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## PHILOSOPHY AS A PUBLIC ENTERPRISE: AGREEMENT AND PROGRESS

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Part 2 of 2

The very opposite is the case in science. A scientific dispute usually, if not always, involves men living at the same time. At any time, the current scientific problems to be solved are conditioned by the state of the data currently in hand or the state of the research currently being carried forward. Competing theories are sponsored by men who take account of the latest findings of research and of the directions taken by investigations going on. Archimedes, Galileo, Newton, and Einstein cannot function as contemporaries in the way in which Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, and William James can.

Let me state this point in still another way. The whole record of past philosophical thought can have critical relevance to current philosophical problems, whereas the whole record of past scientific work is not as relevant to current research and theorizing. A much larger portion of the scientific past has only antiquarian interest for

scientists today. If there are philosophers today who would say that an equally large portion of the philosophical past can be similarly regarded, their view of this matter, I submit, stems from their relegation of philosophy to the plane of second-order questions, or to the supposition that all philosophical questions are “mixed questions,” or to their not recognizing the role of common experience in the formulation and solution of first-order questions that are purely philosophical.

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The differences between philosophy and science which we have just been considering have a critical bearing on the rate of progress that can be made by these two disciplines, and also on the diverse ways in which advances are made by these two modes of inquiry.

Two factors are mainly responsible for the progress that has been made in scientific knowledge. On the one hand, advances in observational techniques and their employment to explore new fields of phenomena result in the steady accumulation of more and more data of special experience. On the other, new theoretical insights are achieved by the development of better and more comprehensive theories. These two factors interact. The discovery of new data by investigation occasions or stimulates advances in theorizing; and new theoretical constructions often call forth experimental or investigative ingenuity in the search for supporting or refuting data. Furthermore, as we have seen, increasing specialization and ever more intensive division of labor occur in science; and this, in turn, is related to the ever growing number of scientists at work which, in purely quantitative terms, accounts for cumulative progress at an accelerating rate.

In philosophy, there is no accumulation of new data; there are no advances in observational techniques and no new observational discoveries; there is no specialization and no division of labor. Since common experience at its core always remains the same, it does not by itself occasion or stimulate advances in theorizing. Since these things are impossible in philosophy, precisely because it is non-investigative, it has made less progress and at a much slower rate.

If the same kind, amount, or rate of progress could be expected of philosophy, then it would be fair to say that science is vastly superior to philosophy in making progress. It is clearly wrong, however, to expect the same kind of progress—or the same rate of progress—from a non-investigative as from an investigative mode

of inquiry, especially in view of the bearing of its investigative procedure on the main factors responsible for progress in science. To say that philosophy is inferior to science in regard to progress is like saying that a fish is inferior to a bird in locomotion. Both can move forward to an objective, each with a certain velocity, but the difference in the manner and the rate of their movement reflects the difference in the mediums through which they move.

What I have just said should not be interpreted as condoning philosophy's failure to make greater progress than it has so far made. Common experience being a constant factor, progress in philosophy must be made on the side of theorizing rather than on the empirical side—that is, in the development of new theoretical insights, improvements in analysis, the formulation of more precise questions, the construction of more comprehensive theories, and the removal of the theoretical inconsistencies, embarrassments, paradoxes, and puzzles that have long beset philosophical thought. Some progress of this sort has been made in the past, and some has occurred quite recently, but it must nevertheless be admitted that the total extent of it falls far short of what might be reasonably expected.

In my judgment, the central reason for this lies in the fact that, for the most part, philosophical work has been carried on by thinkers working in isolation, and not as a public enterprise in which thinkers make serious efforts to cooperate with one another. A little earlier, I pointed out that the ever growing number of scientists at work accounted, in part, for accelerating, cumulative progress. The creation of departments of philosophy in our institutions of higher learning, it could be said, has greatly increased the number of philosophers at work. If this has not produced the same kind of result that the same phenomenon has produced in science—and certainly it has not—the reason why, I submit, lies in the failure of the participants in the philosophical enterprise to cooperate, as scientists cooperate in their ventures.

That philosophy has not, for the most part, been conducted as a public enterprise does not entail that it cannot be. On the contrary, if philosophy can satisfy the other five conditions which I have laid down, it can satisfy this sixth condition as well; for if philosophy can have a method of its own for answering first-order questions of its own, if it can effectively apply tests of the relative truth of competing theories or conclusions, then it must follow that philosophers can tackle common problems, can join issue where they differ in their solutions, and can submit their differences to adjudication by standards commonly accepted. These things being possi-

ble, cooperation among philosophers is not a utopian dream; it has occurred to some extent; if it is ever fully realized, philosophy will be able to make advances at a rate and to a degree which conform to reasonable expectations.

