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Nicholas Maxwell's Intellectual Revolution*

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Why does the gap between scientific achievement and social progress continue to widen? And why has science, which has so often been portrayed as a panacea, become part of the problem? In *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, Nicholas Maxwell argues that the main culprit is 'the philosophy of knowledge', the doctrine that truth is the central aim of inquiry and empirical adequacy the sole criterion of scientific success. While recognizing that we must do more than change our views about inquiry to eradicate poverty, pollution, torture and the threat of nuclear war, Maxwell is convinced that the philosophy of knowledge should be replaced by 'the philosophy of wisdom' and that a revolution in the aims of inquiry would make all the difference.

Maxwell's general view is that the rationalist's emphasis on reason should be combined with the romantic's emphasis on imagination, personal feelings and inspiration. Like many social critics, Maxwell believes that the search for truth should be curtailed and that science as presently practiced tends to frustrate rather than enhance human well-being. But he also insists that the 'rational progress achieved in science at its best has much of value to teach us about how to achieve cooperative rational progress in personal and social life' (p. 157). What we now require, he tells us, is a 'coherent intellectual-cultural movement (Rational Romanticism or Romantic Rationalism), capable of devoting itself far more effectively to the cooperative realization of value in life' (p. 118).

In support of this view, Maxwell observes that the philosophy of knowledge, far from being the pinnacle of rationality, 'inevitably tends, in characteristic ways, to betray the interests of humanity' (p. 47). Although inquiry pursued in accordance with this philosophy might seem to contribute to improving what is of 'value in life', it actually excludes 'the primary problems (of personal and social action) . . . from the intellectual domain of inquiry altogether' (p. 48). According to Maxwell, we need to keep firmly in mind that the problems of knowledge and technology are peripheral and that an emphasis on them distorts the 'priorities of research' (p. 53), the 'cultural (or "pure") dimension of scholarship and science' (p. 58), the study of 'our human world' (p. 59) and even our appreciation of the place of reason in everyday life (p. 63).

In addition, Maxwell argues that a critical investigation of the philosophy of knowledge yields a new aim for inquiry, one which lays the emphasis on wisdom rather than truth. 'Science', he reminds us, 'seeks explanatory truth', not 'truth *per se*' (p. 96); we prize explanatory truth because 'we seek to improve knowledge of humanly valuable truth' (p. 100), we pursue valuable truth because it enables us 'to enrich [our] lives' (p. 105), and 'we endeavour to realize this aim because . . . we endeavour to realize what is of value to us in life, as we live' (p. 107). In short, once we attempt to improve our aims as well as satisfy them,

* *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution in the Aims and Methods of Science*. By Nicholas Maxwell. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984. Pp. vi + 298. \$55.75.

we shall see that wisdom is fundamental and knowledge incidental. The philosophy of wisdom is simply the view that results when we proceed in a fully rational manner (see p. 94).

Much of what Maxwell has to say concerning these matters is sound and important. He is right to deplore the enormous waste of scientific talent on military research and to complain that academic science is often pointless. But such observations hardly establish that scientists are wrong to seek the truth. In the case of research into the etiology of disease, the effects of pollution and the way in which food is produced and distributed—to name some obvious examples—it is the truth and only the truth that we want. Science (as involving the pursuit of knowledge) may not be a panacea, but this does not mean that we should dismiss it as an intellectual disaster. Better that we continue to encourage research that contributes to ‘what is of value in life’ and discourage the rest.

Maxwell anticipates this challenge and replies that the philosophy of knowledge is inadequate even as an account of ‘that fragment of rational inquiry . . . devoted to the acquisition of knowledge’ (p. 200). We cannot, he says, ignore personal feelings and experiences even when considering the acceptance and rejection of scientific hypotheses. However, whether or not the experiential is ‘just that aspect of the real world which gives life its meaning and value’ (p. 201), it is implausible to insist, as Maxwell does, that ‘inquiry pursued in accordance with the philosophy of knowledge (in its modest or immodest version) is necessarily restricted to improving our knowledge of non-experiential fact’ (p. 202). Certainly, proponents of this approach are not obliged to hold that ‘our personal sensations, feelings and desires *always* mislead us about the real, objective nature of things’ (p. 204, Maxwell’s italics).

