

ON PROGRESS IN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: This article seeks to clarify the concept of progress in philosophy. It treats progress as a kind of development. But not every development is a progress. When we talk about progress, what really matters is the direction of development. In some cases it is relatively easy to reach agreement about this direction. But not in the case of philosophy, if we abstract it from the obvious and the trivial, like the number of books on philosophy. As a result, the article concludes that there cannot be progress in philosophy. Instead we see a continual multiplication of interpretations.

Keywords: progress in philosophy, development, interpretation, history of philosophy.

Before we can speak about progress in philosophy, we must clarify the concept. Progress is a kind of development. Development is a specific change in the qualities of a system. It is always ordered, regular, irreversible, and directed. This change provides new tendencies in the existence of the system. And here we risk falling into a logical trap, because the new is not always progressive, and neither is the process of development itself. Thus progress is related to the direction of development. But this implies that we face a problem of values, because the question arises of who has prescribed the direction, and how. The interpretation of this problem about the direction of the development may be both teleological and rigorously causal.

Let us consider philosophy as a developing system. Of course there is development not only in the form of an increasing number of texts or, say, of names of philosophers. But, and this is more important and will be explained in greater detail below, there is development also in the form of an increase in the number of interpretations (or senses) that philosophy makes available to us of the phenomena in the world. Is this development necessarily progressive, however? It is understood that each definition acts within its context, functioning in a given cognitive situation. That is why general speculations concerning progress are somewhat senseless. When the concepts of progress or of, say, what is reasonable are used widely

without being precisely defined with regard to specific, given systems, the result often is that processes in these systems are regarded as artificially reasonable. And this conclusion leads, in turn, not to the discovery of truth but to our evaluations of subjects in question, including philosophy. Now it is clear that progress is a value concept. It is related to the researcher's own set of values, the latter depending on the social and cultural situation. Indeed, progress often appears to be a kind of value self-justification for a person. So the main thing is that the concept of progress should be made more precise whenever it is discussed, by relating it to the given system in question—in our case, to philosophy.

I think making the concept of progress more precise in this way is a very difficult task, perhaps even impossible. I shall note only one thing here. It is a very difficult task even with regard to systems that are more material or concrete than philosophy. Let us consider social progress. The attempts to define it are determined not only by the subject itself but also by the theoretical models that are used to describe society. For example, the fundamental criterion of progress in Marxist theories is the mode of production. An entire chain of differently developed societies is constructed. The peak and highest expression of this progressive development was supposed to be communist society. But very many theoretical discrepancies arise in this case. It turns out that a society built on such a foundation may severely suppress individual freedom. There are other theories that declare personal freedom to be the criterion of social progress. But of course there is no absolute freedom within any society. And, in addition, the other side of absolute freedom is the threat to those persons who may be victimized by the free acts of other people.

Philosophy is not like the sciences. Progress in science is much more evident, because science is an objectified kind of knowledge. Science develops in one direction, determined by its subject. So each science interprets its subjects in its own way; man, for example, can be regarded as a biological, biochemical, mechanical, sociological, or historical subject by different sciences. A science's conceptual frameworks are idealized, they rough out reality. But this provides a relatively unambiguous system of terms and relatively exact results. This is the reason mathematics is the most exact science: it has almost nothing in it but quantitative relations. This objectifying of the phenomena under consideration makes science strong. It makes the results of the sciences effective in practice. But it is the sciences' weakness as well. Science is weak because it can not overstep the limits of its domain of objects.

Of course we can claim that there is progress in philosophy based on the criterion of the number of published works and of certified philosophers. But this is banal and wrong. No less wrong are claims that philosophy has died and there will be no new Hegel. So too is the self-assurance of certain authors who think that progress in philosophy is firmly tied to their own names. If progress implies direction toward an ideal, then this ideal must

be known to all. Philosophers must then reject their endlessly pluralistic reflections and come to an agreement that all of them are going in the same direction and keeping to the same domain, say, analytical or postmodernist. Then there is a chance of a cumulative growth of knowledge in one bag, a bag that will get heavier and heavier.

Nevertheless, I shall make an attempt to propose a criterion of progress in philosophy. Because philosophy is a kind of creative activity of human beings, we could come to the conclusion, perhaps a too abstract one, that progress in human society means development in two directions—first, of more creative individual being; and, second, of coming closer to the unity of this being with its existential structures. But it is also true that human creative ability makes man not only the lord of creation but also a possible fiasco of the world's being.

