

FIVE TYPES OF THEORY REGARDING PROGRESS IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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There has been a great deal of concern among philosophers and historians of philosophy in the last century about whether or not philosophy progresses. Philosophers stand in the shadow of the sciences, which have been accumulating information and solving problems since the Renaissance, and many philosophers have tried to adopt the methods of science in the hope of reaping its results: progress in knowledge and success in application.

This question about whether or not philosophy progresses is at the heart of the debate going on about the very nature of philosophy. That debate has been thought by some to be contained in the dispute between Anglo-American analytic philosophy versus continental European phenomenology, while others have written as if it were a matter of Marxist materialism versus a monolithic Western idealism. The purpose of this paper is to give a few hints as to the vast variety of views which have been held regarding the progress of philosophy during the last century, and then to suggest what I believe would count as progress.

In terms of numbers of histories of philosophy it would seem that theories of progress have dominated in the last century. But I find it interesting that there have been those who have held that philosophy does *not* progress. In fact, every logically possible theory seems to have been held by some prominent philosopher or historian of philosophy.

The logically possible positions regarding progress are: if there is progress, either (1) it is toward some end, or (2) it is without end. If there is no progress, then either (3) there is no movement at all or (4) whatever movement there is is neither progressive nor regressive, (rather, it is e.g., circular or random) or (5) there is no progress, but only regress. I believe that that exhausts the possibilities. And all of those positions have been taken with regard to the history of philosophy. I will present what I consider to be significant examples (I will not attempt to be exhaustive¹) of each of these positions from philosophers and historians of philosophy of the last century. Let us begin with the numerically dominating theories of progress.

I. *Theories of Progress toward some End*

Carmin Mascia speaks from a Thomistic viewpoint of the "perennial philosophy," some threads of which are to be found in each individual philosophy. The perennial philosophy is in development toward "the knowledge of absolute reality, the solution of the problem of like."² The end of progress will be in the completion of the great edifice of reason, Truth. Francois Joseph Thonnard, published by the official press of the Vatican, also wrote from a similar point of view.³

From another perspective, that of Hegel, Francis K. Parker claims that the history of philosophy is following a logical sequence of three stages: (a) "an original state of the self's undifferentiated objective union with the whole of reality", (2) "a withdrawal of the self from this whole to win subjective freedom but at the price of isolation and estrangement," and (3) "a return of the whole in a reunion of a no longer isolated and merely subjective self with a no longer merely undifferentiated objective world."⁴ But, unlike Hegel, he claims that the ancient and medieval periods represent the philosophical expression of the first stage; modern philosophy, ending with its perfect expression in Hegel, represents the second stage; there are substages in the same pattern within the larger stages. The third state, the ultimate "return to the whole" is yet to come.

There is also a Heideggerian vision of progress; Vincent Vycinas writes of a falling away from the gods, from Physis-is-logos in Western philosophy beginning with the Greeks. Men are divine insofar as they share in the greatness of Philosophy, in which is concealed truth; each philosophy contains a facet of the truth. But we have come to the end of Philosophy in the work of Heidegger, which leads us to the future return of the gods and unity. Vycina's is a kind of pagan Augustinian vision: a falling away and return, not to God, but to the gods.

And there is an official Russian Marxian position. The officially approved version has changed continually; this is the vision of 1946, repudiated in 1947: G. F. Aleksandrov⁶ claimed that the history of philosophy has been a movement governed by the aspiration of classes and people, but whereas it was originally seen to be an abstract search for "truth" or "wisdom", only recently has it become a science. Scientific history of philosophy can now distinguish those theories which are reactionary and retard social development from those which serve the interests of society and its progressive forces. Philosophical development is the reflection of the class conflict, which (by implication) will end with the end of class conflict. Philosophy will have become science.

Lastly, we must mention the view of the Wittgensteinian school, that philosophy has been a trap, a "fly-bottle" of

confusions and muddles, which can be cured by precise linguistic analysis. We can "show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" by showing that what we thought were problems were only linguistic muddles: the great problems of philosophy will dissolve, and philosophy will cease to exist. Philosophy is a disease which is also its own best cure. The end of philosophy will be its self-induced dissolution.

