



HOW PHILOSOPHY MAKES PROGRESS

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Philosophy was the first academic field; the founder of the Academy was Plato. Nevertheless, philosophy's place in academe can stir up controversy. The ancient lineage itself provokes dissension. Philosophy's lack of progress over the past 2,500 years is accepted as a truism, trumpeted not only by naysayers but even by some of its most enthusiastic yea-sayers. But the truism isn't true. Both camps mistake the nature of philosophy and so are blind to its progress. Let's consider the yea-sayers first.

The structure of universities demands that a field be designated as a science, a social science, or one of the humanities. This structure has ill served philosophy. It's not a science, and it's not a social science. Therefore it belongs, by default, to the humanities, rubbing shoulders with English literature and art history. And what are the humanities? They are premised, according to one cultural critic, Leon Wieseltier, who is among the most impassioned contemporary defenders of the humanities, on "the irreducible reality of inwardness" and are, in fact, "the study of the many expressions of that inwardness." (Wieseltier's words were written in response to an essay by my husband, Steven Pinker.)

This definition of the humanities is arguably apposite for the study of art and literature, but most philosophers would reject it, starting with Plato himself. In fact, it sounds like a course-catalog description of the shadow studies in which the prisoners of Plato's cave are involuntarily enrolled. The man who banished the poets from his utopia would hardly acquiesce in a view of philosophy that rendered it a species of literature. If the arguments of Plato and Descartes, Spinoza and Hume, Kant and Wittgenstein yield us nothing but expressions of our irreducible inwardness, then we can judge them only on aesthetic grounds, as we do Sophocles and Dante, Shakespeare and Milton, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Some philosophers might agree to the aestheticizing of the field (Martin Heidegger? Richard Rorty?), but many more would not. Henri Bergson argued that the relentless flow of time captures the essence of reality, and that, therefore, all concepts being static, distort reality. Proust channeled this conclusion into the literary techniques of *In Search of Lost Time*. But while we evaluate Bergson on the merits of his arguments, argumentative validity has no bearing on the accomplishment of Proust.

When it comes to philosophy's progress, the inward-looking view of Wieseltier decrees that there is none: "The history of science is a history of errors corrected and discarded. But the vexations of philosophy and the obsessions of literature are not retired in this way. In these fields, the forward-looking cast backward glances." Literature and philosophy are crushed together in the hearty embrace. Plato would shudder.

Now for the naysayers. In the past, opposition to philosophy most often came from the pious, who protested the blasphemous arrogance of human reason seeking to supplant revelation. But nowadays the most vociferous of the naysayers are secular and scientific. While the yea-sayer sees philosophy as a species of literature, the naysayer sees philosophy as failed science. He urges us to look at the history of science and its triumphant expansions, which is simultaneously the history of the embarrassing shrinkage of philosophy. Yes, philosophy was the first academic field, but only because the sciences had not yet developed. Questions of physics, cosmology, biology, psychology, cognitive and affective neuroscience, linguistics, mathematical logic: Philosophy once claimed them all. But as the methodologies of those other disciplines progressed—being empirical, in the case of all but logic—questions over which philosophy had futilely sputtered and speculated were converted into testable hypotheses, and philosophy was rendered forevermore irrelevant.

Is there any doubt, demand the naysayers, about the terminus of this continuing process? Given enough time, talent, and funding, there will be nothing left for philosophers to consider. To quote one naysayer, the physicist Lawrence Krauss, “Philosophy used to be a field that had content, but then ‘natural philosophy’ became physics, and physics has only continued to make inroads. Every time there’s a leap in physics, it encroaches on these areas that philosophers have carefully sequestered away to themselves.” Krauss tends to merge philosophy not with literature, as Wieseltier does, but rather with theology, since both, by his lights, are futile attempts to describe the nature of reality. One could imagine such a naysayer conceding that philosophers should be credited with laying the intellectual eggs, so to speak, in the form of questions, and sitting on them to keep them warm. But no life, in the form of discoveries, ever hatches until science takes over.

There’s some truth in the naysayer’s story. As far as our knowledge of the nature of physical reality is concerned—four-dimensional space-time and genes and neurons and neurotransmitters and the Higgs boson and quantum fields and black holes and maybe even the multiverse—it’s science that has racked up the results. Science is the ingenious practice of prodding reality into answering us back when we’re getting it wrong (although that itself is a heady philosophical claim, substantiated by concerted philosophical work).

