Philosophy doesn't need a concept of progress

Yafeng Shan

Department of Philosophy, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

Correspondence

Yafeng Shan, Department of Philosophy, Cornwallis Central, University of Kent, Canterbury, CT2 7NZ, United Kingdom

Email: y.shan@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

Philosophical progress is one of the most controversial topics in metaphilosophy. It has been widely debated whether philosophy makes any progress in history. This paper revisits the concept of philosophical progress. It first identifies two criteria of an ideal concept of philosophical progress. It then argues that our accounts of philosophical progress fail to provide such an ideal concept. Finally, it argues that not only do we not have a good concept of philosophical progress, we also do not need a concept of philosophical progress in order to arrive at a good understanding of the history of philosophy.

KEYWORDS

philosophical progress, philosophical success, consensus, novelty, disagreement

1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophical progress is one of the most controversial topics in metaphilosophy. It has been widely debated whether philosophy makes any progress in history.[1] Pessimism about progress seems prevailing within and outside the philosophy community. The modest pessimist (e.g., Dietrich 2011) denies that there has been any progress in the history of philosophy. The radical pessimist (e.g., McGinn 1993) even challenges the possibility of philosophical progress in the future. In contrast, there is still some optimism about progress, though for different reasons. The global optimist contends that philosophy is making progress

generally by answering big questions (for example, the problem of the external world). The selective optimist (e.g., Williamson 2006; Stoljar 2017) argues that philosophy has been progressive by solving certain types of problems or by improving our methods to solve problems. The pluralist optimist (e.g., Rescher 2014; Chalmers 2015; Brake 2017) argues that philosophy makes progress by achieving different goals (for example, the creative development of philosophical tools and broadening philosophical topics). The instrumental optimist (e.g., Koertge 2017) suggests that philosophical progress is secondary in the manner of contributing to progress in a broader context, say, scientific progress. The purpose of this essay is not to examine whether philosophy has made any progress in history or will make any progress in the future. Rather, it aims to revisit the concept of philosophical progress itself: What is an ideal concept of philosophical progress? Do we have such a concept? Does philosophy need a concept of philosophical progress?

The essay is structured as follows. Section 2 begins with an examination of the concept of philosophical progress and introduces two criteria for an ideal concept of philosophical progress. Section 3 argues that our accounts of philosophical progress fail to provide such an ideal concept. Section 4 argues that progress is not a useful conceptual tool to assess the contributions made in the history of philosophy, and thus philosophy does not need a concept of progress. Section 5 addresses two objections to my argument.

2. AN IDEAL CONCEPT OF PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS: WHAT WOULD PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS IDEALLY BE?

First of all, I would like to disentangle three different concepts: the aim of philosophy, philosophical success, and philosophical progress. From a conceptual point of view, these three things are somehow related. Suppose the aim of philosophy is X. Philosophical success is typically defined as the achievement of X. Accordingly, philosophical progress is construed as a better achievement of X.[2] Thus, it is not unusual for philosophers to discuss these three concepts together. In particular, it seems to be quite common to discuss the aim of philosophy in order to examine philosophical progress (e.g., Chalmers 2015; Brake 2017; Beebee 2018). As Daniel Stoljar puts it, the question of philosophical progress "is pointless unless we specify [the aim of philosophy]" (2017, 21).

In this essay, however, I would keep the issue of the aim of philosophy aside. By doing so, I am not rejecting the relation of the aim of philosophy to philosophical progress. I

