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EDITORIAL

Wisdom in the university

We live in troubled times. There are the conflicts in Iraq and in Afghanistan and their questionable elements of imperialism, the violence in areas such as Darfur and Chechnya, and the continuing Israeli/Palestinian conflict. There is the threat of international terrorism, and the responses to terrorism by the US, UK and other democratic nations. There is the enduring poverty of millions in Africa and other parts of the developing world; and the poverty in some of the advanced countries is actually worsening. There is the arms trade, and the spread of modern armaments, conventional, chemical, biological, and nuclear. There is the destruction of tropical rain forests and other natural habitats, and the rapid extinction of species on land and in the sea. And over everything hangs global warming, which is already beginning to unleash droughts, storms, floods and rising sea levels, all of which may cause populations to try to migrate, leading in turn, no doubt, to further conflict and war.

In the light of these threats and prospects, humanity urgently needs to learn how to manage its affairs somewhat more wisely than it has done so far. If any existing institutions are to take a lead in this matter, it must surely be our universities, the most advanced institutions of learning that we possess. But do universities devote themselves to helping humanity learn how to create a better world? Do they even conceive of their task, their rationale, in such terms?

Somewhere, lurking in the background, inherited from the past, there is, perhaps, the idea that universities should seek and promote wisdom. But this is hardly what, in reality, the modern university is about. Officially, the intellectual aim of inquiry is to acquire knowledge, and develop technological know-how. In addition, it is the job of universities to train students for the professions: the law, medicine, engineering, education, and so on. And increasingly, these days, a vitally necessary ancillary task for universities is to acquire funds. Once upon a time, the standing of a scientist or scholar in his or her university would depend on the quality of research. Now, increasingly, it seems to depend on the amount of funds brought into the university. Helping humanity learn how to create a better world is hardly at the forefront of academic concern.

Why not? How ought universities to be organized if they are to help humanity acquire a bit more wisdom? What ought to be the aims and methods, the structure and character, of academic inquiry if it is to be devoted rationally to helping us learn how to resolve our conflicts and social problems in more peaceful, just and cooperative ways than we do at present? What needs to change if universities are to teach and promote wisdom, as a deliberate policy rather paying wisdom lip service at the most? How can universities best serve the best interests of humanity?

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These are the questions the papers of this special issue of the *London Review of Education* try to answer.

Maxwell argues, boldly and starkly, that we need a revolution. The basic official aim of inquiry at present is to acquire knowledge. But this, Maxwell argues, betrays both reason and humanity. If universities are to help humanity learn how to create a better world, in a rigorous and effective way, a revolution is needed in the whole organization and character of academic inquiry so that problems of living are put at the heart of the enterprise, and the basic aim becomes that of promoting wisdom—wisdom being understood to be 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.

Iredale considers to what extent Maxwell's call for revolution, from knowledge to wisdom, has been answered since it was first made some 30 years ago. He concludes that there has been some movement towards wisdom-inquiry independently of Maxwell's neglected call for it. The scientific community is today far more actively concerned with environmental problems and the social impact of science than it was three decades ago.

McHenry discusses the manner in which commercial pressures have adversely affected scientific research. He considers specific examples of drug companies distorting or repressing empirical findings of drug trials. It is not just that the priorities of research are adversely affected; the objectivity and independence of medical science has, in some cases, been undermined.

Sternberg *et al.* and Trowbridge are concerned with the question of how education can be conducted so that it leads to the acquisition of wisdom. Sternberg *et al.* discuss teaching for wisdom in schools. They spell out how education can be conducted in such a way that wisdom can be acquired along with whatever else is being taught and learned. Trowbridge gives an account of educational courses for older and retired people, designed specifically to enable these students to acquire wisdom.

Taking her lead from Aquinas and Newman, Deane-Drummond discusses ways in which theological perspectives on wisdom can bring enrichment to universities. She emphasizes the value of interdisciplinarity, community life, and ways of knowing other than the scientific, stressing that theologically informed wisdom could counteract the pathologies of religious extremism, creationism and intelligent design. She concludes by considering two issues of public concern: environmental issues, and new reproductive technologies.

Finally Nordstrom, in an essay that might be regarded as an object lesson in how to conduct teaching for wisdom, sets out to discover what can be learned about wisdom from Shakespeare. For Nordstrom, Shakespeare reveals to us what wisdom is by depicting countless varieties of its opposite: folly. However, we are not necessarily bound to be foolish. From time to time, in Shakespeare's plays, 'sparks of wisdom shine out against the general gloom of human inanity and insanity'.

Nicholas Maxwell
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