**Progress in Philosophy – A Reflection on Socratic “Skepticism”**

Philosophers agonize over the puzzling question of what constitutes progress in their field. In recent times, the phrase “settled science’ has come into vogue to refer at least obliquely to progress in science. In contrast, any talk of “settled philosophy” seems absurd, leading a cynic perhaps to conclude that philosophy, unlike science, is a waste of time.

Nonetheless, the activity of philosophizing is often if not usually experienced as being inspiring, enlightening, and rewarding. Yet when we come together in philosophical discussion of controversial matters – which is what, after all, philosophy is all about - we are pained by how apparently widely divergent people’s thoughts and even language may be at the outset that we might wonder why, after all these centuries of sustained culture, we have not achieved a more stable and well-defined common grounds for philosophical discourse.

Discomfort about this topic is only exacerbated by our occasional comparison of philosophy with science, which surely seems to have shown progress over the centuries. This has prompted some philosophers in recent times to tie their wagons to science either by urging philosophy to reorganize itself in the image of science; or by considering science as the actual starting point – or ending point! - of philosophy; or by considering philosophy to exist in the service of science.

The trouble of defining progress in philosophy goes all the way back to its Socratic roots, where Plato – very much a non-skeptical philosopher himself - faithfully depicts his teacher Socrates on multiple occasions as pronouncing what sounds like a radical skepticism: “All I know is that I know nothing”. This ancient reference is often used by modern skeptics – and some ancient ones as well – as a sort of certification of pedigree, even though their versions of skepticism have little in common with the thought of the great master.

These are the two points of irritation with which those who seek an answer to the question of progress in philosophy have to contend: that Socrates himself seems to have been a radical skeptic, and that another field of inquiry spawned from philosophy: science – seems to have progressed considerably down through the centuries. One might reasonably wonder how there can be any progress to a field in which skepticism reigns right from the beginning. Moreover, one might well wonder whether after science was spawned from philosophy, anything remained in the latter of progressive value.

I will attempt to establish here that a deeper reflection on so-called Socratic skepticism does not, in fact, undercut the prospects for progress in philosophy, but to the contrary gives us a way of more acutely envisioning it. Moreover, a closer study of progress in science reveals, on the one hand, good reasons why science progresses, albeit only in a *practical* sense, in a way philosophy by design not only can’t but shouldn’t; and on the other hand, that the kind of *theoretical* progress that science makes is something shared in common with philosophy.

The claim made repeatedly by Socrates that “all I know is that I know nothing” needs to be seen in the light of his life mission to foster dialog that brings us all away from deception and closer to the truth. He clearly considered this a feasible endeavor, otherwise he would not have wasted his life investing in it. This can be reconciled with his apparently radical skepticism by simple notice of the struggle in all of us between the torturous awareness of a perfect, comprehensive standard of knowing to which we cannot attain and an imperfect, tentative one to which we can attain. Even though we cannot definitively possess the truth, we can be pointed more or less accurately toward it and make continual and steady progress toward it.

This is not really skepticism in the sense according to which we ordinarily use the term, but a humble acknowledgment that the kind of knowledge we can obtain, although vital to our prosperity and happiness, is imperfect, fallible, and tentative: yes, we can be pointed more and more accurately and reliably in the direction of truth and make continual progress toward that truth; no, we cannot definitively possess that truth. This is crucial in order to understand why, exactly, Socrates promoted his brand of rigorously truth-oriented dialog as a divine activity: because it is the only way for us to progress reliably toward the truth. If we continue to argue as the sophists do, we will scatter in every direction and make no progress, no matter how many arguments we win. The reliability of Socratic dialog is based on its dogged truth orientation, which, although fallible, tends to self-correction once errors have been detected. Only the deceived, not the innocent, are defensive about their failures.

Unlike this “Socratic skepticism” the more prevalent skepticisms with which the history of philosophy since Socrates has been visited are forms of opposition to the possibility knowledge to the point of insistence upon either indifference if not constituting downright collapses into denialism. We can’t know p and the very attempt to know p is futile other than perhaps as an invigorating form of mental gymnastics.

Twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell’s negative assessment of the prospects of progress in philosophy is encapsulated in his brilliant if misguided witticism: “Philosophy bakes no bread”, intended tacitly to contrast it to science, which presumably does “bake bread”. Although he never spelled out for us just what kind of bread science bakes, he did lay out openly to his wide readership what he considered the relationship of philosophy to science to be: a temporary placeholder and organizer of subject matter that will eventually be turned over to science progresses to it, such the domain of philosophy continually shrinks, eventually down to nothing, at least as an asymptotic limit, while the domain of science correspondingly expands. Philosophy then bakes no bread; but perhaps it mills a bit of flour.

