

FORUM

Wanted: a new way of thinking

The kind of academic inquiry that we have today is a recipe for disaster, says Nicholas Maxwell

OUR WORLD is beset with appalling problems. There is the problem of poverty in the third World, of the massive global injustice inherent in the gulf that exists between rich and poor nations. There is the problem of the cold war between East and West, fought by proxy as hot wars in the Third World (in case the world's poor do not already suffer enough) and responsible, too, for driving the nuclear arms race to ever higher flights of danger and absurdity. There are ecological problems, the result of population growth and industrialisation, which lead to pollution, depletion of finite, irreplaceable, natural resources, and the destruction of species and natural habitats, such as the tropical rainforest. And over everything hangs the dreadful possibility of the nuclear holocaust, threatening to destroy humanity for ever, whether as a result of accident, lunacy, or the remorseless logic of escalating threat and counter threat in a time of international crisis.

To solve these urgent, intractable global problems it is not new scientific knowledge and technology that we need so much as new *actions*: new policies, new international relations, new institutions and social arrangements, new ways of living. The mere provision of scientific knowledge and technological know-how cannot help much: indeed, all too often it actually makes matters worse. The dreadful truth is that science has played a crucial role, often unwittingly, in the *creation* of our problems. This is glaringly obvious in the case of the nuclear arms race. But it is true of our other problems as well. Scientific and technological research make industrial development possible, which in turn creates pollution, depletes natural resources, destroys natural habitats and creates vast differences in wealth and power between different regions. And even where scientific knowledge is used as originally intended, to help to make things better rather than worse (as in medicine, for example, or agriculture), it is always what science enables people to *do* that helps to solve our human problems, not the knowledge or technology in itself.

To solve our problems, then, we certainly need to learn, but what we need to learn is not so much new *knowledge* as new *actions*—new, more cooperative, wiser ways of living. Above all, we need to learn how to resolve our conflicts in more just, humane and rationally cooperative ways. This in turn requires that we create new institutions and traditions of learning, rationally devoted to helping us to learn how to become more cooperative and wise. We need a new kind of academic enterprise, all over the world, which takes as its basic task to promote not just knowledge, but rather *wisdom*—wisdom being defined as the capacity to solve problems of living so as to achieve what is of value, for oneself and others (wisdom thus including but going beyond knowledge).

Organised inquiry of this kind would give intellectual priority to articulating our problems of living, and to proposing and criticising possible solutions, possible cooperative actions. Such solutions would be assessed in terms of their capacity to enable us to realise what is of

value to us if put into practice. This is the task of social inquiry. The pursuit of science, knowledge and technological know-how would be intellectually subordinate and secondary, influenced by and influencing our best thinking about what our problems are and what we need to do about them.

As a result, there would be the hope that our best thinking about what to do about our problems would influence and be influenced by our best scientific thinking. All intellectual or academic problems would be understood to be subordinate aspects of our real problems of living, and they would be created and tackled ultimately in order to help us to solve those problems. It would not, of course, be the job of academics to dictate to the rest of us how we should think and act. Their job, rather, would be to help the rest of us to improve our own thinking and living for ourselves.

All this differs dramatically from what we have at present: academic inquiry devoted, by and large, to the pursuit of specialised knowledge and technological know-how. When viewed from the standpoint of helping humanity to solve its global problems, the kind of academic inquiry that we have at present is an intellectual and moral disaster. Indeed, in encouraging the pursuit of knowledge dissociated from sustained imaginative and critical thought about our most urgent problems of living, it is a recipe for global disaster. For what it does is to increase our power to *act* without at the same time increasing our power to act *cooperatively and rationally*, that is, without increasing our power to choose good goals in life—those that enhance justice, peace, democracy and cooperative ways of living. Our global problems are the all but inevitable outcome: they are precisely the outcome of increased power to act divorced from any increase in our power to act cooperatively.

As a matter of urgency, then, we need to bring about a major revolution in the overall aims and methods of academic inquiry, so that the basic aim becomes not just to increase expert knowledge, but to help to promote wisdom in life by rationally cooperative means. There can scarcely be any more important task for all those associated in any way with the academic enterprise—scientists, technologists, scholars, teachers, administrators, students, parents, providers of funds—than to help to put into practice the new kind of inquiry, rationally devoted to the growth of wisdom. We urgently need a pressure group or campaigning organisation actively seeking to help to change schools and universities so that they take up their proper task of teaching and learning wisdom.

Nicholas Maxwell lectures in the history and philosophy of science at University College London. This article is based on Maxwell's book, *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, published in paperback last month by Basil Blackwell.