II. *Theories of Progress without End*

I will only deal with a few from a large number who hold this view. Etienne Gilson⁷ claims that philosophy is a collective enterprise, a continuous chain of conversations which has been going on over twenty-five centuries in the effort to deepen the understanding of the first principles of human knowledge. Stallknecht and Brumbaugh⁸ agree with Gilson's position and go on to claim that philosophy, the starting point from which the sciences began, has two principal functions: (1) as critic of the sciences, challenging and clarifying terms, concepts and axioms and (2) as speculative synthesizer of ideas. The latter function is complex and progress there is possible, but not necessary.

The work by Frank Thilly, revised by Ledger Wood,⁹ envisions the progress of philosophy to be in accord with two criteria: (1) consistency, the inner logic governing evolution from simpler to more complex systems which attempt to render the work intelligible, and (2) richness or breadth, accounting for more and more of human experience, which is constantly increasing. Part of the latter is the personal and cultural element which gives a system its particular flavor. The logical element is perfectible, but the richness dimension is inexhaustible and contingent.

William Pepperell Montague¹⁰ claims that the success of science has intensified philosophy's quest for certainty, but philosophy appears to be losing the competition with science. A number of emergency plans have been devised; one is to substitute the history of the subject for the subject itself; but a history of a subject will not interest anyone unless there is an interest in the subject itself. A second plan is to retreat from Metaphysics to Ethics; but that is unlikely to be of lasting success because soon the social sciences will be "regular" sciences. The third plan (that of the Cambridge school) is to restrict philosophy to rigorous analysis of experience; but this is narrow and dry and becomes nothing but grammar and logic which can be handled by linguists and logicians. Therefore philosophy seems to be doomed, and can be completely taken over by historians, scientists, linguists, and mathematicians. Philosophy, he concludes, must rid itself of the quest for certainty, though not yet give up the search for knowledge. The realm of philosophy ought to be, not that of

certainty, but that of *possibilities* to be discovered by imagination and vision pertinent to truths discovered and still to come; a concern with "real possibilities". The role of imagination in the intellect is like the role of mutation in physical evolution: most of its progeny will be monsters, but a few will be advances, and great visions have carried men to new heights of meaning (though, he claims, not all great visions have been advances, for instance Hume, Kant, and Pauline Christianity). The progress of philosophy is the endless evolution of richer and more certain vision.

Emile Brehier¹¹ agrees with Montague. Philosophers are not merely expressors of their environment or of historical moments, but are creators. The history of philosophy seeks the individual, not the general; and not sects or systems, but richness.

III. Philosophy as Unchanging

There are a number of philosophers who believe that philosophy is essentially unchanging, of whom I shall mention only two clear examples. Arthur Kenyon Rogers claimed that thought is not tied to history as shown by the fact that nearly every type of subsequent philosophy has its representative in the fertile period of Greek thought, because the mind was then free to pursue logical possibilities to their conclusions. This intellectual development was a feat accomplished, according to Rogers,¹² by no one prior to the Greeks. Though it has taken science centuries to develop empirically, the major positions of philosophy were taken to their logical conclusions by the Greeks; what has followed has been variations on the eternal themes.

Karl Jaspers has a much broader view of philosophy, including the great traditions of China and India, and his position is unique among contemporary philosophers. He claims that the philosophical tradition is like an ocean, the depth and extent of which are unmeasurable and unmeasured. Never before has there been so much encyclopedic information, and never before has there been such a bewildering juxtaposition of disparate facts, so that "the essential is lost amidst a mass of information."¹³ The history of philosophy is not, as Hegel claimed, a continuous narrative of a single complete process. A total view is impossible. There is no absolute and finished truth, and never can be.