What this account startlingly ignores is the plain fact that science and philosophy, although in a wider sense they do share concerns, cannot have an interchange of subject matter because they don’t even handle the same kind of question. For that reason, as well, they cannot disagree. Whereas science is a closed-question endeavor, philosophy is an open-question endeavor. Closed questions and open questions are irreducibly different in meaning. By ‘closed’ here is meant closed to argument; closed questions are those which are closed to argument because they are either answerable either by observation, calculation, or some combination of the two. Science is a closed-question endeavor because it seeks answers only to questions answered by a combination of observation and calculation. This kind of question cannot be handed over from philosophy to science at any time, since it can never be a philosophical question to begin with. The question of whether there is life on another planet is not a philosophical question any more now that we have yet to answer the question than it would be if we did, which could only be by observation.

Similarly, the kinds of questions that are open questions are exactly those that science could never answer because they are not closed, but open question, answerable only by argument. For example, consider the meaningful question after a basketball game: did the best team win today? There is no observable or calculable way to answer such a question, so the only route left is an argumentative approach. And yes, the question is answerable, although not easily.

A critic of this distinction might try to insist that the question: “Did the best team win today?” is meaningless in the first place - but on what grounds other than simply that it has no *empirical* answer? Are we really going to resort to pretending we don’t know what a question like this is asking; or that the best team is always the team that wins; or that there is no such thing as one team being better than another?

Another approach, likely the one Russell may have favored, is to insist that apparently open questions are simply sloppily stated versions of closed questions; for example, that the claim that John has good moral character means nothing more than something like: “John keeps his promises 95% of the time.” But this clearly does not pass the sniff test of anyone with an unbiased nose. It is not the case that when I say “I love you” it is just a sloppy statement identical in meaning to a large conjunction of empirical observations: Brian’s face turns red when he sees you; his eyes dilate when he sees you; he brings food to you often; or, (the killer): Brian says “I love you” without exhibiting outward signs of deception. “I love you” is full of meaning but means nothing empirical. To be sure, love may well be associated or concomitant with observables, but this correlation is not tantamount to identity.

This is not to say that it is not a worthwhile endeavor for science to attempt to study nonempirical things by constructing empirical facsimiles of them. In so doing, however, let care be taken to remain mindful that there is no identity relation between the facsimiles and what they represent.

We are fighting an uphill battle if we think that open questions are somehow muddy or confused, and that this can only be remedied by converting them somehow into closed questions. For our most intimate meanings in life are open-question meanings: love, care, relationships, happiness, joy, fulfillment, virtue, fidelity, hope. I don’t think we could even come close to constructing empirical or closed-questions facsimiles of such things. The only strategy left is to deny the reality of such things, which some do. To do so out of blind loyalty to an empiricist ideology is utterly backward thinking: rejecting what is closer to us for the sake of something farther; rejecting what is more important for what is less important. In clinging to my mother’s memory, I cling not to the fact that she wore red or had black hair, or had a certain laugh, etc., but that she cherished me and I her.

All of this was said by Russell in an attempt to explain the progress of science while attempting to define the role of philosophy as subservient to science. It is ironic, in fact, that the twentieth century witnessed this movement to subjugate philosophy to science as its “handmaiden”, even while railing against those who would have made of it “handmaiden of theology”, as it had been dubbed by some in medieval times.

Philosophy cannot be of service to anyone or anything by being a handmaiden to it. It is not a tool to promulgate ideology, whether that ideology be religious of scientistic. The best service philosophy can be is a service rendered autonomously and in full liberty. Only such can be the product of a clean, keen, conscience.

To probe the matter further, what kind of bread does science bake, if philosophy bakes none?

In a practical sense, this is a question easy to answer. Science leads to technological advances, which in turn “bake bread”, even literally. But it should be noted that such technological advances come from advances in the ability of scientific theories to predict nature whether those theories are true or not. In in this practical sense, baking bread has nothing to do with truth. Even geocentric theories of the solar system do a pretty good job of predicting where the planets will be at any given time. Moreover, Newton’s theory, though officially refuted, is still widely used by scientists in this-worldly calculations, as it is more convenient to use and the margin of error negligible on that scale.

