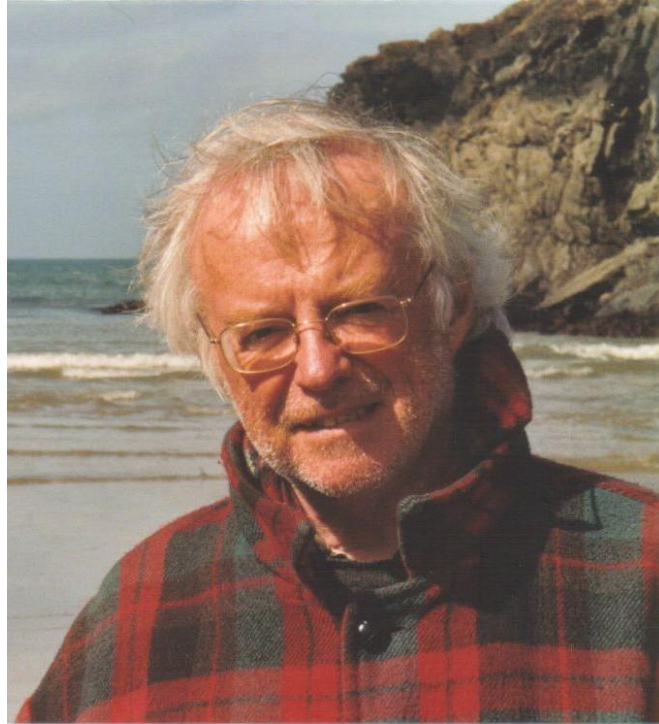


## # Nicholas Maxwell (1937-2025)

Nicholas Maxwell (3 July 1937-11 January 2025) was a [philosopher](#) who has devoted much of his working life to arguing that there is an urgent need to bring about a revolution in [academia](#) so that it seeks and promotes [wisdom](#) and not just knowledge.



Nicholas studied philosophy at Manchester University, where he obtained a BA in 1963, and an MA in 1965, and where he taught philosophy of science for one year. For nearly thirty years he taught [philosophy of science](#) at [University College London](#), where he became an Emeritus Reader. In 2003 he founded Friends of Wisdom, an international group of people sympathetic to the idea that academic inquiry should help humanity acquire more wisdom by rational means.

He has published fifteen books spelling out different aspects of the argument for an intellectual revolution, from knowledge to wisdom, and has contributed to over thirty other books. He has published over eighty papers in scientific and philosophical journals on problems that range from consciousness, value, and art to the rationality of science, simplicity, [scientific realism](#), explanation, time and [quantum theory](#). For elaborations, see [HERE](#)

In a personal reflection he wrote ([HERE](#)):

“I moved down to London from Manchester (where I had studied philosophy) and got a job as lecturer in philosophy of science in the Department of History of Philosophy of Science at University College London. Larry Laudan and Paul Feyerabend were among my departmental colleagues.

“I discovered the work of Karl Popper in the early 1960s, partly as a result of attending his seminars at the LSE, and I was immensely impressed. Here was a philosopher passionately concerned with profound, real problems of the real world which he tackled with fierce intellectual integrity and great originality.

“It was an exciting time and place to be doing history and philosophy of science (HPS). London felt like the HPS capital of the world. HPS seemed to be a fledgling academic discipline, having associated with it all the excitement, freshness, high aspirations and optimism of a new discipline.

“But then HPS fell into a sad decline and lost its way. Feyerabend argued for methodological anarchy, for the view that, in science, "anything goes". Barry Barnes and David Bloor. launched "the strong programme": science must be understood in purely sociological terms, there being no such thing as scientific truth, fact, reason, method or progress. Something similar came from postmodernism, French philosophy, Foucault, Derrida and others.

“The upshot was a whole new way of construing science, which may be called "social constructivism". Scientific knowledge is merely a social construct, having nothing to do with knowledge, truth and falsity, or reason. Sociologists and historians of science took to social constructivism, while philosophers of science looked on in amazement and horror, at the idiocy of it. As a result, HPS broke asunder.

“The integrated enterprise, bringing together history and philosophy of science, which had started out with such high hopes and aspirations, and which was still alive and kicking when I began my academic career around 1965, was no more. The fundamental problem of History of Science - How has scientific progress come about? - could not even be asked. Then, as if matters were not bad enough already, Philosophy of Science began to degenerate into a kind of scholasticism that splintered into a multitude of specialized disciplines: philosophies of the specialized sciences - physics, chemistry, neuroscience, astronomy, botany, and so on.

As a result, Philosophy of Science lost sight of the magnificent endeavour of natural science as a whole, and came to ignore the great, fundamental problems that were, initially, the whole *raison d'être* for its existence: the problem of

induction, the problem of the rationality of science, the problem of how, by what means, science makes progress.

“The upshot of the argument is that we need a revolution in academia, so that the basic aim becomes, not just knowledge, but rather wisdom - this understood to be the capacity, the active endeavour, and the desire, to achieve what is of value in life, for oneself and others.”

Nicholas contributed a number of Opinion Pieces to the HPS&ST Newsletter:

*“Is Bad Philosophy Responsible for the Climate Crisis?”* [HERE](#)

*“The Metaphysics of Science and Aim-Oriented Empiricism”* [HERE](#)

*“What’s Wrong with HPS and What Needs be Done to Put it Right?”* [HERE](#)

*“The Crisis of Our Times, and What to Do about It”* [HERE](#)

Michael R. Matthews