am sympathetic to the view that philosophical progress should reflect a good development of philosophy towards its aim, if there is such a thing. But I still argue that philosophical progress and the aim of philosophy can be construed as two separate issues. There are some subtle differences between the use of the concept of philosophical progress and that of the concept of the aim of philosophy. For example, philosophical progress is typically applied to analyse the history of philosophy, while the aim of philosophy suggests a direction towards a better future for philosophy. And a given account of the aim of philosophy does imply a particular account of philosophical progress, but not vice versa. There can be an account of philosophical progress that is not defined in a teleological way. For example, one may argue that philosophy progresses if philosophy solves more problems, while it regards the aim of philosophy as an open question.[3] In this essay, I would like to focus on the issue of philosophical progress, without making a commitment to any explicit account of the aim of philosophy.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the difference between philosophical success and philosophical progress. I argue that philosophical success should be a non-comparative notion, while philosophical progress should be a comparative notion. Typically, philosophical success refers to achievements made in philosophy, while philosophical progress is marked by greater achievements.[4] Such a clear difference is, however, sometimes overlooked. For example, Stoljar conflates success with progress when he claims "when I say that there is progress *on the questions of philosophy*—that is, on questions of that kind—I mean to assert something that is true if questions of philosophy have been solved in the past and it is reasonable to expect that they will be solved in the future—for short, that there is progress in philosophy if we are answering philosophical questions" (2017, 20-21). If Stoljar is right that philosophy is about problem-solving, then I argue that the fact that philosophy answers questions does not imply that there is philosophical progress. In this case, philosophical progress should rather be defined in the way that philosophy answers more questions or philosophy answers the same questions in a better way, whereas the fact philosophy answers questions is just a case of philosophical success. Thus, an essential feature of an ideal concept of philosophical progress is comparativeness.

Thirdly, I would maintain that philosophical progress is an evaluative concept. It suggests in what ways philosophy is better than before. Thus, if we have a good concept of philosophical progress, we may use it to assess the development of philosophy in a given period. We may also use it to evaluate the historical significance of a particular philosophical

theory or argument. On the other hand, if a concept of philosophical progress is helpful for us to make sense of the trends in the history of philosophy in which philosophy is doing better than before, such a concept of progress is a good one. Accordingly, I propose that *a concept of philosophical progress is useful if and only if it helps us to have a good understanding of the development of philosophy in history*. Therefore, philosophy needs a concept of progress if and only if it is a useful conceptual tool to understand the history of philosophy.

In sum, there are two criteria of an ideal concept of philosophical progress. One is the comparative criterion: *An ideal concept of philosophical progress should be a comparative notion*. The other is the useful criterion: *An ideal concept of philosophical progress is necessary if it helps us to have a good understanding of the history of philosophy*. In the next section, I examine two main accounts of philosophical progress and argue that we do not have an ideal concept of philosophical progress.

3. TWO APPROACHES TO PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS

Contemporary accounts of philosophical progress can be classified into two groups: the consensus-based approach and the novelty-based approach. The consensus-based approach defines philosophical progress in terms of collective agreement or convergence. One of the most influential accounts of philosophical progress, namely, the problem-solving account of progress, is such a case.[5] According to it, philosophical progress is determined by problem-solving effectiveness. Whether a philosophical problem is solved or not is clearly a case of a consensus. Therefore, in order to account for progress in the history of philosophy, one has to identify the consensus on resolutions to philosophical problems. In short, philosophical progress is fundamentally a process of replacing one consensus with another, in which the new consensus is better than the old one in some sense.

There is, however, a difficulty with the consensus-based approach. History tells us that it is much easier to find disagreements than agreements among philosophers (Daly 2017). For example, in the literature on causation, there are various theories, including the regularity theory, the probabilistic theory, the counterfactual theory, the interventionist theory, the mechanistic theory, and the epistemic theory. No consensus has ever been reached. I have to note that causation is not an exceptional case in philosophy. According to the 2009 PhilPapers Survey, there is no consensus at all on twenty-three important philosophical questions (Bourget and Chalmers 2014). As David Chalmers summarises it, "There has not

been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy" (2015, 7). Thus, if we try to assess the history of philosophy in terms of problem-solving, it seems that we may probably end with the conclusion that philosophy does not succeed or progress. *The problem here is not that the conclusion is disappointing but that the concept of philosophical progress does not improve our understanding of the development of philosophy in history*. If few consensuses can be found in the history of philosophy, it would be even more difficult to find the shift from one consensus to another. Thus, it is pointless to understand philosophical progress in terms of consensus. In other words, the consensus-based approach to philosophical progress is useless for evaluating and understanding the historical development of philosophy. As Nicholas Rescher indicates, "[E]volving consensus simply is not the appropriate standard of progress [in philosophy]" (2014, 12).