And, of course, we have a marked tendency to get reality wrong. If you think of the kind of problems our brains evolved to solve in the Pleistocene epoch, it’s a wonder we’ve managed to figure out a technique to get so much right, one that is capable of getting reality itself to debunk some of our deepest intuitions about it—for example, relativity theory playing havoc with our ideas of space and time and quantum mechanics playing similarly with our notions of causality. In contrast, philosophical arguments, lacking that important pushback from the world, don’t have a comparable track record in establishing what Hume called matters of fact and existence.

The naysayer’s view of philosophy as failed or immature science denies it the possibility of progress, as does the yea-sayer’s view of philosophy as a species of literature. But neither conforms to what philosophy is really about, which is to render our human points of view ever more coherent. It’s in terms of our increased coherence that the measure of progress has to be taken, not in terms suitable for evaluating science or literature. We lead conceptually compartmentalized lives, our points of view balkanized so that we can

live happily with our internal tensions and contradictions, many of the borders fortified by unexamined presumptions. It's the job of philosophy to undermine that happiness, and it's been at it ever since the Athenians showed their gratitude to Socrates for services rendered by offering him a cupful of hemlock.

One troubled conceptual border to which philosophers attend concerns science itself. In his essay "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars agrees that the proper agenda of philosophy lies in mediating among simultaneously held points of view with the aim of integrating them into a coherent whole. But for Sellars the action is focused on the border between what he calls the "scientific image" of us-in-the-world and the "manifest image" of us-in-the-world. (His actual language is "man-in-the-world." Sellars' paper was published in 1962, based on two talks he gave in 1960. Certain incoherencies in points of view, reflected in linguistic standards, were yet to come to light.)

"For the philosopher is confronted not by one complex many-dimensional picture, the unity of which, such as it is, he must come to appreciate; but by two pictures of essentially the same order of complexity, each of which purports to be a complete picture of man-in-the-world, and which, after separate scrutiny, he must fuse into one vision." The "manifest image" Sellars explained as the conceptual framework "in terms of which man came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world. It is the framework in terms of which, to use an existentialist turn of phrase, man first encountered himself—which is, of course, when he came to be man. For it is no merely incidental feature of man that he has a conception of himself as man-in-the-world, just as it is obvious, on reflection, that if man had a radically different conception of himself, he would be a radically different kind of man."

In other words, the manifest image is so central to the way in which we think of ourselves that it is constitutive of those very selves. We wouldn't be the things that we are without it—the very things who progressively elaborate the scientific image, bringing to the task our manifest image of ourselves as rational beings, "able to measure ... [our] thoughts by standards of correctness, of relevance, of evidence." Our having an ever-expanding scientific image of ourselves is itself an aspect of our manifest image, the sense that we have of ourselves as creatures who not only believe but offer reasons for our beliefs (and for our actions as well, but we'll get to that). We can't give up on either of the two images of us-in-the-world without destroying the other. They are codependent even when there are issues between them—which is beginning to make

philosophy sound like a couples therapist.

Consider, for example, that relativity theory seems to tell us that time doesn't flow, that all of space-time is laid out in a frozen all-at-once-ness, with the distinctions among past, present, and future "an illusion," in the words of Einstein, "albeit a persistent one." How can such a view of time be reconciled with perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of our manifest image, implicated in almost every emotion we have—our regret and nostalgia for the past, our hopes and terrors for the future? One can't revamp our notion of physical time without disturbing our conception of the very things we are.

And there is the scientific image of us-in-the-world elaborated by neuroscience, one in which I am a brain consisting of a hundred-billion neurons, connected by a hundred-trillion synapses, and this brain itself hasn't a clue as to what's going on among those synapses. How can this be reconciled with the manifest image of me as me, pursuing my life, remembering it and planning for it, singularly committed to its persistence and flourishing? How can the neuron-level view be reconciled with the manifest truth that at some level our brains undeniably think about things? Where's the aboutness to be found among those neurons and synapses? And is the scientific image even coherent if we can't assert that we think about that scientific image, and that in thinking about it, we are thinking about the world?

Once again we come up against the codependence of the scientific and manifest images, even as they sit on the couch with arms folded self-protectively across their chests and resentful ungenerosity in their glares, while philosophy, charged with bringing them together, recognizes their mutual needs. As science progresses, philosophy's work of increasing our overall coherence progresses in tandem. In fact, the scientific image couldn't even coherently claim for itself its expansionist triumphs without helping itself to philosophers' work—to explicate what is essential to scientific methodology and why it is uniquely effective, to argue why it offers an image of reality and not just one more social construction.