Nor is it reasonable to argue that the philosophy of knowledge falls short because it assumes that science is, or ought to be, free of metaphysics. It may well be true, as Maxwell maintains, that proponents of the philosophy of knowledge believe that ‘science does not, and ought not to, make any permanent metaphysical presuppositions about the nature of the world’ (p. 205). But it is far from clear that this prevents them from embracing the assumption that he deems necessary to resolve the problem of induction, namely that the world can be fully comprehended. For philosophers of knowledge can with some plausibility argue that this assumption functions as a very general scientific hypothesis, one that scientists may come in due course to reject. (Also, why think that the problem of induction evaporates once we recognize ‘some kind of overall uniformity, lawfulness, order, coherence, pattern, meaning or plan to the universe’ [p. 220]? As has often been pointed out, whatever happens is bound to conform to some regularity or other.)

Nonetheless, we should be wary about accepting the philosophy of knowledge either as a theory of scientific practice or as a prescription for how science ought to be done. Although scientists often espouse versions of the philosophy of knowledge and philosophers often take it for granted, it is not at all obvious that it ‘prevail[s] throughout the academic enterprise’ (p. 31), nor even that it plays a substantial role in scientific inquiry. On the contrary, historical study and experience of actual scientific research suggest that this philosophy is a poor guide to what science involves. Science is not a monolithic whole but rather a multifaceted enterprise which is pursued for many reasons and in a wide variety of ways. Indeed, when we concentrate on how scientific research is carried out, as opposed to programmatic statements about it, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the philosophy of knowledge comes into play only after the real work has—for good or ill—been done.

Should we therefore conclude that the philosophy of knowledge ought to be replaced by the 'philosophy of wisdom'? Maxwell is undoubtedly right to insist that knowledge by itself is not enough and that questions concerning human well-being are exceptionally important. Yet 'wisdom' is too uncertain and too open to contrary interpretations to serve as a substitute for 'knowledge'. For one thing, criticism based on wisdom is often less compelling than criticism based on knowledge; and for another, vague gestures in the direction of the 'value of life' can cover a multitude of sins. We should not forget that pollution is often ignored in the interests of preserving our present way of life, missiles frequently presented as peace-keepers, and poverty and unemployment widely held to be necessary for future prosperity.

True, Maxwell also provides some indication of what he takes to be of value in life. But his clarifications hinder more than they help. Should we really aim to strengthen and deepen the 'rawness and openness to the experiential dimensions of reality' that we had as children or even to become 'more sensitive and realistic, more knowledgeable and understanding, more creative, cooperative and responsible, more loving' (p. 203)? To eradicate torture, pollution and the like, we need to be a little more combative and a little less cooperative. And surely 'childish rawness and openness to the experiential dimension of reality' can be nasty and brutish as well as kind and humane. 'Living life lovingly, actively loving what is lovable in existence' sounds fine, but is it necessary or useful to promote it to the status of 'supreme good in existence' (p. 258)?

My argument with Maxwell is not that the problem he sets out to solve is unimportant, still less that scientists are exempt from caring and speaking out against terror, starvation, pollution, unemployment and nuclear war. Rather I question his view that our present predicament is fundamentally an intellectual one, that—in his words—'the human disasters of the twentieth century are due to our failure to put right an intellectual disaster of the eighteenth century' (p. 157). As I see it, the philosophy of wisdom is as much an ideological illusion as the philosophy of knowledge and just as tangential to the problems we face. What we need to put matters right is a radical change in our political, economic and social institutions, not a new philosophy of inquiry nor even a 'comprehensive intellectual revolution', however desirable these may be in and of themselves. The real 'disastrous intellectual error' is to assume that theory is more important than practice, ideas more instrumental than material forces.