Some challenge the view that philosophers do not have consensus. It has been argued that though philosophers seldom reach agreement on answers to "big," central," or "core" problems, philosophy has successfully resolved many "boundary" (or "marginal") problems (e.g., Williamson 2006, 178; Frances 2017, 47–53; Stoljar 2017, 39–60). Thus, there are many philosophical consensuses on boundary problem solutions. Nevertheless, showing that there have been many philosophical consensuses in history is not a complete defence of the consensus-based account. As I argued in section 2, an ideal of philosophical progress should be comparative, referring to greater philosophical achievements. Accordingly, a minimal defence of the consensus-based approach to philosophical progress has to show (1) that there are many philosophical consensuses and (2) that these consensuses are often replaced with newer consensuses. It seems to me that (2) is really difficult to maintain. It is not unusual in the history of philosophy that a consensus is abandoned without being replaced by another. For example, in the first-half of the twentieth century, the logical empiricist approach dominated many issues in the philosophy of science, such as the theory/observation distinction (e.g., Carnap 1966), the discovery/justification distinction (e.g., Reichenbach 1938), and the pattern of theory change (e.g., Nagel 1961).[6] Under attack from outsiders (e.g., Quine 1951; Hanson 1958; Popper 1959; Kuhn 1962) and insiders (e.g., Hempel 1950; 1952), it was eventually abandoned. Nevertheless, no new consensus was reached on these issues. Some issues (for example, the theory/observation distinction) are not as important as before, while some issues (for example, the pattern of theory change) have become highly controversial. Thus, even if there were some philosophical consensuses on some boundary problems in history, it is still insufficient to show that philosophy progresses by way of

replacing one consensus with another. The historical development is not a series of consensus changes. Again, the problem is here not that applying the consensus-based notion of progress to the history of philosophy leads to a disappointing conclusion about philosophical progress. Rather the consensus-based notion is not useful in providing us with a good understanding of the historical development of philosophical success. Therefore, I argue that the consensus-based approach is insufficient to provide an ideal concept of philosophical progress.

Let me now turn to the novelty-based approach. The novelty-based approach construes philosophical progress in terms of novel contribution. For example, Elizabeth Brake (2017) defines philosophical progress as the creative development of new models and tools to think about the world and the introduction of new problems.[7] The novelty-based approach is fundamentally different from the consensus-based approach in the sense that the consensus-based approach requires that philosophical progress be judged in terms of consensus, while the novelty-based account does not. Consider Brake's account. As long as there are new philosophical models or tools, philosophy progresses, even if these new models or tools are not widely accepted.

At first glance, the novelty-based notion of progress is more useful than the consensus-based notion, when applied to understanding the history of philosophy. As Brake (2017) suggests, philosophers have been creatively developing new models and tools and proposing new questions for thinking about the world. In other words, the novelty account does reflect achievements in philosophy to some extent. Nevertheless, developing new models and tools and raising new questions do not entail comparative criteria. Recall the distinction between philosophical success and philosophical progress. Developing new models and tools and raising new questions are better interpreted as instances of philosophical success than instances of philosophical progress.

