

IS THERE PROGRESS IN PHILOSOPHY? A RUSSELLIAN VIEW

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Abstract

*After referring to Bertrand Russell's view of philosophy as stated in his book *The Problems of Philosophy*, according to which the value of philosophy lies not in the achievement of any truth or certainty but in its capacity to "enlarge our thoughts", I address the issue of the nature of philosophical controversies. Based on a development and application of Russell's view, I criticize the prevailing assumption that the existence of protracted, unsettled controversies shows that there is no progress in philosophy. My criticism points to the static, undifferentiated view of philosophical controversies associated to that assumption. In order to argue for the need of a more sophisticated view, I distinguish between progressive and degenerated controversies as well as between normal and extraordinary ones. Then I propose a model of the changing phases that philosophical controversies often go through. Finally, I take as an example of application of such model the history of the main controversies that took place along twenty century philosophy of science. My conclusion is that in this case, and in some other important cases too, it may be rightly claimed that there have been progress in philosophy in the Russellian sense of an enlarged understanding of the objects under philosophical reflection.*

Close to the end of his book *The Problems of Philosophy* Bertrand Russell stated his view about the nature of philosophy in the following way: "Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves".¹

That is to say, for Russell philosophical problems are in general insoluble but this does not imply that working on them is pointless.

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On the contrary, as he had pointed out a few pages before, "philosophy is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts ..."² So, it seems clear that according to Russell the practice of philosophy represents a form of intellectual progress, namely, "thought enlargement". In what follows I intend, first, to compare this view of philosophy to other views and, secondly, to outline an alternative proposal by elaborating on Russell's implied notion of philosophical progress. The way in which I will address the issue of progress in philosophy will be an indirect one: I will connect it to the closely associated issue concerning the nature of philosophical controversies.

There are of course philosophical controversies at different levels and with quite different scopes. I am mainly referring here to controversies having a wide scope, both in terms of the number of participants involved and the importance of the philosophical problems at stake, whether epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, etc. Actually, since problems belonging to different philosophical disciplines are interlinked, controversies around those problems are interlinked too. I will come back to this point later.

A great deal of philosophical work has indeed a polemic or controversial character. Thus, it follows from the statement quoted at the beginning that for Russell philosophical controversies may be, despite their unclusiveness, worth to be pursued. Such a positive view about philosophical controversies I am attributing to Russell has been explicitly defended by Nicholas Rescher. In his book on the strife of philosophical systems,³ Rescher argues that the state of confrontation between alternative answers to major philosophical problems cannot be overcome because they imply differences in cognitive values. And value differences are according to him irreducible in the sense of not being eliminable through the use of logical argument. However, Rescher claims that the subsistence of opposite answers to philosophical problems is not something to be regretted but, on the contrary, is a most valuable trait of philosophy because it contributes to express and preserve the plurality of our basic value commitments.

But the existence of protracted, ever unsettled philosophical controversies is far from being universally regarded in such a positive way. Actually, the prevailing view has been that the absence of con-

sensus around any proposed solution of philosophical problems is an utterly negative fact, so negative that Kant dubbed it the *scandal* of philosophy. The inability or lack of willingness shown by philosophers to reach consensus looks from this perspective even less acceptable when compared to science, where disputes between competing theories are as a rule settled in a definitive way.

The ways in which philosophers who depict philosophical controversies in such negative colors react to such state of affairs may be divided into two opposite attitudes. According to the first one, which I will call *optimistic*, the failure to really solve philosophical problems and, hence, to reach consensus, is attributed not to the nature of the problems themselves but to the lack or neglect by those who have been trying to solve them so far of some key intellectual tools such as, for instance, transcendental arguments, modern logic, conceptual analysis, phenomenological *epoché*, and so on. The claim is made that as soon as such methodological instruments are put to work philosophical problems can be, to begin with, rightly stated and then solved, at least those problems which remain legitimate within the appropriate analytical frame. Accordingly, from the moment that the allegedly right approach is adopted, genuine philosophical controversies, that is controversies around legitimate problems, should eventually come to an end. Descartes, Kant, the first Wittgenstein, are classical examples of such an optimistic attitude towards philosophical problems and controversies. Modern naturalism also implies an optimistic attitude, though only as long as philosophical problems may be reformulated as scientific ones. In fact, as Kitcher⁴ pointed out, modern naturalism resembles to some extent more traditional views about the continuity between philosophy and science. However, its novelty would lie in the fact that problems which have always been considered as exclusively philosophical, in particular epistemological problems, are seen by modern naturalists as in principle open to scientific treatment

In sharp contrast to the optimistic attitude, the *pessimistic* one regards any program assuming the possibility of solving philosophical problems as basically mistaken, whatever the intellectual tools that are used for that purpose. Endless controversies around them are seen as a clear indication of their intrinsic insolubility. As in the case

of the optimistic attitude, some distinctions within the pessimistic camp may be made. For instance, although sharing a pessimistic attitude towards the solution of philosophical problems, skeptics, Wittgensteinians and neopragmatists like Rorty differ with respect to some implications of such attitude. So, according to skeptics, philosophical activity is justified as long as it is necessary to counter philosopher's claims in favor of solutions to metaphysical problems which are in fact unsolvable. Wittgenstein also considers such problems as unsolvable but for him they are not just invented by philosophers but are part of the nature of language, revealing its limits, as he says. This implies, as Cavell⁵ pointed out, that for Wittgenstein the state of peace which according to him is achieved once philosophical problems are dissolved can only be provisional since new philosophical problems and, I would add, controversies around them, will keep arising as the use of language proceeds. Rorty, in his turn, claims that the two main philosophical contenders, epistemology and skepticism, presuppose the same view of knowledge as a mirror of nature. Once we get rid of such a wrong view, philosophy loses in his view any possible justification.

