

Universities: from knowledge to wisdom

Nicholas Maxwell argues that the growth in academic work devoted to policy issues could mark the beginning of a shift from 'knowledge-inquiry' to 'wisdom-inquiry', leading to importance benefits for society.

For over 30 years I have argued that, for both intellectual and humanitarian reasons, we urgently need a revolution in the aims and methods of academic inquiry. Instead of giving priority to the search for knowledge, academia should devote itself to seeking and promoting wisdom by rational means – wisdom being the capacity to realise what is of value in life, for oneself and others. Wisdom thus includes knowledge but much else besides. I argue that the fundamental task of academia should be to help humanity learn how to create as good a world as possible.¹

The case for wisdom

Acquiring scientific knowledge dissociated from a concern for wisdom, which we do at present, is dangerously and damagingly irrational.

Natural science has been extraordinarily successful in increasing knowledge. This has been of great benefit to humanity. But new knowledge and technological know-how increase our power to act, which, without wisdom, can and does cause human suffering and death as well as human benefit. Indeed all our modern global problems have arisen in this way: climate change, the destruction caused by modern war and terrorism, vast inequalities of wealth and power round the globe, overpopulation, rapid extinction of other species. All these have been made possible by modern science dissociated from the rational pursuit of wisdom.

If we are to avoid in this century the horrors of the last one, we urgently need to learn how to acquire more wisdom, which in turn means that our institutions of learning become devoted to that end.

The revolution we need would change every branch and aspect of academic inquiry. A basic intellectual task of academic inquiry would be to articulate our problems of living (personal, social and global) and propose and critically assess possible solutions, possible actions. This would be the task of social inquiry and the humanities. Tackling problems of knowledge would be secondary. Social inquiry would be at the heart of the academic enterprise, intellectually more fundamental than natural science. On a rather more long-term basis, social inquiry would be concerned to help humanity build cooperatively rational methods of problem-solving into the fabric of social and political life, so that we may gradually acquire the capacity to resolve our conflicts and problems of living in more cooperatively rational ways than at present. Natural science would change to include three domains of discussion: evidence, theory, and aims - the latter including discussion of metaphysics, values and politics. Academic inquiry as a whole would become a kind of people's civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments. Academia would actively seek to

educate the public by means of discussion and debate, and would not just study the public. Universities would have just sufficient power to retain their independence from government, industry, the media, public opinion, but no more.

These changes are not arbitrary. They all come, I have argued, from demanding that academia cures its current structural irrationality, so that reason – the authentic article – may be devoted to promoting human welfare.²

The rise of policy-orientated research centres - a quiet revolution?

My efforts to start up a campaign to transform academia so that it becomes an educational resource to help humanity learn how to create a better world have not met with much success. I am not aware of any discipline, or any department in any university, that has changed as a result of my work. Few academics have even heard of my work. Even philosophers seem to be, by and large, ignorant of it, or indifferent to it – especially disappointing in view of the fact that the argument for the intellectual revolution is profoundly philosophical in character. And not just the argument: the outcome, the new conception of inquiry I argue for – *wisdom-inquiry* as it may be called – is, I claim, quintessentially philosophical in that it is the solution to a profoundly significant philosophical problem, namely: *What kind of inquiry can best help us make progress towards a civilized world?*

Viewed from another perspective, however, my call for a revolution, for the implementation of *wisdom-inquiry*, has been astonishingly successful. During the last 10-20 years, numerous changes have occurred in academia that amount to a shift towards *wisdom-inquiry* – whether or not in response to any of my work. In what follows I concentrate on universities in the UK.

Perhaps the most significant of these steps is the creation of departments, institutions and research centres concerned with social policy, environmental degradation, climate change, poverty, injustice and war, and other matters such as medical ethics and community health.

At Cambridge University, for example, one can see the first hints of the institutional structure of *wisdom-inquiry* being superimposed upon the existing structure of ‘*knowledge-inquiry*’ (as inquiry organised around the pursuit of knowledge may be called).

As I have indicated, *wisdom-inquiry* puts the intellectual tackling of problems of living at the heart of academic inquiry, this activity being conducted in such a way that it both influences, and is influenced by, more specialised research. *Knowledge-inquiry*, by contrast, organises intellectual activity into the conventional departments of knowledge: physics, chemistry, biology, history and the rest, in turn subdivided, again and again, into increasingly specialised research disciplines. But this *knowledge-inquiry* structure of ever more specialised research is hopelessly inappropriate when it comes to tackling problems of living. In order to tackle environmental problems, for example, in a rational and

effective way, specialized research into a multitude of different fields, from geology, engineering and economics to climate science, biology, architecture and metallurgy, needs to be connected to, and coordinated with, the different aspects of environmental problems.³ The sheer urgency of environmental problems has, it seems, forced Cambridge University to create the beginnings of wisdom-inquiry organization to deal with the issue. The “Cambridge Environmental Initiative” (CEI), launched in December 2004, distinguishes seven fields associated with environmental problems: conservation, climate change, energy, society, water waste built environment and industry, natural hazards, society, and technology, and under these headings, coordinates some 102 research groups working on specialized aspects of environmental issues in some 25 different (knowledge-inquiry) departments.⁴ The CEI holds seminars, workshops and public lectures to put specialized research workers in diverse fields in touch with one another, and to inform the public.