One of the many valid ways of perceiving the history of philosophy is by consideration of the philosophers themselves as individuals, as thinking existences transcending their environments. *The great philosophers are suprahistorical eternal contemporaries*; none has the whole truth but each has a glimpse of the truth and none of them is superfluous in respect of the truth. They comprise the "realm of the great philosophers."¹⁴ Just as no

philosopher can grasp the truth completely, so no historian of philosophy can form a complete picture of the realm of the great philosophers; for though his grasp of truth cannot be complete, yet the thought of the great philosopher can never be exhausted, since it is infinite. However intensely one penetrates his thought, there is always more. If we cannot get a complete view of the history of philosophy, we can get a general picture. Even though the historian does not do the selecting of the material, since the "choice has already been made by history,"¹⁵ it does not matter; the dividing lines are fluid, but the *core is unchanging*. Unlike the findings of science, the manifestations of reason are universally valid; its truth is never acceptable to all men in one and the same form. Scientific knowledge seeks one universally valid truth; reason cannot be embodied in any one exclusive doctrine. Science claims to produce knowledge; philosophy clarifies. Science progresses step by step; philosophy achieves a summit which cannot be transcended in every great philosopher.

The great philosophers are suprahistorical eternal contemporaries and the great philosophies contain the same eternal themes; the great thinkers shape the eternal themes according to their individual and special nature. Whereas sociological histories present philosophers as representatives of their times, they miss what is of philosophical import; the great philosophers have stood against and beyond their times.

The arrangement of Jaspers' work follows from his supposition that philosophers are suprahistorical; the arrangement is not historical but classificatory; he speaks first of the "paradigmatic individuals" (Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus), then of the "great thinkers" (Plato, Augustine, Kant), "creative orderers" (Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, Shankara, Chu Hsi), etc.

IV. Theories of Change without Progress or Regress

George Boas¹⁶ claims that the history of philosophy is the account of how specific problems arose and how they were answered. This is to deny that there is a small core of "eternal" problems which make up philosophy; rather there is a vast number of problems which have been treated under the rubric "philosophy," and the historian chooses which to treat according to his interest and knowledge. In one sense, periodization is artificial since every philosopher is in dialogue with his predecessors, creating an ongoing dialogue; but on the other hand, certain historical events are novel, and certain periods (e.g., 1450-1550 and 1850-1950) are especially full of discovery and invention, novelties and new problems such as the rejection of authority and the resulting problems of grounds of truth and basis for morals and politics which arose for the first time and in a particular context

during the Italian Renaissance. These are not "eternal problems," for they had not arisen before, and they arose in a particular context. But they are problems which are still with us, whereas others are, whether solved or simply forgotten, no longer problems for us. In no way, does Boas suggest that either the raising or the solving or simply forgetting of problems comprises progress; the history of philosophy is simply the account of the raising of problems and how they are answered. It is not a complete account, but only an account which is as extensive as the historians' knowledge and interest. In all this fluctuating panorama of problems and answers, there is little which could be called progress.

Bertrand Russell, in his second history of philosophy,¹⁷ speaks of philosophy as the mother of the sciences, each of which has pretended to go its own way, but each of which remains grounded in a philosophy. Does the giving of birth to so many progeny comprise the progress of philosophy? Russell denies progress of philosophy, for "in a way the exploratory process does not advance as such, it simply goes on and finds new employment."¹⁸ This is philosophy as an unchanging cornucopia.

John Hermann Randall has a view very similar to Russell's: Philosophy, the great mother of the sciences, has been a fickle woman of the world's oldest profession, who "exists to give men pleasure and satisfy their imperious needs."¹⁹ She served the gods in her youth, then morality among the Romans, then Theology in the Middle Ages, and most recently, science.

The description of Russell and Randall are complementary: Philosophy is constantly finding new employment; her career is an adventure done for its own sake, but she quickly tires of her children when they show signs of independence. Russell makes a plea for tolerance of free inquiry: one ought not to cut off the head of the goose which lays golden eggs. Or, in Randall's analogy, science has been the result of Philosophy's free ways. Philosophy herself does not progress, she just moves on to new adventures, but progress indeed may be the result of her adventures, in her progeny, the sciences.

