On several occasions already, this has very nearly happened, because a flock of geese, or the moon, has been mistaken for incoming missiles, and only the courageous actions of an official, disobeying orders, has saved us from annihilation. Despite the fact that the mere existence of these arsenals of nuclear weapons threatens our future, there is still, decades after their manufacture, grossly inadequate recognition of the menace they pose, and scarcely a hint of the action needed to get rid of them. Power

production, agriculture, industry and transport lead to emissions of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere which, in turn, leads to global warming. It takes decades for it to be adequately appreciated that, if we carry on as we are, the temperature of the planet will rise by 2 or 3 (or maybe 4) degrees centigrade, vast tracts of densely inhabited land will become uninhabitable as a result of rising temperature, fires, floods, rising sea levels, millions if not billions will attempt to move, there will be war, and billions will die. It has taken some six decades for this devastating climate crisis to begin to get the recognition it needs (if it has) and, insofar as that has occurred, it has been due to Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg who, between them, have done more to alert the public to the crisis we face in a year than all the universities of the world have done in sixty years.

## Conclusion

Humanity has not even begun to do what needs to be done to put a stop to carbon dioxide emissions, and we have less than ten years to act, if we are to stop feedback effects from making things remorselessly worse and worse. Even the current coronavirus pandemic might have been so much less serious if universities had been doing their job properly. Universities devoted to helping humanity solve problems of living would have developed and scrutinized actions that governments would need to perform to deal with the problem; that in turn might have made it possible for the UK government, for example, to have taken swift and effective action much earlier than it did, even though encumbered by the appallingly, almost criminally incompetent government of Boris Johnson. Tens of thousands of people who died might have lived.

Not only do universities fail to promote rational solving of problems of living in the social world; they do not even engage in public education about what our problems are, and what we need to do about them, And as a result, democracies become dysfunctional. Donald Trump is elected President in the US, and even after years of dangerous and destructive Presidential buffoonery, something like 28% of the electorate continue to support him. In the UK, we have the disaster of Brexit, and the Boris Johnson government. If we carry on as we are doing, sooner or later we will destroy ourselves. As a matter of supreme urgency, universities need to mend their ways, and take up their proper task of helping humanity learn how to tackle problems of living, personal, social, and global, rationally. We cannot afford any longer the current betrayal of reason.

## References

1. For background reading to the theme of this article, see: Maxwell, N., 1984, *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, Blackwell, Oxford (2nd ed. 2007, Pentire Press, free to download from <https://philpapers.org/archive/MAXFKT-2.pdf>); 2014, *How Universities Can Help Create a Wiser World: The Urgent Need for an Academic Revolution*, Imprint Academic, Exeter; 2017, *In Praise of Natural Philosophy: A Revolution for Thought and Life* McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal; 2017, *Understanding Scientific Progress: Aim-Oriented Empiricism*, Paragon House, St. Paul, MN; 2020 *Our Fundamental Problem: A Revolutionary Approach to Philosophy*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal; 2021, *The World Crisis – And What To Do About It: A Revolution for Thought and Action*, World Scientific, London. For a recently published article that gives a survey of the work I have done during nearly 50 years on the way universities have betrayed reason and humanity, and the disastrous consequences that this has had, see Maxwell, N., 2021, *How Universities have Betrayed Reason and Humanity-And What's to be Done About It* Re-Purposing Universities for Sustainable Human Progress, *Frontiers in Sustainability*.



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