

How Universities Can Best Respond to the Climate Crisis and Other Global Problems

Editorial, From the Acquisition of knowledge to the Promotion of Wisdom, *Philosophies*
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The world is in a state of crisis. Global problems that threaten our future include: the climate crisis; the destruction of natural habitats, catastrophic loss of wild life, and mass extinction of species; 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; even worse, 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 make 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 the whole conception of inquiry built into universities around the world. The basic idea is to 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.

But this basic idea is an intellectual disaster. Judged from the standpoint of promoting human welfare, it is profoundly and damagingly irrational, in a structural way. 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. As I have put it in a recent article, “[It is hardly too much to say that Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg have done more in one year to bring the climate crisis to public attention than all the universities of the world have done in 60 years – ever since we first really knew that global warming would occur.](#)”

Universities are in part *responsible* for the genesis of the global problems we face today, not because they have pursued scientific knowledge and technological know-how in such an extraordinarily successful way, but because they have done so in a way that is dissociated from a more fundamental concern to help humanity learn what our problems are, and what we need to do about them. We need urgently to bring about a revolution in universities around the world, wherever possible, so that their central task becomes to help humanity learn how to solve local and global problems of living, so that we may make progress towards a good, civilized world. Almost every branch and aspect of the university needs to change.

This is an argument that I have spelled out in book after book, article after article, for nearly 50 years. It was first spelled out in detail in *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Blackwell, 1984), available free online at <https://philpapers.org/rec/MAXFKT-3> . A recently published paper

gives a vivid account of my work on the issue over the decades: see “[How Universities Have Betrayed Reason and Humanity—And What's to Be Done About It](#)”, 2021, *Frontiers in Sustainability*. For a list of 23 structural changes that need to be made to universities to enhance their capacity to help humanity solve global problems effectively and rationally, see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/from-knowledge-to-wisdom/whatneedstochange> . See too *The World Crisis — And What to Do About It: A Revolution for Thought and Action*, 2021, World Scientific.

In agreeing to edit this special issue of *Philosophies*, devoted to the theme “From the Acquisition of Knowledge to the Pursuit of Wisdom”, I hoped that contributions would explore and discuss this crucial, but so far unnoticed disaster of our times: the appalling failure of universities, as a result of their structural irrationality, to help humanity solve global problems, effectively and intelligently; the urgent need to transform universities so that they become rationally and effectively devoted to helping humanity make progress to a better world.

No contribution to this special issue of *Philosophies* tackles this central disaster of our times head on, although several tackle related topics – related ways in which universities fail to serve the best interests of humanity, and need to be reformed. Robert Sternberg, Maria Jakubik, Zane Diamond, Mark Bracher and Giridhari Pandit all argue, in diverse ways, that universities ought to seek and promote wisdom but at present fail to do so. That is certainly related to what I see as the underlying disaster of our times: cured of its current gross, structural irrationality, academic inquiry could indeed be said to acquire, as its basic aim, to seek and promote wisdom, as I have argued in publication after publication ever since 1984.

Robert Sternberg, who has done so much to instigate the empirical study of wisdom, argues that transformational creativity is needed to promote wisdom and solve global problems. Sternberg explains what transformational creativity is, and how it helps. Mari Jakubik asks how university education can help us make progress to a better world. Her answer is that “universities, by becoming more open, unbounded, and enacting organizations, and by enhancing collaboration with businesses, could foster the cultivation of” practical wisdom “in higher education”. Zane Diamond is concerned with the problem of how the modern university can come to foster wisdom in its students. In a wide ranging article that considers ideas about wisdom and how it is to be acquired in many historical and cultural contexts, Diamond stresses in particular the value of learning from traditional and indigenous views and practices concerning wisdom. Mark Bracher argues that absolutely crucial to wisdom, in the sense of “the ability to respond to problems with decisions that maximize flourishing for all affected parties”, is the capacity to engage in causal reasoning, as far as both the past and the future are concerned. In order to solve a problem wisely, we must be able to understand what has caused the problem, and what will be the future outcomes of our attempts to solve it. Such causal reasoning is a key component of systems thinking, essential, Bracher argues, for wisdom. Giridhari Pandit argues that our institutions of learning need urgently to be transformed so that, instead of being restricted to the acquisition of knowledge, they develop “within a new framework of a culture of wisdom inquiry” to contribute to human well-being. Pandit argues that we may have much to learn from the complex interactions between diverse species in the natural world; we may be able to learn how to live with nature, and not against it. Pandit goes on to argue that much may be learned from the example of the university founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1921, and from older wisdom traditions.