I think that philosophy, as a developing system, first of all seeks understanding of the meaning of being, making sense of it. Such an understanding can be achieved only at a specific, ideal level. A philosopher deals not with being as it is, not with the multitude of phenomena but with the sense of them; and that sense is fixed in philosophical texts. Being talks to us by means of the text—that is a condition of the existence of a space for communication between two or more minds, and in a wider sense between two or more cultures. In this dialogue, the deep meaning of the text (not its formally logical meaning) is determined by the entire sociocultural context that is to be taken into account. Thus we can say that every understanding of a text is possible through personal interpretation of it, an interpretation that is a mutual adaptation of two individual minds or of two cultures.

The semantic field of science is oriented toward the future (and in this sense it is progressive). The latest scientific theory is the most adequate in its reflection of being. It is connected to the previous theories only genetically, and most of the richness of the senses is not lost in the history of this theory; that richness passes to the new theory. The semantic field of philosophy is rather different. It is not oriented toward the future as a goal. Rather, philosophy multiplies senses inside itself, or just inside reason per se. And in philosophy there are problems that were raised thousands of years ago. They are still alive, although today modified according to present sociocultural circumstances. Because it does not develop in a linear progressive way, philosophy, unlike science, does not provide generally valid results. Thus, there can be no absolutely true philosophy.

Philosophy develops within the borders of a single philosophic problem field, a field that is in a certain sense closed and determined by the eternal questions of being. While science in its objective expansion is directed to the future, dominating everything by its objectifying method, philosophy takes the past, present, and future as coexisting, sometimes even swapping them around. Philosophy's main feature is not progress but some kind of

organic unity that is an everlasting variety in unity, or a unity in unavoidable variety. That fact explains why there are no absolutely outdated ideas in philosophy, as well as no absolutely new ones. This feature of philosophy makes dialogue across space, time, culture, and language borders possible. So Plato can be as modern for me as the contemporary American philosopher John Ryder. Thus, if there is a progress in philosophy, it is directed inside this semiotic space, multiplying its senses. Philosophers discuss the senses and the values, no matter when they appeared, and make them necessary and thus actual today. In this way philosophy becomes progressive.

This is why philosophers have special regard for the history of philosophy. It is studied not for itself and not just as history; it helps us to understand better what we think today about being and about ourselves. In science, the role of its history is different. It is not necessary for us to know the history of physics or chemistry to understand its actual condition. But in philosophy we can never find the most actual position, the one that has accumulated all that has been thought earlier. Thus, the history of science appears to be a list of discoveries and findings; it is a kind of archive. But the history of philosophy can hardly be set forth in a general and unbiased way. It is not a casual whim of many philosophers to write their own history of philosophy. They cast their subjective theoretical net into the past and get it back with the pre-expected historical catch. The history of philosophy is always an interpretation of the real historical process, and it always dresses the history of ideas in conceptual clothes proposed by the author. It can be told in a personalized way, where philosophers are exposed to us, classified according to their importance and greatness from the point of view of the author. Of course, there can be no guarantee that this historical panorama is correct. Hegel criticized such sorts of subjective interpretations, saying that they are at best a system of tales about the history of philosophy. (By the way, Hegel also believed that progress in philosophy is possible. According to him, philosophy's destination is a special understanding of being. It is based on the principle of the single historicophilosophical process, in which each theory is just another stage in the formation of philosophical self-consciousness. Of course, however, this approach in fact resulted in giving priority to Hegel's own systems.)

Philosophy cannot stand still, it cannot be a system of generally accepted knowledge, and in this sense no progress in philosophy is possible, just an augmentation of senses, in the way explained above. But this fact gives philosophy an entirely different impetus for development: as a permanent struggle of contrary conceptions. Philosophy develops through the conflicts of senses, so it does not need any progress, because something would inevitably be lost were progress to occur. Philosophy throws away only the things that have become generally accepted. Concerning such things, it is of course possible to speak about progress, but it is too trivial

to do so. Moreover, the presence of competing alternative theories gives philosophy stability and balance, so that it need not worry about the usual crises in society and culture. The competing theories just allow it to interpret each new situation as it arises, for philosophy is then the self-consciousness of that situation.

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