Issue Introduction

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The Problem: Can philosophy make progress?

It has been well over two centuries since Kant asked, essentially, whether philosophy is possible as a science. What is the answer?

Many philosophical problems – the most important philosophical problems, some would urge – have a recognizably scientific character. Are we free, or determined? What can we know? Why is it wrong to hurt others? What is real? These are problems that call out for solutions, in the form of true-or-false statements about the world. Accordingly, analytic philosophers talk as if our discipline is a branch of science: we aspire to the rigor of mathematics, the objectivity of physics, the explanatory power of biology, and so forth.

If philosophy is like a science, though, then it is a science like no other. Philosophical proposals that are hundreds or even thousands of years old are taken seriously in the present, even as it is widely believed that those ideas don't solve their respective problems. No philosophical idea ever dies, and no philosophical idea ever gains full acceptance, either. Even apparently settled questions (e.g., what does it mean for an argument to be valid?) are in perpetual and hot dispute. No other solution-based, intellectual discipline has this property. Other solution-based disciplines settle on at least some solutions, and carry on. Not philosophers. Philosophers hypothesize answers like scientists, structure arguments like mathematicians, and end up with theories as inscrutable as art.

Or so it seemed to Eric Dietrich and I when we first started talking about philosophy and its future. In this issue, we have asked again where philosophy stands as a problem
solving discipline. And we have in the pages ahead a rich variety of answers to the question posed by Kant: Have we advanced even one step? Can we?

First let me break down one way answers to this question could go.

First Answer: Philosophy is making progress.
One need only cite Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions in 1905, or Tarski’s theory of truth in 1933, to see that indeed we now have a better grip on old problems than previous generations did. While Plato could be troubled by negative existentials (what Quine called “Plato’s beard”) or the question of whether the Good is more or less identical to the True (to paraphrase Wittgenstein), we in the analytic age are not so concerned. In a recent popular book, The Philosophy of Philosophy, Timothy Williamson writes (p. 280):

> We know much more in 2007 than was known in 1957; much more was known in 1957 than in 1907; much more was known in 1907 than was known in 1857. As in natural science, something can be collectively known in a community even if it is occasionally denied by eccentric members of that community. Although fundamental disagreement is conspicuous in most areas of philosophy, the best theories in a given area are in most cases far better developed in 2007 than the best theories in that area were in 1957, and so on.

So one answer to our titular question is a straightforward ‘yes’. Philosophy can, because it does, make progress.

And if this first line seems too easy—tellingly, none of our contributors argue directly for it—then one can proffer a second. We turn to other disciplines in the sciences that obviously have progressed (astronomy, biology, chemistry) and note that these all were philosophy once. Call this the philosophy-as-incubator view. On this view, philosophy certainly does make progress—most notably, when a topic becomes so well developed that it leaves the philosophical incubator and takes on a full-fledged name of its own.

Note well though that, however common the philosophy-as-incubator view is, in his paper “The Contingency of Science,” I.J. Kidd questions this claim. The controversy begins…

Second Answer: Philosophy should, but does not, make progress.
A sceptic could argue that the First Answer is hopelessly naïve. As Dietrich points out in his paper, “There is no progress in philosophy,” no philosophical theory is universally or even widely accepted—not in the way scientific theories like gravity are
widely accepted, anyway—and none will be. Ergo there is no progress. There are at
least two possible explanations for this.

Option A. Philosophers choose not to progress. Mainstream philosophers are
iconoclasts. They refuse to agree with each other. Philosophy is distinctive because it is
practiced by philosophers, and philosophers are by disposition uncooperative. If its
practitioners were scientists, philosophy would make progress—but such people do not
opt to do philosophy. They do science.

Option B. Philosophy is inherently insoluble. Philosophy hasn’t because it can’t and
won’t make progress, because it is diabolical. Success stories like astronomy, biology,
etc., are not now and never were philosophy, precisely because they are tractable.
Philosophy cannot make progress, more or less by definition. This is the line taken by
Dietrich, and also tacitly by Richard Kamber, who in “The Promise of Experimental
Philosophy” argues that the only way for philosophy to progress is to expand our
conception of philosophy.

I’ll come back to discussing Option A in a moment.

Third Answer: Philosophy should not, but does, make progress.

In fact we hear claim like this more often about science, but philosophy too. Invoking
the myth of Icarus and his hubristic flight too close to the sun, there are persistent
voices that urge that any sense of progress we have is a terrible misconception.
Tellingly again, though, none of our contributors are arguing for this view.

Fourth Answer: Philosophy should not make progress.

