

Knowledge to Wisdom: We Need a Revolution

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Introduction

The following document is a very brief summary of a thesis and argument that I have devoted the last 30 years of my life to trying to get across to my fellow human beings. It was first spelled out in *What's Wrong With Science?* (Bran's Head Books, 1976) and subsequently in *From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Blackwell, 1984), *Is Science Neurotic?* (Imperial College Press, 2004) and numerous articles, references to which can be found on <http://www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk>. Three years ago an international group was formed, called Friends of Wisdom, which seeks to get across to academics and the public the compelling arguments and urgent need to transform academic inquiry so that its basic aim becomes to seek and promote wisdom. The document below is taken from the website of Friends of Wisdom, the URL of which is <http://www.knowledgetowisdom.org>. It is the mission statement of Friends of Wisdom. You are invited to join.

Keywords academic inquiry · knowledge · wisdom · rationality · revolution · natural science · social inquiry · problems of living · metaphysics · values · politics · better world · global warming · poverty · war · terrorism · human welfare

We need a revolution in the aims and methods of academic inquiry. Instead of giving priority to the search for knowledge, academia needs to devote itself to seeking and promoting wisdom by rational means, wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, wisdom thus including knowledge but much else besides. A basic task ought to be to help humanity learn how to create a better world.

Acquiring scientific knowledge dissociated from a more basic concern for wisdom, as 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

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increase our power to act which, without wisdom, may cause human suffering and death as well as human benefit. All our modern global problems have arisen in this way: global warming, the lethal character of modern war and terrorism, vast inequalities of wealth and power round the globe, rapid increase in population, rapid extinction of other species, even the aids epidemic (aids being spread by modern travel). 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 – wars, death camps, dictatorships, poverty, environmental damage – 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.

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