I must immediately confess that my brief sketches of these contributions do not begin to do justice to their content. I have said enough however, I hope, to indicate that none tackles head on what is for me the crucial issue, the gross, structural irrationality of the modern university when judged from the standpoint of helping to promote human welfare – the urgent need to transform universities so that they become devoted, *in a genuinely rational*

way, to helping humanity realize (experience, be a part of, and create) what is of value in life, for oneself and others.

When I first developed this argument, long ago in the early 1970s, I did so without any reference to wisdom at all. (My first book, *What's Wrong With Science?*, 1976, scarcely mentions wisdom at all, and never as a basic aim of inquiry.) What is absolutely crucial is that we should have a kind of academic inquiry that is rationally designed and devoted to helping people realize what is of value in life, for themselves and others, it being recognized that, because what is genuinely of value is often profoundly problematic, we need a conception of reason that helps us improve problematic aims and ideals as we live. As that sentence indicates, the crucial argument can be stated and developed without the word "wisdom" being used at all. I introduced "wisdom" reluctantly, in my second book [*From Knowledge to Wisdom*](#), 1984, because I needed a word to stand for what should be, in my view, the basic aim of inquiry: to enhance "the capacity, active endeavour and desire to realize what is of value in life". I did so reluctantly, because I felt the word "wisdom" had various unfortunate associations connected with it.

It is in part my fault that there is not a single contribution devoted to *Reason* rather than *Wisdom*. I should have been clearer in the title and information of this special issue.

There are six further contributions to this special issue of *Philosophies*.

Susan Gardner points out that the tragedy of the commons obstructs solving the climate crisis: no nation wants to take a lead in the matter, especially if doing so fails to help. Gardner goes on to argue that what we need is "a certain kind of education, namely one that is critically and cooperatively dialogically person centered; one in which students are able to reflect on their own actions within facilitator-led dialogical interpersonal interchanges ... an education that focuses on student transformation".

Larry Culliford argues that, as a result of bringing psychology and philosophy together, a new joint discipline could be created that would enhance the contributions made "towards a healthier future for humanity". This alliance of the two disciplines would build upon development psychology especially, on the one hand, and the traditional love of wisdom of philosophy, on the other. Culliford discusses the way in which work in the two fields, brought together, can contribute towards people learning to live together better.

Chara Armon recognizes quite clearly that a crucial issue is that we need to transform our universities in order to solve the climate crisis. She argues that students need to acquire "knowledge and skills for effective regenerative action". This "consists of principles that can guide higher education into a stage of deep contribution to regeneration of the natural world and human well-being. The framework of regenerative collaboration promotes transformation of academic disciplines, academic departments, and courses and calls for development of practical regenerative skills to be part of every degree program." The outcome is a transition from a "knowledge focus to a wisdom and regenerative action focus".

Finally, there are three papers by Philip Wilson that explore in a well-documented and savagely ironical way, the horrific way in which humanity has failed so far over the decades to act to prevent the impending disasters of the climate crisis. The first paper explores reasons for climate change inaction. Some experts are held to be in part responsible as a result of presenting information about climate change in an over-optimistic way, partly out of fear that the grim truth might just induce despair and inaction. The second paper puts the blame for climate change inaction on the "the excessive complexity of society, from which arise the ills of post-truth, post-trust and post-reality". In the third article, Wilson argues that, all too often, it is held that we can have both unlimited economic growth and the solution to the climate and ecological crises; we can have "green growth" in other words. That, Wilson maintains, is not possible, and it is very damaging to pretend that it is. Far too many public

voices promote optimism, and underplay the gravity of the crisis. Direct action is urgently required to put a stop to further global heating.

To sum up, it is I think fair to say that, despite many differences of emphasis and substance, we all agree on the following key point: universities need to become much more actively and effectively engaged in helping the public tackle, and solve, the climate crisis, the ecological crisis, and other global problems that threaten our future.