The final possibility is that philosophy is sui generis. Science and mathematics make
progress. But philosophy is a part of the humanities, and asking for progress here is no
more appropriate than asking a molecule to write a poem or a genome to sing a song.
This is, dare I say, the consensus view of our contributors, albeit for differing reasons.
Some see it as a consequence of the definition of progress (Golding, Sinclair); others
take it from facts about language (Barham), or the purpose of literature (Tartaglia,
Richter). These authors reject the presupposition of Kant’s question, or answer it with a
qualified ‘no’.

Kant’s question is a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question: Can there be progress? In introducing these
papers, then, I have another question: Why are there so many different answers?
A Rorschach Test?

The vast majority of submissions we received argued something like this: No, philosophy does not make progress in the way that chemistry or biology makes progress; but yes, it does make a kind of progress appropriate for philosophy. That is, most of the answers are a nuanced fourth type. My own view—which I will confine to these opening pages—is that the question itself is a bit of a Rorschach test. How you think of yourself as a philosopher determines what you see when faced with the inkblot of philosophical methodology. I suspect (but this is why I’ll confine my remarks) that there is a crucial psychological component here. Personally, I take the Second Answer, Option A: philosophy is what philosophers do, and what we do not. Saliently, we do not agree. Therefore we don’t progress. If we agreed, what we are doing would be called—is called—mathematics, law, cognitive science, physics. Let me explain by urging for a few paragraphs that if philosophers worked like mathematicians, then philosophy would be making the same sort of progress mathematicians make.

By contrast, mathematics appears to make progress because mathematicians, the people who practice mathematics, accept its results. More than content or method, this is the key difference between mathematics (and science, more generally), and philosophy: mathematicians are very different from philosophers. Mathematicians have an agreed upon method—proofs. But proofs are only compelling to people inclined to be compelled by those proofs. Literate people all along have disputed various proof techniques (geometric intuition? non-constructive proof?), inference rules (reductio ad absurdum? proof by cases?), the concepts the proof is about (infinitesimals? transfinite numbers?), and the results themselves (the intermediate value theorem). All that happens is that these people—the dissenters—become, by definition, not merely mathematicians. They become philosophers.

To illustrate, consider the following common scene:

The audience arrives at the seminar, takes their seats, and listens as the speaker presents some ideas. The ideas unfold like a story—setting, main characters, the problem facing our protagonists and how the tension is resolved. The speaker is working largely from personal intuition, which is then controlled by careful argumentation. Some parts are clear, some are murky, but overall, if the talk is a decent one, the speaker has made some claims that he believes are true, or are likely to turn out to be true, and hopes the audience will agree.

Up to this point, this could be a description of a mathematics or philosophy seminar equally. The disciplines have a lot in common. But then we get to the end of the presentation, and it is time for questions. Here the troubles begin.
In the mathematics seminar, there are few questions. These are short and inevitably seeking clarification, or perhaps pointing out a helpful connection. That is, the presumption is that the speaker has been correct, more or less; the seminar has been a report of new, true results in the given field. Not being experts in the same field, most of the people in the audience don’t really understand a lot of what was said in the talk (especially towards the end). Accordingly, they don’t say much. Question time lasts all of five minutes and then it is time to go back to the office and think things through. It is time to go away and derive for oneself a positive answer to the question: Why is what I just heard true?

The situation is rather different in the philosophy seminar room. Question time is as long, or longer, than the presentation itself. Many people in the audience did not understand a lot of what was said in the talk (especially towards the end), but this is no hindrance at all to asking discursive, impromptu questions that may or may not terminate in an upward inflection of tone. The questions are challenges, or ‘worries’ as we call them—prodding searches for points of weakness in what was said, attempts to deflate, debunk, or even demolish whatever positive theory was just put forward. The questions are inherently critical and antagonistic, even if the questioner is polite. It is time to answer to the question: Why is what we just heard false?

Of course, both these scenarios are cartoonish. Scientists generally and mathematicians in particular are not blindly obedient to the dogmas they are told, nor are philosophers uniformly disagreeable. The scenes I sketch are parodies of the reality—but only to an extent. The main point is I think true enough, and just this. Mathematicians are trying to agree. They come together with the intention of reaching consensus on an issue. And with enough work, they almost always do. In mathematics, when consensus is not reached, this is called philosophy. Philosophers are trying to disagree. If philosophers started accepting each others’ results, we would make progress. We could have proofs in philosophy -- say, Evans' proof that there are no vague identities, or Williamson’s proof that everything that exists does so necessarily. We have, from Tarski, a nice formal answer to ‘what is truth’. But for any P, there is someone (sometimes that someone is me), who says not P. It is temperament that sets us apart.

And it is temperament that is being explored in the pages to follow. So here you are: eight fine essays each saying something different. Does philosophy progress? We have not even made progress on answering that question.