Some may suggest that there is a way to understand the novelty-based notion comparatively: We have more new models, tools, and questions than we did previously. In other words, progress amounts to increasing our stock of models/tools/questions. Such an interpretation, however, is insufficient to defend the novelty-based approach. An account of philosophical progress defined by more new models/tools/questions is not a novelty-based notion. The basic feature of the novelty-based notion is novelty, which is contrasted with the consensus-based notion. According to the novelty-based approach, philosophical progress is about something new rather than about something acknowledged by the philosophical

community. In other words, philosophy can be progressive as long as there is something new, regardless of whether the community acknowledges the new dimension or not. Whether we have more new models, tools, and questions depends, however, on whether we agree on that we have new more models, tools, and questions. Thus, in this way, such a concept of progress is not characterised in terms of novelty. A genuine novelty-based approach to philosophical progress provides a non-comparative notion. Therefore, I argue that the novelty-based approach does not provide an ideal concept of philosophical progress, because it fails to fulfil the comparative criterion.

4. THE NEED FOR A CONCEPT OF PHILOSOPHICAL PROGRESS RECONSIDERED

In section 3, I argued that neither the consensus-based approach nor the novelty-based approach provides us with a useful and comparative concept of philosophical progress. Thus, we do not have an ideal concept of philosophical progress of the kind elaborated by section 2. In this section, I argue that we do not even need such a concept of progress in philosophy.

When talking of philosophical progress, philosophers typically tend to contrast it with scientific progress (e.g., Dietrich 2011; Rescher 2014; Frances 2017). The implicit assumption behind this approach is that a good concept of progress in science should be applicable or useful to philosophy.[8] I really doubt this. Despite their intimate historical relation, there are some differences between philosophical practice and scientific practice.[9] First, unlike science, philosophy values disagreement to a greater extent. It is not unusual in the history of philosophy that the introduction of a counterexample to a theory is celebrated as a great success. Edmund Gettier's three-page article "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" (1963) is such a clear case. All that Gettier does in the article is to suggest two counterexamples to the JTB account of knowledge, but the article has become a must-read in epistemology. In contrast, the discovery of an anomaly in science is seldom regarded as important a contribution as the introduction of a counterexample is in philosophy. Few scientists are credited merely for the work of challenging a received theory. Rather scientists are more often acclaimed for their work that earns a new consensus by replacing a once received consensus.[10]

Second, unlike science, philosophy values old ideas to a great extent. It has been more than two thousand years since Plato wrote his dialogues, but his dialogues are still widely

read and discussed today. It is difficult to imagine that first-year philosophy undergraduates would not be required to read the works of Plato, Descartes, and Hume. It is not a big surprise for philosophers to develop a historically motivated approach to contemporary issues. For example, the Humean approach is still popular in the discussion on causation (see Lewis 1973; Beebee 2007), while the Kantian approach to philosophy of science is developing (see Massimi 2008). Old philosophical ideas still matter. In contrast, old ideas or theories in science are not as important today as old ones in philosophy. Chemistry students do not have to learn the phlogiston theory, and physics students are not taught about Aristotelian physics. In scientific practice, old ideas or theories are just dead. Few scientists read or discuss the works of scientists of the seventeenth century. Old scientific ideas or theories are not so relevant to contemporary practice.

I argue, moreover, that these seeming differences between philosophy and science are rooted in a crucial difference between them. Science is essentially a collective enterprise. Scientific knowledge is now widely accepted as a product of collective effort (e.g., Wray 2007; Bird 2010; de Ridder 2014).[11] As Thomas Kuhn (1962) insightfully indicates, the unit of scientific development is a community-based consensus. There are many major shifts of consensus in the history of science (for example, the Copernican revolution and the chemical revolution). Accordingly, the typical unit of analysis in the examination of the development of science is a community-based consensus (e.g., Kuhn 1962; Lakatos 1978; Laudan 1977; Chang 2012). Therefore, a concept of progress is useful in examining major scientific changes. We need a concept of progress to make sense of the shifts of scientific consensus in history. In addition, we need a concept of progress to guide our choice of the most promising line of inquiry for further investigation. When a group of scientists have multiple lines of inquiry and limited resources, it is not unusual that they have to choose and focus on one of them. Thus, a concept of progress is helpful for evaluating different lines of inquiry.

