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On 17 December 1903 Orville and Wilbur Wright's plane was airborne for twelve seconds, covering a distance of 36.5 metres. Just seven hundred and eighty-seven months later, Neil Armstrong flew ten million times as far to land on the moon. Yet we continue to argue about what Aristotle said twenty-four centuries ago. What kind of progress is possible in philosophy? Is it worth it?

In this essay, I will refute the contention, implied in the question, that there is no progress in philosophy, even if philosophical progress differs from the conventional ideas as applied to the sciences. I will argue, further, that philosophical inquiry is worthy due to the progress that it has made, but also that philosophy's worth is established in the *way* that philosophy has progressed and intertwined with other disciplines.

It is easy to see why philosophy might be said to be pointless. Progress in the sciences is, usually, clearly measurable. A hypothesized notion is satisfied through a proof; a discovery answers a question. One measures progress on a time-line. We do not ask any more of what is matter made or why does an apple fall from a tree. We know these things. The same cannot be said of philosophy. We are still debating, as Descartes was, how do I know that I exist? There are defendants of competing philosophical premises – of Kant's categorical imperative, of Mill and Bentham's forms of utilitarianism and even of Aristotelian virtue ethics -- from up to 2000 years ago.

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein neatly summarises the argument that philosophy makes no progress in her 'What Philosophers Really Know':[1]

"*[Philosophers] cannot seem to agree on anything, with dissension descending to such basic questions as the nature of the field itself, both its subject matter and its methodology. The lack of unanimity implies a lack of objectivity and suggests that any hope for progress is futile. This complaint often comes from the scientists and culminates in the charge that there is no such thing as philosophical expertise.*"

To understand whether philosophy "progresses", it is important to define what we mean by "progress." Generically, progress is usually an observable development over a period of time within a field. The example given in the question is easily recognisable as progress, for we begin with Orville and Wilbur Wright's plane in 1903, barely airborne for 12 seconds, and a mere 70 years later, man is taking its first steps on the moon. We went from point A at a particular time to point B at a later time where point B was more advanced than point A. Can we treat progress in philosophy the same way?

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[1] Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *What Philosophers Really Know* MIT Press 2015

Philosophy has no evidentiary base. Even when it seeks to use scientific fact or observation to build an argument, that too might be challenged. Nothing can be taken for granted in philosophy; and because firm structures cannot be built on shifting sands, this is problematic. Philosophy also puts great emphasis on the thoughts of scholars who lived as long as 2000 years ago or, like Aristotle, even further back in time. Their views still have relevance and are contested to this day, unlike in scientific fields where each new milestone brings a paradigm shift and new thought-leaders. For example, one can trace a clear shift in physics from the Greek philosophers' mathematics to Newtonian Physics and then to special and general relativity. Each step demonstrates obviously improved knowledge within the field. How, then, can we compare the philosopher's constant questioning of first principles?

To account for this difference – and explain why it doesn't damn philosophy to irrelevance -- let us think of philosophy as an expedition into conceptual space, rather than the empirical space of science. In this space, we entertain questions varying from ethics to politics, from epistemology to the nature of science. A philosopher constructs arguments, accommodates counter-arguments and in conclusion will either discard or gain greater precision towards a certain perspective. This process, while eliminating many poor answers, does not on the whole rank one solution above all others, as conceptual space is far more extensive than its empirical equivalent, meaning that there is more than one "right" or reasonable way of analysing any particular question. In this sense, progress comes from identifying and scaling these peaks in conceptual space.

Philosophers, over time, come to better, although not perfect, agreement on how philosophical questions have to be broken down into smaller questions and that this may in turn take us to further questions. Once we accept this form of intrinsic progress – progress *within* philosophy – we can also show that philosophy has been essential for extrinsic progress (that philosophy has motored progress in other fields).

Such progress is possible because whilst philosophical inquiry does entail a degree of complexity, the fruits of philosophy are available to anyone to be used. As Goldstein says, "*Those who value clarity and do not cringe before complexity can help themselves to what has so far been achieved.*"[2] Through philosophical headway – for example, the study of epistemology and its identifying of the various methods of knowing -- philosophy has been key in establishing analytical methods for analysing linguistic phenomena, such as sentences, and psychological phenomena, such as sense data, and most importantly, the analysing of concepts (conceptual analysis).

Indeed, the basic idea of conceptual analysis is that questions such as 'What is knowledge?' or 'What is truth?' can be answered with only the basis of one's

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[2] *ibid.*

understanding of the relevant concepts. The optimal result of a conceptual analysis would be a definition or analysis of the relevant X, typically formulated as a necessary biconditional that states necessary and sufficient conditions for being X. For example, a conventional formulation of the classical analysis of knowledge as justified true belief is: A knows that B in the case that 1) B is true, 2) A believes that B, and 3) A is justified in believing that B. Here, these conditions declare individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for knowing that B.[3]

Philosophy has helped set up a formulaic method for analysing most things. Its use across many disciplines suggests that it has both progressed within its own discipline and led to progress in other disciplines and therefore can lay double claim to being "worth it" on the basis of progress.

