

## There is progress in science. Is there progress in philosophy, and is the field only successful if there is?

There is PROGRESS in science. What is PROGRESS in science, and does this PROGRESS apply to philosophy? Framed by Thomas Kuhn's analysis of PROGRESS, I will show that there is no PROGRESS in philosophy and defend against four counterexamples of substantial philosophical *developments*. Despite the absence of PROGRESS in philosophy, its success is measured differently. I argue that philosophy is still successful by employing Mary Midgley's and John Dewey's respective ideas of 'philosophical plumbing' and 'problems of men.'<sup>1 2</sup>

Thomas Kuhn argued that science progresses in ways unparalleled in other fields, through *revolutions*.<sup>3</sup> His project sought to find a coherent definition of PROGRESS in science, not one based on semantics but on the real practices of scientists. It was common belief that science progressed linearly through accumulation but Kuhn found this paradoxical: if PROGRESS in science is the accumulation of facts and theories to the stockpile of scientific *knowledge*, then out-of-date beliefs are either labelled myths and removed from the stockpile or called science and remain part of it. If out-of-date beliefs are labelled myths and unscientific, then unscientific myths are produced by the same methods and supported by the same reasons of scientific *knowledge*; if they are called science, then the stockpile of scientific *knowledge* includes false beliefs.<sup>4</sup> Both options are incoherent – Kuhn needed a new definition of PROGRESS.

I have restructured Kuhn's definition of PROGRESS in the following manner:

A field experiences PROGRESS if and only if:

1. There is an existing paradigm; a paradigm is an *unanimously accepted* achievement which acts as the *exemplar* model or pattern of research of the *general consensus* within a given field.<sup>5</sup> However, as the late Ian Hacking stressed, it is not just a model, a *paradigm* is the '[a]ccepted examples of... practice, including laws, theories,

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Midgley, 'Philosophical Plumbing' (1992) 33 Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements 139.

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (Philosophical Library 1946).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas S Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd edn, University of Chicago Press 1970).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* 23.

applications, experiment, and instrumentation... which constitute a... community in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

2. There is a *normal* stage allowing for *puzzle-solving*.<sup>7</sup> Steady research is characteristic of the *normal* stage; novelties are not aimed at; no new theory or phenomenon is anticipated.<sup>8</sup>
3. Anomalies give rise to challenges to the existing paradigm.<sup>9</sup>
4. The existing paradigm fails to solve these anomalies, leading to a crisis.<sup>10</sup>
5. Revolution is demanded amidst crisis.<sup>11</sup>
6. A new paradigm emerges from the revolution when it:
  - a. attracts an enduring group of adherents away from the crisis;<sup>12</sup>
  - b. provides new *puzzles* for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve;<sup>13</sup>
  - c. has a monopoly over the agreed set of beliefs of the *general consensus*;<sup>14</sup>
  - d. can solve anomalies previous theories faced and continues to be able to solve *puzzles* that were solved in the previous *paradigm*.<sup>15</sup>

PROGRESS in science is defined as this cycle of *paradigm shifts*. For example, astronomy experienced PROGRESS when Ptolemy's geocentric theories (1. & 2.) failed to solve anomalies (3.), leading to a crisis (4.) and demanding revolution (5.). Emerging out of the revolution, Copernicus and his heliocentric theory formed a new *paradigm* in astronomy (6.).

Before PROGRESS can even occur, there is a *pre-paradigm* period of speculation without a set of agreed puzzles to work on, no anomalies to appear, because there is no paradigm yet.<sup>16</sup> I argue that this is the stage philosophy as a whole is in, which explains why there is no PROGRESS.

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Hacking, 'Introductory Essay', *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition* (4th edn, University of Chicago Press 2012) 12.

<sup>7</sup> Kuhn (n 3) 24.

<sup>8</sup> Hacking (n 6) 8.

<sup>9</sup> Kuhn (n 3) 62.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* 69.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* 85.

<sup>12</sup> Hacking (n 6) 12.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> Kuhn (n 3) 90.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* 169.

<sup>16</sup> Hacking (n 6) 14.