In contrast, philosophy is not fundamentally a collective enterprise. Philosophers are more used to working individually. The division of labour in philosophy is not as necessary as it is in science. Thus, as I have indicated, there are fewer consensuses in philosophy and even fewer consensus shifts in the history of philosophy. Therefore, a concept of philosophical progress is not as necessary as a concept of scientific progress is.

Some may object to this by arguing that there have been quite a few consensus changes in the history of philosophy. Consider again the case of logical empiricism.

Philosophers of science now agree that the logical empiricist approach to the problem of a pattern of scientific change is not plausible. It seems that there is a consensus shift from a widely accepted view that the logical empiricist approach is good to a view that the logical empiricist approach is problematic. That said, I have to emphasise that this is not a case of consensus shift. A consensus shift should be a process of replacing one consensus with another, where two consensuses refer to something constructive. The Copernican revolution is a good example of a positive consensus shift, a process of replacing the Ptolemaic theory with the Copernican, where both theories provide astronomical models for representing the motion of celestial bodies. The elimination of logical empiricism in the philosophy of science, however, is not a positive consensus shift, because no new approach or theory is widely adopted in the same field. And most major shifts in the history of philosophy are more akin to the elimination of logical empiricism than to the Copernican revolution.

Therefore, given that the history of philosophy lacks positive consensus changes, it is not necessary to have a concept of progress to analyse and evaluate the historical development of philosophy. In other words, a concept of philosophical progress is not very helpful to us in reaching a better understanding of the history of philosophy.

5. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Regarding my argument in the last section, two worries might arise. First, some may argue that a good concept of philosophical progress should not only be retrospectively useful but also be prospectively useful in the sense that it helps us to decide how to do better philosophy. If so, my argument still fails to show that philosophy does not need a concept of progress. Second, if philosophy does not need a concept of progress, does it imply some scepticism about philosophy? Does it undermine the value or the significance of philosophy?

In response to the first worry, that a good concept of philosophical progress should both retrospectively and prospectively useful, I argue that philosophy does need a prescriptive concept to assess and judge what philosophy to do and how to do it. I do find a concept of philosophical success necessary. A good concept of philosophical success will be helpful to assess and judge philosophical work. It is still unclear, however, whether philosophy needs a concept of progress, if there is a good concept of success.

In response to the second worry, whether not needing a concept of progress implies scepticism, I would say no: that philosophy does not need a concept of progress does not suggest or imply any scepticism about philosophy. Bryan Frances concludes his defence of philosophical progress with the following remarks.

> Like many philosophers, I have long thought that philosophy has some genuine accomplishments. For instance, we have been successful at pointing out that there are certain notions that are of fundamental importance to our lives, how we interact with each other, how we interact with the world, and the world itself: justice, freedom, consciousness, perception, reason, beauty, truth, evidence, time, knowledge, intentionality, suffering, change, moral goodness, and so forth. We are also superb at generating fascinating questions, ones that are central to understanding the notions just mentioned. We are excellent at discovering certain problems or even paradoxes involving those notions. We are probably too good at crafting potential answers to the questions. We are creative and profligate at making a great many highly sophisticated arguments for and against those answers. Finally, over the millennia we have been good at generating new fields of investigation, such as special sciences. That's an impressive list: notions, questions, problems, answers, arguments, and fields. What I'm claiming is that we are also good at generating actual results, claims that can be handed down from generation to generation as things almost all of us accept. (2017, 56)

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I completely agree with Frances on his observation: there have been many great philosophical achievements in history, although these philosophical achievements should be interpreted as instances of philosophical success rather than of philosophical progress. By abandoning a concept of philosophical progress, we would not end up with scepticism about philosophy. Without a concept of philosophical progress, philosophy can still do well. Contra Timothy Williamson's claim that philosophy "must do better," I argue that philosophy "must do well." Thus, for philosophers, the urgent task is to look for a good concept of success rather than a good concept of progress.[12]

6. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have identified two criteria of an ideal concept of philosophical progress: philosophical progress should be a comparative notion and be useful for understanding the historical development of philosophy. I have argued that we do not have such an ideal concept. Two main approaches to philosophical progress do not provide us with a comparative or a useful notion. I have further argued that we do not need a concept of philosophical progress. In short, my central argument in this essay is to reject the concept of philosophical progress and its use in the historical analysis of philosophy. That said, rejection of the concept of philosophical progress should not be confused with the rejection of philosophical success. I am not trying to deny that there have been philosophical successes in history. Like most philosophers, I think that there are many great philosophical works. I have been learning and benefiting from these works. Nevertheless, I do not think that we need a concept of progress to compare and judge these works in order to reach a good understanding of the history of philosophy. How to develop a better account of philosophical success is a far more important task for anyone who is interested in metaphilosophy.

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<FOOTNOTES>

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[1] Philosophical progress here refers to the progress in philosophy as advance in the intellectual realm, which is contrasted with the progress of philosophy as the improvement in the professional or institutionalised realm. For a more detailed discussion, see Rescher (2014, 1–2).

2 Alternatively, philosophical progress can also be defined as getting closer to achieving X than before but not actually achieving it.

3 Philip Kitcher (2015) distinguishes between teleological progress and pragmatic progress. The former is defined as the decrease of our distance to a goal, while the latter consists in overcoming some problems of the current state. Kitcher's "pragmatic progress" is a good example of how philosophical progress can be examined without discussing the aim of philosophy.

4 My "philosophical success" is different from Nathan Hanna's "philosophical success" (2015), which refers to the success of a philosophical argument.

5 To a great extent, most of the recent discussions on philosophical progress are situated in the problem-solving framework: Has philosophy ever solved any "big" or "core" problems (e.g., McGinn 1993; Dietrich 2011)? If not, has philosophy successfully resolved some "boundary" or "marginal" problems (e.g., Brake 2017; Stoljar 2017)? Is there a plausible way of defending the view that philosophy progresses in terms of problem-solving (e.g., Golding 2011; Kamber 2011, 2017)? Moreover, some accounts of philosophical progress that are not defined in terms of problem-solving are still fundamentally problem-solving in nature. For example, Timothy Williamson (2006) argues for a method-based account: philosophy progresses if it develops a better mathematics-informed method to articulate the problems, concepts, and arguments. That said, it is worth noting that for Williamson, a better method is ultimately for the purpose of problem-solving. In this sense, I argue that Williamson's account is a problem-solving account. Helen Beebee's equilibrium-based account (2018) is another example of the consensus-based approach to philosophical progress. Other examples include the knowledge-based account and the truth-based account.

6 The logical empiricist accounts of these issues were typically called "the received views."

7 Examples of the creative development of new models and tools include the introduction of new thought experiments (e.g., Descartes's evil demon).

8 It should be noted that science in this context (that is, the literature on scientific progress) refers to empirical sciences, such as physics, biology, and chemistry. Mathematics and statistics are not under consideration.

9 Philosophy in this context does not include logic.

10 It should be noted that here I am not dismissing the significance of disagreement in scientific practice or denying the fact that there are disagreements in the history of the

sciences. Disagreement plays an important role in scientific practice, and scientists do disagree with each other in many issues. Nevertheless, there is a subtle difference between scientists and philosophers. Scientists are more eager to look for a new consensus to replace the old one in order to end disagreement, while philosophers are more comfortable about keeping disagreement ongoing. To a great extent scientific disagreements are the means to scientific consensus.

[11] This is why agreement is more important than disagreement for scientists.

[12] Even if a concept of progress in philosophy is necessary, it has to be articulated based on a good concept of success. As I have argued, philosophical progress, as a comparative notion, means greater philosophical success.