

# Does Philosophy Progress?

Agnes Callard

2020

Does philosophy progress? If we are to evaluate philosophy from the inside, which is to say, to gauge its progress as a form of learning or knowledge in its own right, we must acknowledge that philosophy, as it is currently practised, is not in the business of building consensus. In this respect, it differs from many academic disciplines. It also differs from earlier incarnations of itself: think of Plato's Academy, or Zeno and the Stoa, or German idealism or the Vienna Circle. Think of Aquinas and Augustine and all the great religious philosophers who are philosophising strictly within Christianity. Think of Maimonides' commitment to reconciling the Rabbinical teachings with Aristotle. Each of these philosophers lived inside a philosophical world of a particular character, within which progress was possible because of the practice of handing down teachings. My philosophical colleagues and I don't do that. We don't expect our students to progress within the framework we set down for them.

Though I think all of those philosophers are worth reading— more on that below— I believe the turn away from schools, teachings and doctrines is itself one of the great instances of philosophical progress. In philosophy, there is nothing “we” think. Some of us believe there are true contradictions. Some of us believe that possible worlds are real. Some of us believe that, because we can't create our characters, and our characters determine how we act, we can't ever be morally responsible for anything we do. Indeed, there is not even a consensus about who “we” are: some of us believe that “philosopher” is an academic title that belongs to those who are being, or have been, educated in a certain kind of institution; others believe that anyone who calls herself a philosopher is a philosopher. We are a very motley crew.

Instead of gauging progress by asking what “we” philosophers agree about, one should ask whether someone who wants to do philosophy is in a better position to do so today than she would've been 10 or 100 or 1000 years ago? The answer is: certainly. Here are two very different reasons to answer yes:

1. If she is a she, there would have been major obstacles to her doing it at all until fairly recently. (This is also true of many— most—“he”s.)
2. There are many great philosophical arguments and ideas available for her to engage with. She has better interlocutors to think with than people did 10 or 100 or 1000 years ago: later philosophers always have the advantage. The more we respond to one another, the better materials we hand down to our descendants for thinking with. For example, nowadays if you want to go ahead and assert, in a philosophical context, that there aren't any true contradictions or that what didn't but could've happened is unreal, or that you are sometimes morally responsible for some of the things you do, there are philosophers who have made it hard for you to do that. Graham Priest and David Lewis and Galen Strawson have, respectively, raised the cost of saying what you're reflexively inclined to say. They've made you work for it— made you think for it.

Priest, Lewis and Strawson offer the person who is willing to do this work a decrease in the entropy in their original claim, which now has to be more specific and determinate. What one had before encountering them was, one now sees, nothing more than a way of vaguely gesturing at the idea in question. Engaging with them introduces order into one's thinking as to what *exactly* is meant by claiming, e.g. that one is morally responsible. If someone is willing to do the work, she can have thoughts about this common sense, intuitive claims that are better than anyone could've had 10 or 100 or 1000 years ago. What greater gift can one possibly ask for?

But if philosophical thinking is getting better and better— more precise, truthful, articulate, deep— why should we still read Aristotle or Maimonides? The reason we need to do the history of philosophy is precisely that philosophy has *caused* massive amounts of progress: it has filtered into, shaped and organised common sense, ordinary thought. Indeed, it constitutes much of that thought. A historian of philosophy named Wolfgang Mann wrote a book called *The Discovery of Things*. He argues, just as the title of his book suggests, that Aristotle discovered things. It's a book about the distinction between subject and predicate in Aristotle's *Categories*—between *what* is and *how* it is. You may not have realised this but: someone had to come up with that! Many of the things that seem obvious to you— that human beings have basic rights, that knowledge requires justification, that modus ponens is a valid syllogistic form, that the world is filled with things—people had to come up with those ideas. And the people who came up with them were philosophers.

So you are pretty much constantly thinking thoughts that, in one way or another, you inherited from philosophers. You don't see it, because *philosophical exports are the kinds of thing that, once you internalise them, just seem like the way things are*. So the reason to read Aristotle isn't (just) that he's a great philosopher, but that he's colonised large parts of your mind. Not everyone is interested in learning about the history of philosophy. But if you are the kind of person who is not happy about having delegated some of your most fundamental thinking to other people; if you want to go back and retrace those steps to make sure you are on board; if you want to take full ownership of your own mind, well, in that case the history of philosophy might be for you.

Let me end with a reflection on something that might underlie complaints about philosophy's failure to progress. We don't demand progress in the fields of fashion or literature, because these things please us. Philosophy, by contrast, is bitter, and we want to know what good it will do us, and when, finally, it will be over. It is not pleasant to be told that maybe you don't know who you are, or how to treat your friends, or how to be happy. It's not pleasant to have it pointed out to you that maybe nothing you have ever done matters, or that, for all you know, there is nothing out there at all.

Sometimes, the demand for philosophical progress is a way of asking: "When will philosophy finally go away? When will they stop raising questions about whether my own will is free, or saying that I can't tell whether I'm leading my life or it's leading

me? When will they stop telling me that I need to read this or that book in order to be fully human? When will they leave me alone?" The answer is: never.

It is not the point of philosophy to end philosophy, to "solve" the deep questions so that people can stop thinking about them. It is the point of people to think about these questions, and the job of philosophers to rub their faces in that fact.

The first philosopher was once asked this question:

Tell me, Socrates, are we to take you as being in earnest now, or joking?  
For if you are in earnest, and these things you're saying are really true,  
won't this human life of ours be turned upside down, and won't everything  
we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?

Perhaps one way to gauge the success—thought not the progress—of philosophy is by the fact that it has, for thousands of years now, succeeded in maintaining earnestness in the face of such incredulity.

The Ted K Archive

Agnes Callard  
Does Philosophy Progress?  
2020

Philosophy by Women, Chapter 3. <[www.routledge.com/Philosophy-by-Women-22-Philosophers-Reflect-on-Philosophy-and-Its-Value/Vintiadis/p/book/9780367332631](http://www.routledge.com/Philosophy-by-Women-22-Philosophers-Reflect-on-Philosophy-and-Its-Value/Vintiadis/p/book/9780367332631)>  
ISBN 0367458411, 9780367458416

Routledge

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**