Sellars is right that philosophy is best viewed neither as inward-expressing literature (in which case give me poetry over philosophy) nor as failed science (in which case give me physics over philosophy), but as the systematic attempt to increase our overall coherence. Still, his conception is too narrow. Philosophy does indeed always involve our manifest image, but it needn't always involve the scientific image. In particular, some of philosophy's

most significant progress has proceeded independently of science, and here the work of increasing our moral coherence is particularly important. And this is philosophical work that hasn't kept itself locked away in the Academy, which was where Plato chose to pursue philosophy, but has made itself felt in the agora, where a bare-foot Socrates wandered among his fellow citizens, trying to get them to feel the point of his questions so that they might begin to make moral progress.


As living organisms we are primed, unthinkingly, to do all we can to thrive; to be more precise, we are primed, unthinkingly, to do all we can to increase the probability that copies of our genes will survive. But our manifest image of us-in-the-world compels us to give reasons for our actions, and this activity, though undoubtedly compromised by the unthinking processes that science has recently brought to light, proceeds on its own terms. Indeed, the fact that it proceeds on its own terms is part of the manifest image of us-in-the-world. The reasons we are prepared to give to ourselves and one another in accounting for our behavior make no mention of the machinations of the selfish gene. Such reasons would never wash, not even if you're Richard Dawkins. On the contrary, coherence work of the moral kind pushes in the direction of less influence by those unthinking processes and the presumptions they spawn—all variations on “me and my kind are worth more than you and your kind.”

Gregarious creatures that we are, our framework of making ourselves coherent to ourselves commits us to making ourselves coherent to others. Having reasons means being prepared to share them—though not necessarily with everyone. The progress in our moral reasoning has worked to widen both the kinds of reasons we offer and the group to whom we offer them. There can't be a widening of the reasons we give in justifying our actions without a corresponding widening of the audience to which we're prepared to give our reasons. Plato gave arguments for why Greeks, under the pressures of war, couldn't treat other Greeks in abominable ways, pillaging and razing their cities and taking the vanquished as slaves. But his reasons didn't, in principle, generalize to non-Greeks, which is tantamount to denying that non-Greeks were owed any reasons. Every increase in our moral coherence—recognizing the rights of the enslaved, the colonized, the impoverished, the imprisoned, women, children, LGBTs, the handicapped ...—is simultaneously an expansion of those to whom we are prepared to offer reasons accounting for our behavior. The reasons by which we make our behavior coherent to ourselves changes together with our view of who has reasons coming to them.

And this is progress, progress in increasing our coherence, which is philosophy's special domain. In the case of manumission, women's rights, children's rights, gay rights, criminals' rights, animal rights, the abolition of cruel and unusual punishment, the conduct of war—in fact, almost every progressive movement one can name—it was reasoned argument that first laid out the incoherence, demonstrating that the same logic underlying reasons to which we were already committed applied in a wider context. The project of rendering ourselves less inconsistent, initiated by the ancient Greeks, has left those ancient Greeks, even the best and brightest of them, far behind, just as our science has left their scientists far behind.

This kind of progress, unlike scientific progress, tends to erase its own tracks as it is integrated into our manifest image and so becomes subsumed in the framework by which we conceive of ourselves. We no longer see the argumentative work it took for this advance in morality to be achieved. Its invisibility takes the measure of the achievement.

I've imagined Plato shuddering at a certain conception of the field he helped to shape. Would he likewise shudder at having been left so far behind by that field? I think not. If he was committed to any philosophical position, he was committed to the assertion that philosophy is progress-making. Think of the Myth of the Cave, which could be subtitled "A Philosophical Pilgrim's Progress." Even excluding the science-directed philosophy of Sellars' analysis, which couldn't be accomplished in advance of scientific progress, still the task of rendering us more coherently integrated was too much for any man, for any generation, for any millennium. Our conceptual schemes are fragmented for reasons that run deep in our psyches, having nothing to do with the reasons that function in our manifest image of us-in-the-world, powered instead by unthinking strategies (strategies that science is beginning to illuminate).

No wonder progress, though real, is laborious. But given enough time and talent—and maybe even a bit of funding—our descendants will look back at us and wonder why we stopped short of the greater coherence they will have achieved. 

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