To better understand why Kuhnian PROGRESS does not apply to philosophy, I will defend against four of the strongest counterexamples that are often used to argue for PROGRESS in philosophy: the introduction of the Socratic method, the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, political philosophy in the Enlightenment, and the linguistic turn in philosophy. *A fortiori*, all other significant *developments* in philosophy such as the ideas of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel, *et al.* should not be considered PROGRESS mainly due to the same reason: no *general consensus* is reached on which theories to accept (6.c.). Hence, no *paradigm* is created (6.).

Firstly, the two instances in Ancient Greece. One cannot successfully claim that anomalies, a necessary condition for PROGRESS were solved by the man who said, 'For I was conscious that I knew practically nothing.'<sup>17</sup> Socrates changed all of philosophy by asking new questions particularly in ethics and politics but he did not progress philosophy as he did not solve anomalies (6.d.). Plato gave his set of solutions to Socrates' problems but his student Aristotle also came up with his own. However, it is a misnomer that Aristotle defeated Plato and answered the questions better, he did not; Plato's *forms* were resilient enough to withstand Aristotle's novelties. Aristotle created a new school of thought that would continue to battle Platonism. As Kuhn would say, there is no *general consensus* on which school to accept (6.c.); neither of them created a *paradigm* (6.) and hence, PROGRESS in philosophy.

During the Enlightenment, significant *developments* were made in political philosophy. Thomas Hobbes introduced the theories of social contract and the modern state; one may question whether his theories, which form the framework of liberal democracies, created philosophical *paradigms*.<sup>18</sup> While the concepts of social contract and the state can be seen in global politics today, this does not imply that there has been PROGRESS in political philosophy. Hobbes brought forth a conceptual tool to derive political obligation from below rather than from above, proving to be useful in modern politics, but it still has failed to reach a *general consensus* (6.c.) and create a *paradigm* (6.) in philosophy.<sup>19</sup> The social contract theory is still evolving and changes according to how it best fits society. Difficulties often arise with the

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 22d.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651).

<sup>19</sup> Midgley (n 1) 143.

interests of non-voting parties and minorities which means the theory has to be altered. It is no adequate guide for constructing the entire political system but only a tool that is partial and provisional.<sup>20</sup> If we compare Hobbes' contribution to that of Sir Isaac Newton, Hobbes' nearest parallel in science, there is no clear analogy. Newton created a paradigm with his laws of motion and universal gravitation that was only superseded centuries later by Einstein's relativity. Hobbes gave a useful tool to be used, not a final decree of politics.<sup>21</sup> Political philosophy is still in the *pre-paradigm* stage and the social contract theory is not PROGRESS.

The final counterexample is the linguistic turn in philosophy, especially logical positivism. An enduring group of adherents, the Vienna Circle were attracted away from the *pre-paradigm* stage of speculation (6.a.); a set of *puzzles*, as well as entities to work on (*language*), and a common methodology were agreed upon (6.b.); a *paradigm* (6.) could have been formed where *normal* philosophy (2.) could have taken place. Thinkers such as Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap were the first to remap the boundaries of philosophy by considering what questions were genuinely meaningful, arriving at only logic or science. Later, logical positivism was imported into British philosophy by A.J. Ayer and if the movement continued, a *paradigm* might have been created. However, this circle of logical positivists failed to expand and persuade the rest of the continent. Traditional philosophers such as Donald Mackinnon rejected logical positivism outright and claimed that '[t]he elimination of metaphysics is before all else an assault on man in the interests of a method.'<sup>22</sup> Many also argued that it is self-defeating: logical positivism is neither science nor logic. Therefore, by its own principle, it is 'nonsense.' No *paradigm* is created. (6.) Logical positivism is not PROGRESS.

