

The Urgent Need for an Academic Revolution: From Knowledge to Wisdom

TEDxUCL Talk 2nd June 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dak-tDMSBUY>

1. Introduction

We are in a state of impending crisis. And the fault lies in part with academia. For two centuries or so, academia has been devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and technological know-how. This has enormously increased our power to act which has, in turn, brought us both all the great benefits of the modern world *and* the crises we now face. Modern science and technology have made possible modern industry and agriculture, the explosive growth of the world's population, modern armaments and the lethal character of modern warfare, immense inequalities of wealth and power around the globe, destruction of natural habitats and rapid extinction of species, pollution of earth, sea and air, and above all the impending disasters of climate change. All these global problems have arisen because some of us have acquired unprecedented powers to act, via science and technology, without also acquiring the capacity to act *wisely*. We urgently need a revolution in universities so that the basic intellectual aim becomes, not knowledge merely, but rather wisdom – wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, thus including knowledge and technological know-how, but much else besides.

2. Outline of the Argument

I develop the argument by considering two kinds of inquiry, which I shall call knowledge-inquiry and wisdom-inquiry. Both take the basic social or humanitarian aim of inquiry to be to help promote human welfare by intellectual and educational means.

Knowledge-inquiry takes as its basic intellectual aim to acquire knowledge. First, knowledge to be acquired; then, secondarily, it can be applied to help solve social problems.

Knowledge-inquiry has, associated with it, a sort of severe censorship system. Only that which is relevant to the pursuit of knowledge may enter into the intellectual domain of inquiry: evidence, valid argument, theories, claims to knowledge, and so on. This means things like values, politics, political ideas, feelings and desires, cries of distress, problems of living, proposals for action must all be excluded from the intellectual domain of inquiry - although factual knowledge about these things can of course be included.

Knowledge-inquiry is what we have inherited from the past. It is what is dominant even today in universities round the world, even though not everything that goes on in universities conforms precisely to the edicts of knowledge-inquiry. Despite this, knowledge-inquiry is profoundly and damagingly irrational in a wholesale, structural way, and it is this irrationality that is, in part, responsible for the genesis of our global problems, and our current incapacity to resolve them.

Wisdom-inquiry emerges when knowledge-inquiry is modified just sufficiently to cure it of its structural irrationality. The basic aim, as I have indicated, is to seek and promote wisdom, and not just acquire knowledge.

There are two arguments. The first appeals to a problem-solving conception of rationality, the second to an aim-pursuing conception of rationality. The second argument builds on the first.

3. First Argument

I am going to argue that knowledge-inquiry is damagingly irrational and needs to be replaced with wisdom-inquiry in universities around the world. This first argument appeals to a problem-solving conception of rationality.

4. What do I mean by Rationality?

Rationality, as I use the term - and this is the notion that is relevant to the issues we are considering - assumes that there is some probably rather ill-defined set of methods, strategies or rules which, if put into practice, give us our best chances, other things being equal, of solving our problems or realizing our aims. The rules of reason don't tell you precisely what to do (they tell you what to attempt), and they don't guarantee success. They assume that there is much that you can already do, and they tell you how to marshal these already solved problems how to best tackle new problems.

5. Four Basic Rules of Rational Problem-solving

I shall appeal to four absolutely basic, elementary, almost banal rules of rational problem-solving.

1. Articulate, and try to improve the articulation, of the problem you are trying to solve.
2. Propose and critically assess possible solutions.
3. If the basic problem you are trying to solve proves to be especially difficult to solve, specialize. Break the problem up into subordinate problems. Tackle analogous, easier to solve problems in an attempt to work gradually towards the solution to the basic problem.
4. But if you do specialize in this way, make sure specialized and basic problem-solving keep in touch with one another, so that each influences the other. If this isn't done, there is always the danger that specialized problem-solving will become unrelated to the basic problem you are trying to solve.

6. Damaging Irrationality of Knowledge-Inquiry

Any problem-solving endeavour that persistently violates just one of these rules will be seriously irrational, and will suffer as a result. Knowledge-inquiry violates *three* of these rules. It is as bad as that.