V. A Theory of Regress

I know of only one theory of regress, in this century, but it harkens back to the "golden age" theory of Plato and Hinduism, which dominated the thinking of ancient Greece, Rome, and India. Franz Brentano claims that "Philosophy, like art, shows times of decadence besides times of upward development, which often are not less rich, but are richer in epoch-making appearances than the times of healthy fruitfulness."²⁰ Thus we find a law (of development). Western philosophy's course has been through

three great periods: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern (up to Hegel), each going through four stages²¹ which, for all their difference, show a basic similarity.

I. The first phase has a double character: (1) a living and pure theoretical interest, and (2) a harmony with nature and a natural method, which leads to questioning, research, and the development of science.

II. The second phase (the first stage of decline) is characterized by the weakening of scientific interest and the prevalence of the practical motive.

III. The Third Phase (the second state of decline) is the stage of scepticism when science is forsaken because the possibility of certain knowledge is given up. But men have a natural desire to know and scepticism cannot be maintained.

IV. The Fourth Phase (the last stage of decline) is the stage of mysticism in which dogma is based on the intuitive power of knowledge. Earlier and later appearances take place in each stage, but the general character of the stage prevails; and stages are of unequal lengths.²²

During the ancient period, the first phase is that from the Ionians to Aristotle, the second phase is that of the Stoics and Epicureans who took up practical interests giving up depth, but broadening philosophy. The third phase is that of the sceptics, and eclectics like Cicero. The fourth phase is that of neo-Platonism and neo-Pythagoreanism.

During the Middle Ages, we find the same four phases repeated: the first phase was that, including Westerners and Arabs, culminating in Thomas Aquinas. The second stage was one dominated by the practical: Duns Scotus led the Franciscans in dogmatic quarrels against the Dominicans. The third stage was that of the scepticism of William of Ockham. The fourth phase was that of the mystical reaction to scepticism, led by Eckhardt, Cusanus, Lull, et. al.

The cycle of decline is repeated again in the Modern Period, the first phase of which is the stage of observation and inductive research which began with Bacon and Descartes, and included Locke and Leibniz. The second stage (first stage of decline) was that of the French and German Enlightenment which accomplished nothing but to make Locke and Leibniz more shallow (does he mean the Encyclopedists and Wolff?). The third phase is that of Hume's scepticism. And the fourth phase (the last stage of decline) is that of the Scottish "common sense" school, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

We are now beginning a new period, the fourth. As the Middle Ages turned back to Aristotle for its starting point, so must we turn back to the history of science.

Conclusion

We see that a number of philosophers, from Neo-Thomists to Marxists, and historians of philosophy (Gilson and Brehier) agree that philosophy progresses, whereas the list of philosophers (Jaspers, Russell, Brentano) and historians of philosophy (Boas and Randall) who agree that philosophy does not progress is, if not as long, at least equally prestigious. Each of these positions is well supported by empirical evidence, so we wonder by what criteria we could choose among these positions?

When philosophy is thought to be unchanging, as it was by Jaspers, it is understood in relationship to eternal truths and eternal categories. And when it is supposed to change without progress as Boas, Russell, and Randall believed it to, it is considered in relationship with the changing concerns of free individuals in an ephemeral present. When the theory is one of recurring regress, as Brentano claimed, the direction of history seems to be completely out of the hands of individual philosophers and under the control of the irrepressible mechanistic forces of fate.

By others, philosophy is seen to progress toward a variety of ends: (1) the completion of the great edifice of reason, truth (neo-Thomism); (2) the reunion of the subjective and the objective in a whole (Hegelianism); (3) to return to the pre-philosophical stance of mythology (Heideggerianism); (4) to become science (Marxism); and (5) to dissolve itself (Wittgensteinianism). Such philosophies focus upon the future wherein that end resides, and in relationship to which that progress is measured.