Political philosophers have advanced our understanding of good governance and solved many problems of bad and inadequate governance. The creation of a system of rights, democratic representation, federalism (also social contract theory) could be seen as progress for the good of humanity on a par with the discovery of penicillin or the printing press. One possible response to this is that philosophy merely followed the social trend towards these evolved arrangements rather than instigating them. However, I think more stock should be placed in the argument that since the time of Aristotle, philosophers have defended equal rights (examples include, Kant with his maxim "never treat any person merely as a means to an end", John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau). The more modern thinkers had a profound effect on the American and French revolutions and the democratic governments produced. A concrete example of a problem that philosophy has solved, even though it is intrinsic to philosophy, is the Epimenides paradox, which explores how one can evaluate the veracity of the sentence "all Cretans are liars" (where the person putting forward the statement is a Cretan himself). Two resolutions have been put forward, one being Russell's theories of types and the other being Wittgenstein's interpretation[4]. Should philosophy have helped on such a global scale, quite apart from the progress it has made, even the deepest sceptics must admit it would be worth it.

While we have shown that philosophy is capable of progress, we can also dispute the idea, implied in the comparison, that disciplines which ponder the "same questions" for an extended period of time are suspect. For if that is the case, then we can raise the same criticism about science itself. For example, physics, or maybe more precisely cosmology, has been dwelling on the question of the origin and evolution of the universe since the pre-Socratic atomists. Biology has

[3] (https://philpapers.org/browse/conceptual-analysis)
[4] James C. Klagge, *Wittgenstein: Biography and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 127

been focused on the nature of adaptation since Aristotle's codification of his four causes. So why should philosophy be said to not have made progress compared to these other areas of study when there are fundamentals that are still being debated in all of them?

Also, the name-dropping of the philosophers here was not forced on my part. Philosophers were the first to use scientific methods; Aristotle is known as the first empiricist. Newton was a natural philosopher, but his work is regarded as a cornerstone of physics. It often feels that, since the philosophical process is not so much designed for answering questions but rather *refining* questions and asking new ones, we may venture to ask whether as soon as philosophy starts getting hard-and-fast answers, it ceases to be called philosophy and begins to be called science or something else, to paraphrase Searle.[5] Philosophy has evolved and diverged into various fields, such as cosmology and biology. Progress in these fields would not have been possible without philosophy. Philosophy has been very useful in the modern development of evolutionary theory and cognitive science, for example. Daniel Dennett's work[6] provides examples of this.

Wilfrid Sellars[7] argues that philosophy is best seen neither as "inward-expressing literature", similar to poetry, nor as a "failed science (in which case give me physics over philosophy)", but rather as a systematic effort to better our overall understanding. I believe we can expand upon this. Philosophy has made some of its most significant developments entirely independently of science, and this gains importance when put in the context of increasing our moral coherence.

"Progress" is one metric for determining worthiness, but when applied to other disciplines, it can sometimes seem an absurd one. Art from the time of ancient Greece is still fascinating to people around the world. Art has certainly evolved in technique and style over the years, but to say one artistic style is better than another simply because there is some progress in the skill level, does not seem to be legitimate. What about when we apply the argument to literature? Would we say that J.K. Rowling is better than Murasaki Shikibu (author of "The Tale of Genji", written in 1010 and considered the greatest work of Japanese literature)?

This brings me to the heart of the argument being made. Art and literature must surely be said to have worth. Why should it not be the same for philosophy? Is it because we place more value in art or literature, or that more people appear to enjoy them, than in contemplation of the realms of metaphysics and ethics? If that is so, then it is not through lack of progress that philosophy falls short, but rather popular appeal.

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[5] John Searle, *Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement* 2008
[6] Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* 1991
[7] Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy entry: Wilfrid Sellars

I have attempted to show that firstly, philosophical progress is unique and cannot be regarded in the same way as scientific progress. Secondly, I argue that within philosophy's definition of progress, it has succeeded (progressed) through clarification of some of the big questions and through the establishment and acceptance of philosophical methodology. Thirdly, I argue that philosophy was the backbone of the sciences and as such, a large proportion of scientific progress has been reliant upon philosophy. I hope to have shown that in the way philosophical inquiry has progressed and in what it has achieved, either alone or through other mediums such as the sciences, philosophy has not only proved its worth but has served the betterment of mankind.

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