

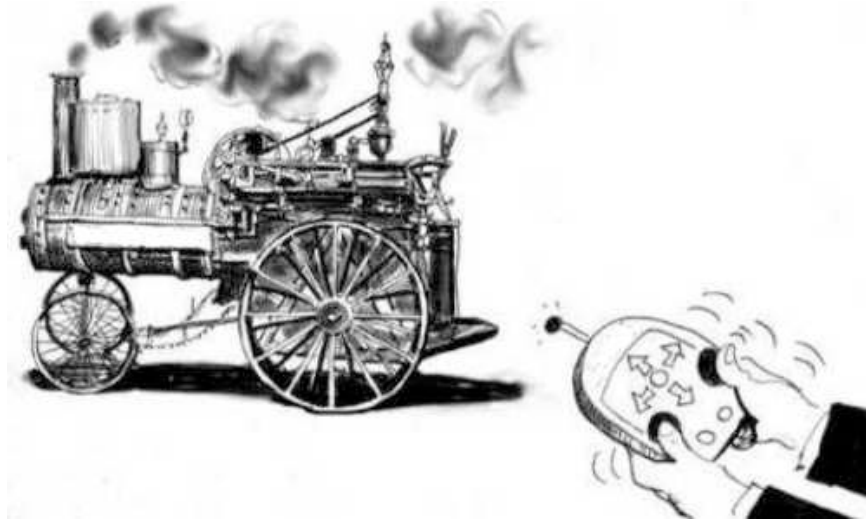
# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Never discourage anyone...who continually makes progress, no matter how slow. —Plato*



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## IS PHILOSOPHY PROGRESSIVE?

*Some say that one of the main differences between science and philosophy is that science makes progress while philosophers go round in circles endlessly discussing the same questions. Toni Vogel Carey isn't convinced.*

George Sarton, a founder of the relatively new field of history of science, speaks for the many in calling science the only discipline that is “obviously and undoubtedly cumulative and progressive.” Once upon a time, people thought that scary, unexpected phenomena like thunder and lightning must be caused by the wrath of the gods. But with Greek civilization came the beginnings of real science: Euclidean geometry, Pythagorean harmonics, Aristotelian biology, Archimedean statics etc. Nearly two millennia separated that golden age from the next one; but since then, Scientific Revolution advances have poured forth almost without let-up. Newton united heavens and earth through gravitation; Benjamin Franklin united them through electricity (taming the gods’ wrath with a wave of his lightning rod). Darwin knit together all life sys-

tems with the thread of natural selection. Einstein discovered  $e = mc^2$ . Now physicists are in hot pursuit of a Theory of Everything, an equation for the whole universe as simple as Einstein's.

The arts are not like the sciences in this way, and don't aim to be. "Beethoven did not surpass Bach," says Nobel biologist Francois Jacob, "in the way that Einstein surpassed Newton." Rather, the arts furnish a plenitude of points of view, reflecting the uniqueness of their makers. They can all express truths, and yet be so different as to be incommensurable.

Philosophy falls somewhere between the arts and sciences. On the one hand, it offers idiosyncratic worldviews that may be too disparate to compare: Hume and Husserl, for example, or Spinoza and Sartre. It is not surprising, then, that the question "Is philosophy progressive?" is hardly ever *raised*. On the other hand, philosophy, like science, is a quest for truth, and it too requires that we check our theories against what we observe in the external world, or the internal one (sense data, pains, etc.).

A few philosophers, such as Hegel and Herbert Spencer, seem to hold that *everything* is progressive. But even discounting pessimists and postmodernists, who are unwilling to countenance the idea of progress at all, very few think the history of philosophy shows an overall progressive sweep—getting better, if not day by day, at least century by century. The notion that Wittgenstein's philosophy surpasses Plato's seems downright silly.

If what we are asking, though, is whether philosophy is *ever* progressive, I think the answer is clearly yes; sometimes it is even cumulatively progressive, as Sartre said about science. And I think we could see more progress than we do if philosophers gave more thought to whether what they are writing really moves philosophy forward, or merely adds to the accumulated verbiage.

"Is what I am doing really worth the effort? Yes, but only if a light shines on it from above... And if the light from above is lacking, I can't in any case be more than clever." (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*)

To be sure, science has its share of false moves and dead-end roads; in fact, according to the philosopher of biology David Hull, *most* scientific research "fails or leads nowhere." And science is as vulnerable as any other discipline to influences inimical to the pursuit of truth. For many years Soviet biology was restricted by the state to Lysenko's notion of the inheritance of acquired character-

istics. More subtle, but in some ways no less dangerous, the ‘Chief Influentials’ in a given field, as Michael Polanyi calls them, are wont to dictate which topics, and which positions on those topics, are ‘interesting’ at any given time, and which mean instant career-death. For much of the twentieth century, the Positivists managed to marginalize whole philosophical disciplines—ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics—as meaningless because *unscientific*. And of course we are never free from garden-variety resistance to new ideas by those who don’t know any better, and those who *should* know better. Everyone is aware of Galileo’s troubles with the Church. We don’t hear much, though, about his “earliest conflicts with authority,” which Stillman Drake tells us “had nothing to do with religion;” they were instigated by schoolmen at the University of Pisa who felt threatened by Galileo’s new ideas.