However, logical positivism advocated for conducting philosophy with the scientific method which was supported by ordinary language philosophers such as J.L. Austin. Austin's view 'was that philosophy could be, and should be, a co-operative pursuit... solved by the patient, minutely detailed labour of scores, even hundreds, of trained investigators, and by the

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid* 144.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Mackinnon, 'And the Son of Man That Thou Visiteth Him' (1938).

persistent, systematic co-ordination of their inquiries and their findings.<sup>23</sup> By being patient and focusing on minute details, PROGRESS could be experienced. This can be seen through Edmund Gettier's paper which undoubtedly created a *general consensus* that justified true belief is not knowledge, but it did not create a *general consensus* to the answer of 'what is knowledge?'<sup>24</sup> I will concede that Gettier created a *paradigm* (6.) and hence, PROGRESS over a minute part of epistemology. I call this incremental PROGRESS, so small that it can only be observed at a *microscopic* level; so minute that it can be neglected. I argue that at best, philosophy may experience incremental progress but there is still no PROGRESS at a *macroscopic* level, as demonstrated by how Gettier failed to help at all with answering the greater question of 'what is knowledge?' Logical positivists did not bring PROGRESS to philosophy but they did popularise the scientific method during the linguistic turn which allowed for incremental PROGRESS. However, I would neglect it and argue that there is still no PROGRESS in philosophy at a *macroscopic* level.

There is no PROGRESS in philosophy at a *macroscopic* level, but I will now show that the field's success as a whole is measured differently by using Midgley's comparison of philosophy to plumbing. Although unflattering at first glance, she argues that philosophy is not optional, it is necessary. Philosophy supplies vital ideas to allow other fields to flourish, especially aiding scientific PROGRESS.<sup>25</sup> Its 'peculiar business... is to concentrate on the gaps between all the [other fields], and to understand the relations between them.'<sup>26</sup> It is not philosophy's goal to find the 'theory of everything.' Its job is to conceptualise ideas, such as the social contract, to offer partial, provisional solutions for other fields.<sup>27</sup> Its importance is unnoticed because '[s]ystems of ideas which are working smoothly are more or less invisible.'<sup>28</sup> Philosophy has to look at the problems arising in real life, conceptualise them and *aid* other fields to solve them. This is 'applied philosophy', not merely a by-product of its pure, abstract form, but

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<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey J Warnock, 'John Langshaw Austin: A Biographical Sketch' [1963] Proceedings of the British Academy.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund L Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' (1963) 23 Analysis 121.

<sup>25</sup> Midgley (n 1) 139.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* 142.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid* 147.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid* 143.

something central to the success of European philosophy; Kant's metaphysics has always been concerned with the practical and the theoretical, the substantial and the formal.<sup>29</sup>

Dewey introduces his theory that philosophy is an attempt to make sense of life, to see how things hang together and to solve 'problems of men.' This compliments Midgley's 'philosophical plumbing.' Dewey believed that not even philosophy could prove fundamental assumptions of ethics, metaphysics, politics, etc. Philosophy can only provide justification that is context-dependent in relation to existing social practices. This is where it plays its crucial role.<sup>30</sup> Dewey calls problems such as abortion, animal rights, nuclear warfare and in the twenty-first century, climate change and artificial intelligence the 'problems of men.' It is the task of philosophy to rationalise the 'problems of men.'<sup>31</sup> Philosophy offers crucial aid in answering problems about social practices, by showing which practices ought to endure and which abandoned.<sup>32</sup> This is how philosophy *develops* and how it is successful: by controlling a vast network of thoughts and ideas – either by thinking of new ones or reconstructing previous ones and providing partial, provisional solutions to the 'problems of men.' For example, the original ideas of Karl Marx offered solutions to the 'problems of men' during the rapid social changes, urbanisation and mass politics after the Industrial Revolution. His nineteenth-century ideas would not offer solutions to twenty-first-century problems because society has changed. However, Marx's philosophy can be *developed* and *reconstructed* to address issues today. Philosophy as a whole is still successful.

In conclusion, I have shown, by applying Thomas Kuhn's definition of PROGRESS in science to philosophy that at best, there is incremental PROGRESS in philosophy at a *microscopic* level. However, this incremental PROGRESS can be neglected at a *macroscopic* level. There is no PROGRESS in philosophy as a whole. Philosophy *develops* but does not progress. The field is still successful as a whole by measuring how well philosophers, like plumbers, hang together a dynamic network of thoughts and ideas to provide vital solutions to the 'problems of men.'

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid* 150.

<sup>30</sup> Dewey (n 2) 3–20.

<sup>31</sup> Kai Nielsen, 'CAN THERE BE PROGRESS IN PHILOSOPHY?' (1987) 18 *Metaphilosophy* 1, 4.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* 5.

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