A similar coordinating, interdisciplinary initiative exists at Oxford University. This is the School of Geography and the Environment, founded in 2005 under another name. It is made up of five research “clusters”, two previously established research centres, the Environmental Change Institute (founded in 1991) and the Transport Studies Institute, and three inter-departmental research programmes, the African Environments Programme the Oxford Centre for Water Research, and the Oxford branch of the Tyndall Centre (see below). The School has links with other such research centres, for example the UK Climate Impact Programme and the UK Energy Research Centre.

Similar developments have taken place recently at my own university, University College London. Not only are there 141 research institutes and centres at UCL, some only recently founded, many interdisciplinary in character, devoted to such themes as ageing, cancer, cities, culture, public policy, the environment, global health, governance, migration, and security. In addition, very recently, the attempt has been made to organize research at UCL around a few broad themes that include: global health, sustainable cities, intercultural interactions, and human wellbeing. This is being done so that UCL may all the better contribute to solving the immense global problems that confront humanity.

These developments, echoed in many other UK universities, can be regarded as first steps towards implementing wisdom-inquiry.

Equally impressive is the John Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, founded by 28 scientists from ten different institutions in 2000. It is based in six British universities, has links with six others, and is funded by three research councils: the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The centre “brings together scientists, economists, engineers and social scientists, who together are working to develop sustainable responses to climate change through trans-disciplinary research and dialogue on both a national and international level [including] [...] with business leaders, policy advisors, the media and the public in general”.⁵ It is clear from the centre’s own account⁶ that innovations in its work are strikingly in accordance with

basic features of wisdom-inquiry. We have here, perhaps, the real beginnings of wisdom-inquiry being put into academic practice.

A similar organisation, modelled on the Tyndall Centre, is the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC), launched in 2004, and also funded by NERC, EPSRC and ESRC. Its mission is to be a “centre of research, and source of authoritative information and leadership, on sustainable energy systems”.⁷ The UKERC coordinates research in some twelve British universities or research institutions and has also launched the National Energy Research Network (NERN), which seeks to link up the entire energy community, including people from academia, government, non-governmental organisations and business.

Another possible indication of a modest step towards wisdom-inquiry is the growth of peace studies and conflict resolution research. In the UK, the Peace Studies Department at Bradford University has quadrupled in size since 1984,⁸ and is now the largest university department in this field in the world. INCORE, an International Conflict Research project, was established in 1993 at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, in conjunction with the United Nations University. It develops conflict resolution strategies and aims to influence policymakers and others involved in conflict resolution. Like the newly created environmental institutions just considered, INCORE is highly interdisciplinary in character, in that it coordinates work across the traditional knowledge departments of history, policy studies, politics, international affairs, sociology, geography, architecture, communications and social work as well as in peace and conflict studies.

Peace studies have also grown during the last two decades at Sussex University, Kings College London, Leeds University, Coventry University and London Metropolitan University. Recently created UK centres in the field include the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies at Warwick University; the Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace at Liverpool Hope University; the Praxis Centre at Leeds Metropolitan University; the Crime and Conflict Centre at Middlesex University; and the International Boundaries Research Unit at Durham University.⁹

There are further indications of a general movement towards aspects of wisdom-inquiry. Demos, an independent UK think tank has, in recent years, convened conferences on the need for more public participation in discussion of the aims and priorities of scientific research and greater openness of science to the public.¹⁰ This has been taken up by the Royal Society, which, in 2004, published a report on the potential benefits and hazards of nanotechnology produced by a group consisting of both scientists and non-scientists. The Royal Society also created a ‘Science in Society Programme’ in 2000, with the aims of promoting ‘dialogue with society’, of involving ‘society positively in influencing and sharing responsibility for policy on scientific matters’, and of embracing ‘a culture of openness in decision-making’ which takes into account ‘the values and attitudes of the public’.

A similar initiative is the ‘science in society’ research programme funded by the ESRC, which, in late 2007, produced six booklets on various aspects of the relationship between science and society. Many scientists now appreciate that non-scientists ought to contribute to discussions concerning science policy. There is a growing awareness among scientists and others of the role that values play in science policy, and of the importance of subjecting medical and other scientific research to ethical assessment. That universities are becoming increasingly concerned about these issues is indicated by the creation, in recent years, of many departments of ‘science, technology and society’, in the UK, the USA and elsewhere, their focus being interactions between science and society.