Notwithstanding some egregious examples to the contrary, though, a sweep of scientific progress since 1600 seems undeniable. We tend to attribute this to the discovery and invention of new things; but at least as important has been the ability to perceive *old* things in new ways. The Aristotelians looked at a swinging body, Thomas Kuhn says, and saw something “falling with difficulty;” Galileo looked at it and saw a pendulum. This aspect of science, which is explanatory and explicatory, sometimes bears a distinct resemblance to philosophical analysis. Cosmologists, for example, conceptualize a galaxy as “particles making up a continuous and perfect fluid;” economists define a ‘product’ as a “collection of units that are perfect substitutes to purchasers.”

Some, like the Positivists, and W.V.O. Quine in his famous paper ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism,’ minimize the difference between science and philosophy. Others, like Wittgenstein and Max Black, emphasize it. As Black points out, facts are things to which “philosophers are, by general consent, professionally indifferent.”

“I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings. So I am not aiming at the same target as the scientists and my way of thinking is different from theirs.” (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*)

If philosophy resembles science in some respects but not all, we can expect that sometimes *progress* in philosophy will resemble that in science, and sometimes it won’t. And that expectation is borne out, I think, in the following three examples.

## Progress as Destruction

Karl Popper insisted on the importance of falsifiability over positive confirmation, because no matter how many white swans we spot, a single black one is enough to overthrow the ‘law’ that all swans are white. In business and personal relationships, destructive criticism is often unhelpful. But in science and philosophy, few things are more prized than a clear counter-instance to a putative law or a prospective definition.

Edmund Gettier made his reputation with a single paper less than three pages long; that is all it took to give a devastating counterexample to the traditional definition of ‘knowledge’ in Plato’s *Theatetus* as “true belief plus an account,” or justified true belief. Gettier’s cases rely only on the uncontroversial supposition that if we are justified in believing  $p$ , and we know  $p$  implies  $q$ , and we believe  $q$  on that basis, then we are justified in believing  $q$ . What I present here is Jonathan Dancy’s amusing variation on the Gettier theme: Watching the men’s tennis finals at Wimbledon and seeing John McEnroe take match point against Jimmy Connors, television viewers justifiably concluded that McEnroe had just won the Wimbledon. They were right, but not for the reason they supposed. As it happens, McEnroe’s match point win over Connors took place off-camera. Due to a technical malfunction, what viewers actually saw was a replay of the previous year’s match point, which McEnroe similarly won against Connors. Thus while our viewers’ belief that McEnroe had just won the Wimbledon was both true and justified, it did not amount to knowledge.

In the law, proof ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ falls short of proof *tout court*; so too, the Gettier cases teach us that justified true belief falls short of *bona fide* knowledge. The prospects for ‘fixing’ the Platonic definition are poor to nil. Nevertheless, we consider it a net plus just to see that the age-old Platonic formula doesn’t work.

## Progress as Clarification

Ever since Socrates showed the way, clarifying our ideas has been a primary objective of philosophy; and a classic example of this is John Rawls’ 1955 article ‘Two Concepts of Rules’. Act-utilitarianism in ethics, which goes back to Jeremy Bentham and James and John Stuart Mill, ran afoul of moral intuitions that we consider foundational; for instance, it would have 100 units of good go to convicted pedophiles, rather than 99 units to law-abiding, morally upstanding people. It was hoped that rule-

utilitarianism might prove more satisfactory, and to that end Rawls drew a distinction between a ‘summary’ concept of rules and a ‘practice’ concept. The advantage of the former is that providing ‘summaries of past decisions’ eliminates the need to judge each case from scratch. The disadvantage is that being based directly on the utility principle, summary rules are merely rules-of-thumb, so one can and should ‘violate’ these rules if doing so will produce better consequences than obeying them.

On the summary concept, “decisions made in particular cases are logically prior to rules.” On the practice concept, it is the other way around. Practice rules are definitive of certain kinds of activity, such as games like cricket and baseball, and institutions like promising and punishment. And because of this, one cannot simply decide what seems best in a particular case and act accordingly; one cannot go over the authority of a moral rule, that is, and appeal directly to the utility principle. Particular acts are subject hierarchically to the practice rules that govern them, and it is these rules, not particular acts, that are governed by the utility principle.