Nor is it that we now, finally, are in possession of true scientific theory, as if science could be completed by a certain date. Relativity science can be counted as theoretically refuted for its inability to accurately predict the behaviors of elementary particles. Quantum theory cleans up in this one area which Relativity theory left messy, but is equally messy itself when applied to phenomena above the level of elementary particles. Thus, if baking bread means providing a complete product, we cannot say science breaks bread either, at least not in this theoretical sense.

It appears then that the bread science bakes is mostly practical and not theoretical bread. This makes sense since in large part science is a predictive endeavor rather than a truth quest. The same cannot be said of philosophy, which is bound to get to the bottom of things, no matter how bottomless those things may be. Perhaps it is for this reason that Russell considered only the practical benefits of science and not of philosophy to count as bread.

Practical benefits aside, the progress we see in scientific theory has been described as a process of falsification. Although we may never be happy to settle on one theory as true, we can progressively get closer to the truth by developing stronger and stronger theories and them falsifying them, each falsification paving the way for an even stronger theory, even closer to the truth. The process of elimination is a reliable way of choosing the truth among candidates for truth. We can show theories false by hypothetical experimentation, a theory being false when it implies an empirical consequence that cannot be observed. Assuming that our domain of candidates is finite, we should expect thereby to arrive at the truth in a finite amount of time. But the domain of candidates for truth in science is infinite.

This indeed is genuine progress, as over time we reliably hone down scientific theory to something more and more truthlike. So why cannot something similar apply to philosophy as well?

In the first place, unlike science, philosophy is not a matter of expertise, so there is no official certification or notification to the world of progress made, such as there is in science, in which, for example, a heavenly body can be voted down as a planet.

Secondly, the philosophical progress is harder to track insofar as philosophy does not build up in one direction from axioms and basic laws, as does science, at least in its more calculative aspects. That is, philosophy routinely question s its own principles as well as drawing out inferences from them and subjecting these to criticism.

In this sense, science is foundational in a way philosophy is not. With no lasting foundation to build on, philosophy’s progress may indeed seem ephemeral. But in fact, although it is not foundational, philosophy yet can consider and criticize foundational models or theories about its own subject matter. This is mostly what goes on in philosophy. Foundational models are finite attempts to capture in theory the uncountably infinite manifold of our experience. In this regard, they are like scientific theories, with latter models improving on previous ones according to the lessons of the refutations of past models. Although like scientific theories they are forever tentative, we can in this manner move forward largely leaving in the past notions that had earlier been heavily endorsed, e.g., that war is a glorious political good to be optimized; that there is no social obligation above the level of nation or state; that learning is primarily by rote or dictation; that social prosperity does not require liberty; that slavery is a natural institution; or that women are intellectually inferior to men.

Philosophy in this manner progresses by an ongoing consideration of finite explanatory models, with the understanding that as finite they cannot perfectly capture the infinity of experience, but can give us, one after the other, more accurate, fine-grained truth-like approximations.

Philosophy, of course, does not head ineluctably in this direction. But careful and sustained scrutiny can reveal this kind of progress over time. The notion of philosophical progress suffers from the absence expert authority. The progress is there, hidden among the riffraff. Not that science is lacking in its own riffraff, but our reliance on the authority of experts makes it easier for us to ignore the negative interference of bad science.

What is needed in order to make philosophical progress more evident is that we develop and promote certain philosophical virtues in ourselves and in others, tantamount to putting on a pair of 3-D glasses to allow us to see things as they really are. The first virtue is sustained, proactive, truth-oriented inquiry. As rational beings, we are well motivated to be truth-oriented except in reaction to temptations. Yet we tend to be less than diligent about engaging in deep reflection when we are in a state of peace. We tend to waste peace of mind on idleness rather than the diligent reflection that would transform our lives. Then when trouble hits, we are forced to do all our deep thinking in the biased state of emotional unrest.

The second philosophical virtue is reconciliatory dialog in preference to polemic argument. This is the basic lesson of Socratic philosophy: we learn nothing by winning arguments and gain wisdom from reconciling with one another. Without charitability, all argument falls prey to the straw man fallacy, with all the efforts of one side spent on making the other side look bad.

The third philosophical virtue is the reduction of disagreement by expansion of attention to and development of common grounds. Absence of attention to common grounds exaggerates the experience of alienation we feel when we must confront ideological conflict. This will challenge our ability to seek reconciliation and turn us toward polemic, in which truth no longer matters.

It is our lack of our practice of these virtues that clouds our minds from seeing the philosophical progress we have made, and from clinging to it and building on it. This is our only path to happiness, and we should take care to live by it.