There are two initiatives that I have been involved with personally. The first is a new international group of over 230 scholars and educationalists called Friends of Wisdom, “an association of people sympathetic to the idea that academic inquiry should help humanity acquire more wisdom by rational means”.¹¹ The second is a special issue of the journal *London Review of Education*, which was devoted to the theme ‘wisdom in the university’, and which appeared in June 2007.¹² By coincidence, another academic journal, *Social Epistemology*, brought out a special issue on a similar theme in the same month.¹³ Later that year, ‘History and Policy’ was launched, a new initiative that seeks to bring together historians, politicians and the media, to work “for better public policy through an understanding of history”¹⁴.

Much still needs to be done

None of these developments quite amounts to advocating or implementing wisdom-inquiry (apart from the two I am associated with). The new environmental research organisations and the emphasis on policy studies of various kinds do not in themselves add up to wisdom-inquiry. In order to put wisdom-inquiry fully into academic practice, social inquiry and the humanities must give far greater emphasis to the task of helping humanity learn how to tackle its immense global problems in more cooperatively rational ways than at present. The imaginative and critical exploration of these problems would need to proceed at the heart of academia in such a way that it influences science policy and is in turn influenced by the results of scientific research.

Academia would also need to give much more emphasis to the task of public education by means of discussion and debate. Our only hope of tackling the global problems of climate change, poverty, war and terrorism humanely and effectively is to tackle them democratically. But democratic governments are rarely much more enlightened than their electorates, which means that electorates of democracies must have a good understanding of what our global problems are, and what needs to be done about them.

A vital task for universities, therefore, is to help educate the public. Wisdom-inquiry would promote public education to an extent far beyond anything attempted or even imagined by academics today; it would be a kind of academic inquiry devoted to helping humanity learn how to make progress towards as good a world as possible. A university system that did that might, for example, create a shadow government, which would generate policies and possible legislation, imaginatively, critically and free of the

shackles from which actual governments suffer because of all sorts of pressures, honourable and dishonourable.

We are still far from such a system today, and I suspect far from even a sense of awareness that such a system is required. Nevertheless, the developments I have indicated can be regarded as signs of a growing awareness of the need for our universities to change so as to help individuals learn how to realise what is genuinely of value in life; and help humanity learn how to tackle its immense global problems in wiser, more cooperatively rational ways than we are doing at present.

What is needed is a broader campaign to capitalise on this growing awareness and to help push the case forward for such an intellectual and institutional revolution. We urgently need academics and non-academics to wake up to what is going on and what needs to go on – and to help give direction, coherence and a rationale to this nascent revolution from knowledge to wisdom.

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Notes and References

¹ For a summary of the argument see Maxwell N (2007). Can the World Learn Wisdom? Solidarity, Sustainability, and Non-Violence, Vol. 3, No. 4. www.pelicanweb.org/solisustv03n04maxwell.html

² This argument was first spelled out in Maxwell N (1976). What's Wrong With Science? Bran's Head Books, Frome (second edition, Pentire Press, London, 2009); and in greater detail in Maxwell N (1984). From Knowledge to Wisdom. Basil Blackwell, Oxford (second edition, Pentire Press, London, 2007). See also Maxwell N (1992). What Kind of Inquiry Can Best Help Us Create a Good World? Science, Technology and Human Values 17, 205-27; Maxwell N (2000). Can Humanity Learn to become Civilized? The Crisis of Science without Civilization. Journal of Applied Philosophy 17, 29-44; Maxwell N (2004). Is Science Neurotic? Imperial College Press, London; and Maxwell N (2007). From Knowledge to Wisdom: The Need for an Academic Revolution. London Review of Education, 5, 97-115. See also www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk.

³ For the fundamental importance of interconnecting work on broad and specialized problems, see my (1980). Science, Reason, Knowledge and Wisdom: A Critique of Specialism, Inquiry 23, pp. 19-81.

⁴ See www.cei.group.cam.ac.uk/.

⁵ www.tyndall.ac.uk/general/about.shtml

⁶ Tyndall Centre, ed., *Truly Useful*, (UK, Tyndall Centre).

⁷ UKERC (2009). www.ukerc.ac.uk/

⁸ Professor Paul Rogers, personal communication.

⁹ For an account of the birth and growth of peace studies in universities see Rogers P F (2006). Peace Studies. In A Collins (ed). Contemporary Security Studies, Ch. 3. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹⁰ See Wilsdon J and Willis R (2004). See-through Science. Demos, London.

¹¹ See www.knowledgetowisdom.org/

¹² London Review of Education (2007). Special issue: Wisdom in the university. Vol. 5, no.2 (June).

¹³ Social Epistemology (2007). Special issue: Wisdom in management. Vol. 21, no. 2 (April-June).

¹⁴ See www.historyandpolicy.org/