My own position is to turn back to those who speak of progress without end, not that I am sure that philosophy *does* progress, but they have helped to clarify what would count as progress, if it is to occur. For such a position, one needs a set of criteria by which to judge what would count as progress. Progress is judged in relationship to the past, *from* which philosophy progresses. I agree with Stallknecht and Brumbaugh that philosophy has two principal functions: (1) the critical, though not only, as they claim of the sciences, but of all areas of human knowledge including the political, psychological, artistic, religious, etc.; and (2) as speculative synthesizer of ideas, of systems of thought of all areas of knowledge, into an overall unity. It is with regard to the latter function, the system building, that we need criteria by which to judge progress.

Thilly and Wood have suggested two such criteria: (1) consistency, the principle of non-contradiction, the very basis of Western logic, along with which we might include the related ideas of coherence, clarity, unity, and harmony, and (2) comprehensiveness, the accounting for more and more human

experience. Thomas Kuhn in his work on the philosophy of science has suggested another criterion which is a bit harder to delimit, and that is the aesthetic, which may include complexity and richness, or simplicity, depth, fineness, uniqueness, or significance. The difference between comprehensiveness and the aesthetic is that the former pertains to the factual and probable, while the latter may include (as Montague would have us do) the imaginary and improbable, the realm of the creative imagination and of symbolic significance.

In short, I am not claiming that philosophy does or does not progress, but I am claiming that the criteria by which one could judge whether or not it progresses, whether or not one philosophical system is better and represents an advance over another, and is more likely to appeal to individual human beings or to whole societies, is whether or not it is (1) more coherent (clear and consistent), (2) more comprehensive (accounts for more of human experience and satisfies more needs), and (3) more aesthetic (richer, simpler, deeper, more significant, etc.). Progress would consist in the breaking down of old, inadequate systems by criticism, and the building of new, better systems by synthesis in terms of these criteria.

Notes

¹ For a more exhaustive coverage and more in-depth treatment of these figures, except Brentano, see my dissertation "The History of Philosophy and the Idea of Progress. . ." 1971.

² Carmin Mascia, *A History of Philosophy* (Paterson, N.J.: 1957).

³ Francois Joseph Thonnard, *A Short History of Philosophy*, translated from the French by Edward A Maziarz (New York: 1956).

⁴ Francis H. Parker, *The Story of Western Philosophy* (Bloomington: 1967) xii-xiii.

⁵ Vincent Vycinas, *Greatness and Philosophy; and Inquiry into Western Thought* (The Hague: 1966).

⁶ G. F. Aleksandrov, *A History of Western European Philosophy* (1940), second ed., trans. McLean (New Haven: 1949).

⁷ Etienne Gilson (gen.ed.), *A History of Philosophy* (New York: 1966).

⁸ Newton P. Stallknecht and Robert S. Brumbaugh, *The Spirit of Western Philosophy* (New York: 1950).

⁹ Frank Thilly and Ledger Wood, *A History of Philosophy*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: 1963).

¹⁰ William Pepperell Montague, *Great Visions of Philosophy*

(La Salle, Ill.: 1950).

¹¹ Emile Brehier, *The History of Philosophy*, trans, Joseph Thomas (Chicago: 1963).

¹² Arthur Kenyon Rogers, *A Student's History of Philosophy*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: 1935).

¹³ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* (New York: 1962),

vii.

¹⁴ Jaspers, viii

¹⁵ Jaspers, xiii.

¹⁶ George Bosa, *Dominant Themes in Modern Philosophy* (New York: 1957).

¹⁷ Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West* (Garden City, New York: 1959).

¹⁸ Russell, *Wisdom of the West*, 6.

¹⁹ John Hermann Randall, Jr., *The Career of Philosophy from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (New York: 1962). 4ff.

²⁰ Franz Brentano, *Die Vier Phasen der Philosophie und ihr augenblicklicher Stand* (1895) (Liepzig: 1926) 7; my translation throughout.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8ff; the same division into these four stages provides the basis for Brentano's *Geschichte der Griechischen Philosophie* (Bern und Muenchen, 1963).

²² *Geschichte*, xix; the rest of this is taken from *Vier Phasen*, 10ff.