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Philosophy needs to face up to the Global Problems of our Times

Book review: Nicholas Maxwell (2020), *Our Fundamental Problem: A Revolutionary Approach to Philosophy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, pp. xiii + 298, \$34.95 CAD PB.

Gil Santos¹

gilcosan@gmail.com

According to Nicholas Maxwell, two main problems of *learning* confront humanity: the problem of learning about the nature of the universe and our place in it, and the problem of learning how to achieve social progress toward a better, wiser world. The first problem, says Maxwell, was solved with the creation of modern science in the 17th century. The second is still waiting to be solved. For Maxwell, philosophy has lost its track long ago, due to the neglect, or at least downplaying, of its fundamental role: to help us understand how the world as we experience it can exist and best flourish within the physical universe. This is 'our fundamental problem'. Although some contemporary philosophers have explored aspects of this problem, such as Karl Popper, J.J.C. Smart, Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers, academic philosophy has failed so far to put that problem center stage (33).

To tackle this problem, Maxwell puts forward a new kind of philosophical approach, which he calls 'critical fundamentalism'. But the need to revolutionize

¹ Departamento de História e Filosofia das Ciências, Faculdade de Ciências, Centro de Filosofia das Ciências, Universidade de Lisboa, Campo Grande, C4.3.24, 1749-016 Lisboa, Portugal.

philosophy, says Maxwell, is only the starting point of a series of radical changes that must be implemented, namely, in the way we take science to tell us about the world (Chapters 3 and 5); in our conception of science and the kind of science we should seek to pursue (Chapter 4); in the interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution as a mean to understand how a life of value may have evolved (Chapter 6); and in the way the social sciences and academic inquiry ought to develop (Chapters 7 and 8).

Maxwell's book may be divided into three main parts, each one of them addressing a particular question. The first part concerns the question of how we can justify the autonomy of the 'human world' vis-à-vis the 'physical universe'. This is the subject of Chapters 2 to 5. To answer this question, Maxwell addresses five approaches to the solution of the fundamental problem: physicalism, Cartesian dualism, idealism, naïve realism, and the two-aspect view, concluding with his support to a particular version of the latter, which he calls 'experiential physicalism'. According to this view, the physical and the humanly experiential are just two kinds of features or properties of material things. In connection with this two-aspect view, Maxwell argues that Physics only covers the causally efficacious aspect of the world, and the manner in which that aspect determines, even if only probabilistically, the way events unfold. Consequently, Physics' silence on the experiential aspects of reality provides no ground for rejecting the objective reality of perceptual qualities, not limited to the processes occurring in sentient or conscious brains, even though they can only be known by subjective means. In this context, Maxwell argues for a realist theory of perception, stressing the liabilities of the causal account of perception and its associated internalist viewpoint (49-54). To understand the human world is an enterprise quite distinct from explaining the physical universe, since it necessarily involves purposive explanations, not reducible to, although compatible with, physical explanations.

The second part of the book addresses the question of how the human world could have been generated from a purely physical universe. That is the subject of Chapter 6. Maxwell thinks we can find an explanation if we embrace a purposive interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution. Although evolution itself has no purpose, mutations and natural selection are both devoid of any purpose, all living organisms are inherently purposive as their basic goals are to survive and reproduce. Now, purposive activity, manifested, for example, in niche construction, has "a major impact on selection — on what characteristics have survival value, and what do not — and thus on the way subsequent evolution proceeds" (131). Maxwell's idea is that 'evolution by cultural

means' can be understood as a new step or way of life, in the process of diversification, complexification, and sophistication of the purposeful activity of some living things. Darwin's theory of evolution may thus explain why culture has evolved from non-cultural purposive actions, just like purposiveness gradually emerged from an ultimately purposeless universe. Although Darwin's theory cannot explain the evolution of sentience and consciousness, it can give an account of what needs to evolve for them to emerge. For Maxwell, sentience, imagination and consciousness, all of them endowed with an undeniable survival value, may have emerged as a result of a series of gradual changes in the way brains control purposive action (143).

The third part of the book examines the question of how the social sciences, academic inquiry and philosophy should be changed in order to address and solve the fundamental problem. This is the subject of Chapters 7-9 and the Appendix. According to Maxwell, the social sciences should not be primarily conceived as sciences, since their proper basic task must be to promote the cooperatively rational solving of conflicts and problems of living in the social world. Social inquiry should then be conceived as social methodology or philosophy rather than science. Global problems, such as growing inequality, global warming, pollution, destruction of natural habitats, conflicts and wars, are by-products of our scientific and technological successes (153 and 155). Now, if we do not want to "descend into even greater anarchy and chaos than what we have at present", that is, if we really want to resolve these global problems, we need to *learn* how to best approach them. And this means "that our institutions of learning — or university and schools — need to be well designed and devoted to the task" (154). The reason why universities "are, in part, responsible for making things worse", is that they adopted the traditional idea, rooted in the eighteen-century Enlightenment program, that the primary intellectual aim of inquiry is to acquire knowledge, and only secondarily to apply that knowledge to help solving social problems.

This is why Maxwell calls for a new Enlightenment. We need to reverse the priorities: social inquiry and the humanities need to be at the heart of the academic enterprise. The standard empiricism, with its idea that scientific knowledge can be assessed independently of metaphysical issues, explains the current divorce between *knowledge*-inquiry and *wisdom*-inquiry, as well as the secondary character of the latter. Maxwell thus contends that our institutions, social endeavours and culture, need to adopt an *aim-oriented* rationalism, to transform knowledge-inquiry into wisdom-inquiry. Only

this way we can have “institutions of learning rationally designed and devoted to helping us improve our personal and social lives as we live” (178).

Broadly speaking, *Our Fundamental Problem* develops two main theses. The first thesis says that philosophy must be able to learn how to solve the serious global problems of our times, which in turn implies an inversion of the traditional relations between knowledge-inquiry and wisdom-inquiry. The second thesis says that our inability to address adequately and solve the most important problems of our world is only, or mainly, due to the fact that, after Descartes, philosophy “has profoundly misunderstood what its proper task is”, as well as because the eighteen-century Enlightenment program was interpreted and developed in a wrong way (164-171; 206-210).

Now, these two theses are quite independent of each other. One may entirely agree with the first while disagreeing with the second. For example, Maxwell rightly acknowledges that Spinoza endorsed a dual-aspect theory, thereby conceiving both *mens* and *extensio* as objective attributes of reality. Yet, Maxwell does not consider Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and, in particular, his *Ethics*. Can one really say that *all* philosophers after Descartes failed to give center stage to what Maxwell considers to be the fundamental problem? (31-32) Secondly, I find it difficult to understand how post-Cartesian philosophy and the development of Enlightenment program can be taken as the only or even main cause for our inability to address and solve problems such as the increasing growth of inequality, geopolitical conflicts and wars, or environmental degradation (164-165, 205-206).

Nevertheless, the problems and challenges raised by *Our Fundamental Problem* are undoubtedly relevant, making this book a highly important contribution for anyone interested in addressing and answering the most important problems of our time in a meaningful way. It seems obvious that we cannot rely on mere palliative or cosmetic measures, nor in the passive belief that human rationality will inevitably solve all the problems somehow in the future as if it were teleologically guided by some intrinsic principle of optimization. For this reason, as well as for the fact that Maxwell takes problems such as the growth of inequality or environmental degradation very seriously, this book can be read as an essential counterpoint to other accounts such as the one recently published by Pinker (2018). In this regard, it is also worth reading Maxwell 2018.

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