Review of: "Does Philosophy Matter? The Urgent Need for a Philosophical Revolution"

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I share with the author several of the concerns about academia and about the wider world outside of academia and he is to be commended for a direct, unhesitant formulation of what he takes to be the most fundamental issues. I do not share the practical conclusions he draws. I believe there are reasons to be skeptical regarding the claim that philosophy should be reoriented to Critical Fundamentalism and that universities should be reoriented, in thorough and systematic ways to become “a people’s civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments.” [p. 12] (Why “in secret”….. except for various intelligence and security organizations, and some aspects of law enforcement?) As much as I share some of Prof. Maxwell’s concerns, I believe his proposals invite all sorts of reservations regarding (i) feasibility and (ii) [plausibility. It’s almost certainly true that the proposed changes in universities could only be attempted, no less executed, if there are first (or simultaneously) significant changes in civil society and political culture, and historically, the record of implementing social/educational/economic programs on a society-wide scale, even when claiming to aspire to strongly desirable ends is discouraging in various respects if not also terrifying. For one thing, the (plausible, defensible) pluralism regarding what constitutes wisdom is likely to be an impediment. That is not a reason for simply leaving universities in their current condition but the aspiration to achieve wisdom on a culture-wide or at least society-wide scale would require a scope of intellectual and practical agreement which, in a sense, is what a liberal democracy believes is either unattainable, undesirable, or *both*.

If one values wisdom but is also skeptical regarding the extent to which it is likely to be realized—even by a society that is not struggling with sharp political divisions, frictions between groups, deep disagreements about what constitutes normative authority, and so forth—one will recognize that the pursuit of wisdom on a grand scale has very limited prospects. More concerning is the way that the effort and the aspiration can be ideologically hijacked and take a coercive form. I suppose I am less confident than the author both epistemically and politically. I do believe there is such a thing as practical wisdom and though some of it can be articulated in the form of numerous important generalizations and principles the great majority of it is contextual (without being relativist) in ways that resist the systemizing that is likely to be needed for a shared, social conception of what are the problems and the solutions.

In raising objections to the author’s view I am not defending the status quo. In numerous respects it is now almost embarrassing to be a professor, and far too many universities are run by people who understand neither intellectual life nor academic life—except in the terms of some desiccated, jargon-riddled management rhetoric-of-the-month. One reason for skepticism regarding Critical Fundamentalism is that there are many types of universities, and they have

different aims, and are responsive to different constituencies, and they have different needs. As troubling as the current state of many universities, that there is a diversity of types is probably a good thing. Moreover, for wisdom to be pursued and realized in the ways the author proposes would probably require the further social-scientizing of universities—and the first casualty would be the very notion of wisdom. The way in which it is understood by (many) philosophers is in terms that many (even highly educated) non-philosophers just won't understand or will regard as 'mushy,' obscure, or unscientific. Then there are the practical challenges. On pages 12-13 these come one after the other, and include the notion that "Universities need just enough power to preserve their independence from government, the media, the commercial world, and the public, but no more." A great deal of wisdom—of various types—would be needed to find that mean. All sorts of contingencies could disturb it—legitimately—and it is very difficult to undo institutional arrangements even if what gave rise to them were contingencies of a particular moment.

I won't go on at length but one way to summarize several of the points I would make is to observe that a number of recent and contemporary currents, trends, and attitudes have rendered a great many persons inarticulate with regard to normative matters at the same time as encouraging them to regard their normative views and commitments as immune to criticism. It is as though a criterion we might call 'The Big Stupid' has managed to set the terms of argument, disagreement, and valuative judgment and commitment. Education at all levels has a great deal to answer for as so much of it seems to induct students into ways of seeing things that regard critical thought as anathema. It might be that every era has some form of this discouraging worry, but even if that is the case, it is our turn *now*, and it is deeply troubling. The damage it is doing is profound and the risks seem greater than in many other eras. (Though, consider the 1860s; the 1930s, even the 1960s. Those were all periods rich with genuine potential for disasters of various types—many of which occurred.)

Perhaps part of what Professor Maxwell means by wisdom and the society-wide pursuit of it, with philosophy having a key role in articulating it, is that we need to be educated in ways that enable rigorous and informed but open-minded normative understanding and normative judgment. Without that as a crucial element of education we will be unable to formulate, no less address multiple, diverse and genuine challenges. Plato held that it is wisdom that has the authority to rule but there are ways for wisdom to have a critically important role without a Platonic political order and its liabilities. Right along with thinking about what we mean by wisdom we need to be thinking about what roles it could or should have, and what we are to do politically when wisdom does not carry the day and its authority is not recognized. That is the case most of the time. That is the kind of politics we need to become much better at practicing. That is something philosophy can help us to understand. I agree that we are not doing well at having a role for philosophy in education and in society. But I am very hesitant about endorsing the mandate for it that Prof Maxwell describes.

I have been in the discipline long enough to see just how fashion driven it is. For example, look at Anglophone philosophy in the twentieth century. There are pretty clearly discernible periods of a particular way of seeing things being in the ascendance—and then not in the ascendance. Certain problems, certain idiom and methods are urgently important, and then seven to ten years later, somehow, something else is urgently important even though the older problems have not been solved, nor have the idiom and the method been exhausted. On the one hand, genuinely philosophical problems are those that endure. Often they need to be empirically informed but they are not empirical problems. And they survive

changes in fashion and ignorant exhibitions of contempt whether by scientists or others. Maybe one thing philosophers can do is to be very careful and very deliberate in their understanding of the relation between contemporary urgency and enduring issues. But I am hesitant to seek to institutionalize wisdom, so to speak, as a specific project. That so often ends very badly. Even if many people acquired wisdom it would probably stull be the case that it is transmitted through the texture of civility in many different departments of life rather than mainly through a particular discipline. Perhaps wisdom is best understood by philosophy but that does not assure us that a philosophical curriculum will render it practical with real effect.