What does this all come to? First, philosophy by its very nature cannot make the same kind and rate of progress that is made in science; to expect it to is to make a false demand; to denigrate philosophy for not doing so is unjustified. Second, because of the difference in the factors operative in the two disciplines, it is more difficult to make progress—and more difficult to make it steadily and at an ever accelerating pace—in philosophy than in science. Third, these difficulties can be overcome to a certain extent by the cooperation of philosophers in the conduct of their work as a public enterprise; and, when that occurs, philosophy will not be inferior to science, as it now is, with respect to progress. Philosophy is inferior to science now not because it fails to make the same kind or rate of progress, but because it fails to advance in a way and at a pace that is as appropriate to its non-investigative character as the manner and pace of scientific progress is appropriate to a discipline that is investigative in method. If philosophy were to do as well in its medium as science does in its, the correct statement of the case would not be that philosophy is inferior to science in progress, but only that it is distinctly different in this respect.

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One of the commonest complaints about philosophy is that philosophers always disagree. This complaint is given added force by pointing out that, in contrast to philosophy, there is a large area of agreement among scientists. Furthermore, when they disagree, we expect them to work at and succeed in settling their differences. They have at their disposal and employ effective implements of decision whereby they can resolve their disagreements and obtain a concurrence of opinion among those qualified to judge the matters under dispute. Philosophical disagreements persist; or, to speak more accurately, since there is so little genuine disagreement or joining of issues in philosophy, differences of opinion remain unclarified, undebated, and unresolved. It is frequently far from clear that philosophers who appear to differ are even addressing themselves to the same subject or trying to answer the same question. This state of affairs gives rise to the widely prevalent judgment that, in this matter of agreement and disagreement, philosophy is plainly inferior to science. Nevertheless, as in the matter of progress, the comparison of science and philosophy with respect to

agreement is falsely drawn and the judgment based on it is unfairly made.

One difference between science and philosophy, already pointed out, helps us to rectify the erroneous impression that agreement generally obtains in science while disagreement is rife in philosophy. Because philosophy relies solely on common experience in dealing with first-order questions, philosophers widely separated in time can be treated as contemporaries; whereas with the ever changing state of the data acquired by ongoing investigation, only scientists working at the same time can function as contemporaries. This basic difference between science and philosophy results in a different temporal pattern of agreement and disagreement in each, to whatever extent genuine agreements and disagreements do in fact exist.

The scientists of a given century or time tend to disagree with and reject the formulations of earlier scientists, largely because the latter are based on insufficient data. Disagreement in science occurs vertically across the centuries; and most of the agreements in science occur along the same horizontal time line, among scientists at work at the same period. In contrast, there is considerable and often unnoticed agreement across the centuries among philosophers living at different times; the striking disagreements—or differences of opinion—occur mainly among philosophers alive at the same time. In short, we find some measure of agreement and of disagreement in both science and philosophy, but we find the temporal pattern of it quite different in each case.

The judgment that philosophy is inferior to science with respect to agreement focuses entirely on the horizontal time line, where we find the maximum degree of agreement among scientists and the minimum degree of it among philosophers. If we shift our attention to the vertical time line, there is some ground for the opposite judgment; for, looking at the opinions of scientists in one century in relation to those of scientists in an earlier century, we come away with the impression of substantial and extensive disagreement, whereas we find a considerable measure of agreement among philosophers across the centuries.

To judge philosophy inferior by expecting or demanding that its pattern of agreement and disagreement should conform to the pattern exhibited by science is to judge it by reference to a model or standard that is as inapplicable as the model or standard of scientific progress is inapplicable to philosophy. To dismiss this judgment as wrongly made, however, is not to condone philosophy for

its failure to achieve what might be reasonably expected of it in its own terms. The most crucial failure of philosophy so far is the failure of philosophers to face each other in clear and genuine disagreements, to join issue and engage in the debate of disputed questions. Only when this defect is overcome will they be able to settle their differences by rational means and achieve the measure of agreement that can be reasonably expected of them.

Here, as with respect to progress, the difficulties are greater for philosophy. The decision between competing scientific formulations by reference to crucial data obtained by investigation is easier than the resolution of philosophical issues by rational debate. Nevertheless, the difficulties which confront philosophy with respect to agreement and disagreement can be surmounted in the same way that the difficulties it faces with respect to progress can be overcome—namely, by the conduct of philosophy as a public, rather than as a private, enterprise. When philosophy is properly conducted as a public enterprise and philosophers work cooperatively, they will succeed to a much greater extent than they do now in addressing themselves to the same problems, in clearly joining issue where they differ in their answers, and in carrying on rational debate of the issues in a way that holds some promise of their eventual resolution.

It is, therefore, fair to say that philosophy is at present inferior to science with respect to agreement and disagreement, but *only if one means* that philosophy has not yet achieved what can reasonably be expected of it—a measure and a pattern of agreement and disagreement appropriate to its character as a non-investigative discipline and hence distinctly different from the measure and pattern of these things in science. I reiterate that philosophy, like science, can be conducted as a public enterprise, wherein philosophers work cooperatively. In the very nature of the case that is possible, even though little has been done to move philosophy in that direction. Nevertheless, should philosophy ever fully realize what is inherently possible, its achievement with respect to agreement and disagreement will be as commendable as the achievement of science in the same respect, for each will then have done all it can do within the limitations of its method as a mode of inquiry and appropriate to its character as a type of knowledge. 📖

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