Knowledge-inquiry puts rule 3 into practice magnificently, especially as exemplified in universities around the world. Endless specialization, disciplines being endlessly subdivided into ever more specialized discipline, is a striking feature of academia as it exists today. But rules 1, 2 and 4 are all violated.

If we take seriously that academia has as its basic task to help promote human welfare - help people realize what is of value to them in life - then the basic problems academia needs to help solve are *problems of living*, problems of action in the real world, and not, fundamentally, problems of knowledge. It is what we do - or refrain from doing - that enables us to achieve what is of value in life, and not what we know. Even where new knowledge or technology is relevant, as it is in medicine, for example, or agriculture, it is always what this knowledge or technology enables us to do that enables us to achieve what is of value in life, not the knowledge as such.

So, in order to put rules 1 and 2 into practice, academia needs to give absolute intellectual priority to the tasks of 1 articulating our problems of living, including the global problems I indicated at the outset, and 2 proposing and critically assessing possible solutions - that is, possible *actions, policies, political programmes, strategies, new institutions, new social endeavours, new social arrangements, new ways of living, philosophies of life*. But the censorship system of knowledge-inquiry excludes all this from the intellectual domain of inquiry because it does not constitute contributions to knowledge. Just that which academia most needs to do in order help people, humanity, solve problems of living in increasingly cooperatively rational ways is not done within knowledge-inquiry because it does not contribute to the pursuit of knowledge. And in practice in universities today, thinking about problems of living and policy issues is pushed to the periphery of academia, and does not

proceed at the heart of the academic enterprise, as the most fundamental intellectual activity. It is in part because universities today fail to do what most needs to be done to help us make progress towards as good a world as possible, that we are in the mess that we are in.

Having violated rules 1 and 2, knowledge-inquiry also violates rule 4. If you fail to engage in thinking about fundamental problems, you cannot interconnect specialized and fundamental problem-solving, as rule 4 requires. As a result, specialized research is likely to become unrelated to our most urgent needs which, one may well argue, is what has happened in our universities today.

7. Wisdom-Inquiry: First, Problem-Solving Version

Wisdom-inquiry is what emerges when knowledge-inquiry is modified just sufficiently to correct its severe rationality defects. Wisdom-inquiry puts all four rules of reason into practice in a wholesale, structural way. At the heart of academia there are the absolutely intellectually fundamental tasks of 1 articulating and improving the articulation of problems of living, including global problems, and 2 proposing and critically assessing possible solutions - possible actions, policies, political programmes, ways of life and so on. More specialized problem-solving, and in particular scientific and technological research, emerge out of this and feed back into it, in accordance with rule 4. Thinking about our problems of living and what to do about them influences the aims and priorities of scientific and technological research, and the results of scientific and technological research of course influence thinking about problems of living.

Almost every branch and aspect of academia is modified as we move from knowledge-inquiry to wisdom-inquiry. Within knowledge-inquiry, social inquiry is primarily social science. The social sciences and humanities have, as their basic task, to improve our knowledge and understanding of social phenomena, the human world. Within wisdom-inquiry, by contrast, social inquiry have, as their basic task, to articulate problems of living and propose and assess possible solutions. The basic task is to help people, humanity, tackle conflicts and problems of living in the real world in increasingly cooperatively rational ways so that humanity may make progress towards a genuinely good, wise world - or at least as good a world as possible. Social inquiry, so conceived, within wisdom-inquiry, is intellectually more fundamental than natural science.

As we move from knowledge-inquiry to wisdom-inquiry the relationship between academia as a whole and the rest of the social world is transformed. Knowledge-inquiry seeks to shield itself from the social world to preserve the objectivity and integrity of the pursuit of knowledge. Wisdom-inquiry, by contrast, seeks to interact with the social world, ideas, experiences and arguments going in both directions, so that academia may help humanity learn how to tackle our immense global problems more effectively. Wisdom-inquiry might be regarded as a kind of civil service for humanity. What actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments, wisdom-inquiry academia does openly for the public.

So much for my sketch of the first argument.

8. Second Argument

An obvious question to ask is: If I am right, and academia really is as profoundly and damagingly irrational as I have argued it is, how and when did this come about? The answer is that it all goes back to the 18th century Enlightenment, especially the French Enlightenment.