Rawls’ distinction is relevant to such issues as the difference between accidental and law-like generalization, although he did not extend his exploration from meta-ethical to meta-scientific questions. His main point is that the practice-summary distinction “strengthens the utilitarian view,” even if it does not render utilitarianism “completely defensible.” I think he is right on both counts. With his clarification, rule-utilitarianism becomes more distinct from act-utilitarianism and gains credibility as well as *gravitas* in the process. But for those who consider the whole thrust of utilitarianism misguided—including W.D. Ross, Bernard Williams, and indeed Rawls himself in his *magnum opus*, *A Theory of Justice*—his efforts can only go so far. Furthermore, the increased viability Rawls achieves comes at a price; for his clarification renders rule-utilitarianism not only less like act-utilitarianism, but considerably more like its chief rival, rule-deontology. For utilitarians, therefore, Rawls’ distinction may be something of a mixed blessing; but for *philosophy*, it seems a clear and distinct example of progress.

### Progress as Doubt

How can we be certain that history did not begin five minutes ago, complete with records and ‘memories’? How do we know the external world is not an illusion created by an evil demon to deceive us? These are questions only a philosopher would ask; for to all intents and purposes they make no difference whatever. If there is

no external world, then instead of paying our bills, we will simply *appear* to pay what *appear* to be our bills; and how, even in principle, would we tell the difference?

Skeptical questions, though, do have practical use; for one thing, like the Gettier counterexamples, they show that we don't know as much as we thought. Hume's skeptical forays showed him the need for "caution and modesty"—in effect, for prefacing our assertions with a silent 'if' ("if I understood your meaning," "if this source can be trusted," "if there is an external world," etc.). Hume's 'mitigated skepticism' turns categorical statements into implicit conditionals.

If only we could acquire the habit of Humean modesty, our discourse would be more civil, and the world a more peaceful place. And it would cost us nothing, except the presumption that we know more than we do. It's a simple lesson, and really as old as Socrates; yet we never seem to get the message. Not much progress there, I'm afraid. 

**Toni Vogel Carey**, a philosophy professor in a former life, writes about philosophy and the history of ideas. She is a regular contributor to *Philosophy Now*, and is on its U.S. board of editorial advisors.

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## ADLER ON PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS

The outstanding achievement and intellectual glory of modern times has been empirical science and the mathematics that it has put to such good use. The progress it has made in the last three centuries, together with the technological advances that have resulted therefrom, are breathtaking.

The equally great achievement and intellectual glory of Greek antiquity and of the Middle Ages was philosophy. We have inherited from those epochs a fund of accumulated wisdom. That, too, is breathtaking, especially when one considers how little philosophical progress has been made in modern times.

This is not to say that no advances in philosophical thought have occurred in the last three hundred years. They are mainly in logic, in the philosophy of science, and in political theory, not in metaphysics, in the philosophy of nature, or in the philosophy of mind, and least of all in moral philosophy. Nor is it true to say that, in


Greek antiquity and in the later Middle Ages, from the fourteenth century on, science did not prosper at all. On the contrary, the foundations were laid in mathematics, in mathematical physics, in biology, and in medicine.

It is in metaphysics, the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of mind, and moral philosophy that the ancients and their mediaeval successors did more than lay the foundations for the sound understanding and the modicum of wisdom we possess. They did not make the philosophical mistakes that have been the ruination of modern thought. On the contrary, they had the insights and made the indispensable distinctions that provide us with the means for correcting these mistakes.

At its best, investigative science gives us knowledge of reality. As I have argued earlier in this book, philosophy is, at the very least, also knowledge of reality, not mere opinion. Much better than that, it is knowledge illuminated by understanding. At its best, it approaches wisdom, both speculative and practical.

Precisely because science is investigative and philosophy is not, one should not be surprised by the remarkable progress in science and by the equally remarkable lack of it in philosophy. Precisely because philosophy is based upon the common experience of mankind and is a refinement and elaboration of the common-sense knowledge and understanding that derives from reflection on that common experience, philosophy came to maturity early and developed beyond that point only slightly and slowly.

Scientific knowledge changes, grows, improves, expands, as a result of refinements in and accretions to the special experience—the observational data—on which science as an investigative mode of inquiry must rely. Philosophical knowledge is not subject to the same conditions of change or growth. Common experience, or more precisely, the general lineaments or common core of that experience, which suffices for the philosopher, remains relatively constant over the ages.

Descartes and Hobbes in the seventeenth century, Locke, Hume, and Kant in the eighteenth century, and Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell in the twentieth century enjoy no greater advantages in this respect than Plato and Aristotle in antiquity or than Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Roger Bacon in the Middle Ages. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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