



## **Review - From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution for Science and the Humanities**

Second Edition

by Nicholas Maxwell

Pentire Press, 2007

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Any philosopher or other person who seeks wisdom should read this book. Any educator who loves education--especially those in leadership positions--should read this book. Anyone who wants to understand an important source of modern human malaise should read this book. And anyone trying to figure out why, in a world that produces so many technical wonders, there is such an immense "wisdom gap" should read this book.

In *From Knowledge to Wisdom: A Revolution for Science and the Humanities*, Second Edition, British philosopher Nicholas Maxwell presents a compelling, wise, humane, and timely argument for a shift in our fundamental "aim of inquiry" from that of knowledge to that of wisdom. To appreciate the bare essence of Maxwell's conclusion, one need only consult a good dictionary and reflect on the state of the world today. But, the book helps bring the problem to life and presents a *compelling rationale* for the shift. Indeed, the essential argument of the book "rings true" (and loudly so) in light of what's going on in the world today on many dimensions.

Maxwell argues that the highest priority of inquiry--the "aim" of inquiry--should be to help humans realize (including achieve) "what is of value in life" in a broad sense of that phrase and in ways that are themselves subject to continuing assessment and improvement as wisdom and knowledge progress. For example, rather than claiming to seek "truth" primarily for the sake of knowledge itself, we should, Maxwell argues, place a higher priority on seeking understanding, and corresponding action, aimed at helping humans actually *realize* "what is of value in life."

The book is *not* simply or even primarily an emotional plea: Instead, the argument is based in reason, rationality, an analysis of shortcomings of current approaches, and wisdom. The book does *not* argue for wisdom-*without*-knowledge (as if there were such a thing for humans). It argues, instead, that a priority should be placed on wisdom and, within that broader context--and as one key element of it--on the acquisition of knowledge that serves the higher priority of wisdom and, in so

doing, serves the aim mentioned above. Nor is the book's message relativistic in the sense of "everything is equally true" or "anything goes." In fact, the book reflects a deep appreciation for empirical discovery and practicality. That said, the book makes the very healthy argument, among others, that the aims and assumptions of inquiry, in general, should be made explicit and should be subject to ongoing assessment and improvement.

In a very helpful way, Maxwell uses the phrases "philosophy of wisdom," "philosophy of knowledge," "aim-oriented rationality," "standard empiricism," and "aim-oriented empiricism" to clarify concepts and express his argument. That said, given the immense importance of the topic, I could not possibly do it justice by trying to summarize Maxwell's compelling argument here.

Far from wanting to critique Maxwell's central thesis, I recommend that thoughtful readers carefully read and consider the book. In my view, the sooner relevant audiences read *From Knowledge to Wisdom*, the better for the 6.5-plus billion people who currently share Earth. That said, I offer a few comments that may, hopefully, be helpful:

First, in my opinion, after reading the main discussion in the first two-thirds of the book, different audiences may find the final chapters more or less relevant to themselves *depending on* their interests and professions. Some may want to read through chapter nine and, in addition, read chapter thirteen, which I found very helpful. Others, after reading through chapter nine, may find several or all of the final chapters helpful. (The book has fourteen.) For example, educators will probably find chapters eleven and twelve very helpful (in addition to the earlier chapters). For people in some disciplines, there may very well be some great gems in the final chapters. Philosophers of science should find the entire book helpful. That said, unlike the first two-thirds of the book, some of the latter chapters get fairly technical in places and are, in my view, best suited to particular audiences. However, the book is structured such that general readers "get" the main argument and discussion, in highly accessible form, in the first two-thirds and don't necessarily need to read (depending on profession) one or more of the final chapters.

Second, I can't claim to agree with every sentence in the book. I've never met a nonfiction book that didn't give me something--a paragraph here, or a page there--with which to disagree. Nevertheless, in my view, the main theme and

associated reasoning in the book are intact and compelling. My questions and disagreements (few) have to do with ancillary matters mentioned in the latter chapters that are not crucial, in my view, to Maxwell's overall point.

Third, *From Knowledge to Wisdom* is for the open-minded wisdom-seeker but perhaps not for the faint of heart. Maxwell sheds light on--and seeks to correct and improve--some key unexamined or under-examined assumptions that influence academia, scientific pursuit, and global well-being. Mary Poppins might have added a bit more sugar, but that's Mary Poppins.

As a bonus, in addition to the immense wisdom and value of the book's main point, some audiences may find a single quote in the book (from Einstein) worth the entire price of admission.

Finally, to underscore the importance of this book in my view, I leave readers with the following quotes, not from the book itself but which, to me, point to the vital importance of the major shift "from knowledge to wisdom" that Maxwell proposes:

*The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.* Albert Einstein

*It is all too evident that our moral thinking simply has not been able to keep pace with the speed of scientific advancement.* Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama

*If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.* Thomas Jefferson

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Jeff Huggins has a science and engineering background from U.C. Berkeley and an MBA from Harvard, where he graduated as a Baker Scholar. He has been a McKinsey & Company consultant and an executive with The Walt Disney Company. He currently studies human morality from the scientific and philosophical/reasoning standpoints and works on bridging those standpoints into an integrated understanding. Jeff lives in Northern California with his two sons.

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