9. The 18th century French Enlightenment

The *Philosophes* of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet and the rest, had the magnificent idea that it might be possible to learn from scientific progress towards greater

knowledge how to make social progress towards an Enlightened world. Unfortunately, in developing and implementing this magnificent idea, they blundered. They botched the job. They thought the task was to develop the social sciences alongside the natural sciences. This got developed throughout the 19th century, and got built into universities in the early 20th century with the creation of Departments of social science. The outcome is what we have, by and large, today: knowledge-inquiry.

But all this represents a series of dreadful blunders.

10. Three crucial steps to get right to put Enlightenment idea properly into practice

In order to implement the profound, basic idea of the Enlightenment properly, there are three crucial steps it is essential to get right. The *Philosophes* got all three steps wrong.

First, it is essential to get clear about what the progress-achieving methods of science are, what methods, precisely, make scientific progress possible.

Second, these methods need to be correctly generalized so that they become potentially fruitfully applicable to any worthwhile, problematic human endeavour, whatever the aims may be, and not just applicable to the scientific endeavour of improving knowledge.

Third, These correctly generalized progress-achieving methods then need to be got into the social world, into government, industry, agriculture, education, the media, the law, international relations, and so on, so that they may be exploited correctly in the great human endeavour of trying to make social progress towards an enlightened, wise world.

Orthodoxy holds that science seeks knowledge of truth, nothing being presupposed about the truth, the basic method being to assess claims to knowledge with respect to evidence, nothing being accepted as a part of scientific knowledge independent of evidence. But this orthodox view, versions of which have been taken for granted by scientists and non-scientists alike ever since the 18th century, is untenable. In physics, only unified theories are ever accepted, even though endlessly many empirically more successful disunified rivals can always be formulated. This persistent preference for unified theories - theories that assert that the same laws govern the phenomena to which the theory applies - means that physics makes a persistent, substantial, metaphysical, and highly problematic assumption about the nature of the universe: there is some kind of underlying unity in nature. The universe is, in some way, physically comprehensible.

The specific version of this metaphysical assumption that is accepted by physics at any stage in its development is almost bound to be wrong - as the history of physics illustrates. It is thus all-important that physics seeks to improve the assumption as it proceeds. We need to construe physics, and science more generally, as making problematic assumptions inherent in their aims, assumptions having to do with metaphysics, values and politics, there being a need, as a result, to improve aims and methods as science proceeds. There is something like positive feedback between improving scientific knowledge, and improving aims and methods - improving knowledge about how to improve knowledge - a feature of scientific method which helps to explain the explosive growth of scientific knowledge. This has gone on to some extent in scientific practice but it has been obscured by general acceptance of the untenable orthodox view.

It is this evolving aims and methods conception of the progress achieving methods of science that we need to generalize and then try to get into social life, so that all our other human endeavours - politics, industry, economics, agriculture, education, the media, the law, international relations, and so on - may acquire some of the progressive success of natural science: so that we may make social progress towards a genuinely enlightened, wise world. The vital point to appreciate is that it is not just in science that basic aims are problematic. This is the case in life too, not just in personal life, but in social and institutional life. All our global problems have arisen because we have pursued aims, such as economic and industrial progress, economic progress, without adequately taking into account the problems associated with these aims, the undesirable, unforeseen consequences. It is essential that we put the aims-and-methods meta-methodology, generalized from science, into social practice in all that we do if we are to make progress towards the highly problematic goal of achieving as good a world as possible.

If we assume that it is a basic task of social inquiry and the humanities to work out how we can get into the fabric of social life these aims-and-methods improving meta-methods, then social inquiry is more like social methodology or social philosophy than social science. It means social inquiry and the humanities have, as their basic task, to help humanity improve aims and methods of diverse social and institutional endeavours, so that we may make progress towards a wiser world.

11. Summary

To sum up. In order to create a better, wiser world, we need to learn how to do it. That in turn requires that our institutions of learning, our schools and universities, are well-designed, rationally designed and devoted for the task. At present they are not. This is in part responsible for our global problems and our current incapacity to tackle them effectively. We urgently need to bring about a revolution in universities around the world so that they become devoted to seeking and promoting wisdom - helping humanity create a better world. As far as the long term interests of humanity are concerned, there is probably no more important thing that we need to do.