I took so far two main steps. First, I introduced a division between appreciators and depreciators of philosophical controversies. Secondly, these latter were in turn divided into optimistic and pessimistic camps according to their attitude towards the possibility of solving those controversies. Now I would like to introduce a different, historical perspective. I surmise that all views mentioned so far, no matter how much they contributed to clarifying the status of philosophical controversies, failed to take duly into account the dynamic, evolving nature of such controversies. Though it may be true that there are philosophical controversies which have remained basically stagnant, that is to say, the same set of essentially fixed alternative positions have been argued for and against over and over again, this is not the only, nor perhaps the most frequent case. There are at least two other possibilities, namely, disappearance and transformation. As to the former possibility, controversies may sometimes simply die as a result of having lost their importance. They disappear from the philosophical agenda, only surviving as matters of historical interest. Of course, the disappearance of controversial issues I am

referring to is relative to the prevalent philosophical focus at a given time, it does not exclude that a few philosophers continue to be concerned with them. Think for example in the proofs of God's existence so hotly discussed by medieval and early modern philosophers. The fact that a twenty century philosopher like Alvin Plantinga has been involved in applying modal logic to provide an ontological argument for the existence of God, surely cannot be taken as evidence of a continuation of its previous appeal over contemporary philosophical thought.

Now, quite a few controversies, instead of becoming stagnant or disappearing, undergo a process of transformation. This is the case on which I should like to focus and which in my view have been overlooked in the discussion about the nature of philosophical controversies. But before dwelling on it I should state the main consequence I intend to draw, namely, that philosophical controversies which are in a process of transformation may lead, and often do lead, to progress in a Russelian sense. That is to say, progress not of course in the form of an increase in empirical knowledge but in the form of a larger understanding of the nature of the object or objects of philosophical reflection. Here I take the notion of "enlargement" introduced by Russell as implying advancement in conceptual richness and articulation so as to enable us to capture new aspects and higher levels of complexity. It may be achieved through a process of refinement of old concepts, or through the introduction of a new vocabulary or, more usually, through a combination of both. I will illustrate such process of conceptual enlargement by taking a quick look at the history of twenty century philosophy of science. But in order to do so I need first to outline the little conceptual framework I am going to use for that purpose.

To begin with, there are different possible transformations which any given controversy may undergo. Using the well-known distinction that Lakatos⁶ applied to research programmes, I will distinguish between progressive and degenerated or regressive transformations and, in relation to them, between progressive and regressive controversies or, more precisely, between progressive and regressive phases in the development of controversies. A controversy is in a progressive phase if it contributes, as mentioned, to an enlarged or increased

understanding of the objects under philosophical reflection, either through the use of available, still fertile concepts or through conceptual innovation. If, on the contrary, it leads to conceptual confusion and entanglement and prevents innovation, it is in a regressive phase.

Both progressive and regressive controversies require the existence of a common ground, or common conceptual space, on the basis of which the contending parties disagree. Disagreement is thus made possible by agreement on shared assumptions. In other words, global or complete incommensurability would preclude not only agreement but also disagreement. However, in regressive controversies the common ground between contending parties is increasingly eroded and a point may be reached where it completely disappears. This is the point in which the controversy as such also disappears. From that moment on parties may just split and ignore each other or, on the contrary, the conflict between them may go on and even escalate through the use of alternative, nonrational means. Of course, controversies are also conflicts, but conflicts in which there is, as mentioned, a common ground between contending parties.

On the other hand, the fact that in any controversy there is a common ground does not imply that the parties are aware of its existence or extent. Actually, if not all at least a major portion of the common ground may remain implicit for quite a long while. Following Kuhn,⁷ I will apply the term "normal" to any controversy having an underlying, mostly implicit and at the same time extensive shared common ground. Since in normal controversies the common ground operates as a built-in boundary between what is subject to discussion and what is not, it follows that a controversy which is in a normal phase does not produce revolutionary conceptual changes, i.e., changes affecting the whole conceptual structure. However, as Kuhn argued in connection to normal science, a normal controversy may yield, despite its limits, or even because of them, genuine gains in terms of clarification and articulation of the problems at stake, thus qualifying as progressive. But the lack of explicitness of the common ground ends up by undermining the progressive nature of a controversy up to a point in which the controversy shifts to a state of *conceptual blockage*, as I propose to call it. This is a state in which the controversy does not any longer give rise to intellectual progress. If

conceptual blockage is not overcome, and the controversy continues, it is bound to enter a stage of regressiveness in which novelties are not just absent but, as mentioned before, also actively prevented from appearing by the very nature of the discussion. But from the stage of conceptual blockage controversies may also follow an opposite course, that is, they may start a new phase of creativity. In order to describe such a course, let us assume that a protracted, uncreative debate between two parties A and B is going on, where A and B do not usually stand just for single actors but for entire communities, "schools" or traditions of thought. Usually, a positive turn is made possible by the intervention of a third party, let's call her C, who has basic differences both with A and B. In particular, C challenges substantial parts of the common ground between A and B. Such challenge, if it cannot be ignored, forces A and B to address the criticisms made by C and, as a result, the implicit common ground between them is brought to the surface and turns to be the new discussion focus. In this new situation there should be also a new common ground, now between between A, B, and C. In fact, there is at least something in common among the three, namely, the belief in the value of discussing the assumptions constituting the previous common ground. But usually there is more than this, as I will show later.

Such refocusing of the controversy on the previous common ground is in principle progressive since it enlarges its conceptual scope by allowing awareness and discussion of implicit assumptions. But this is not the only alternative course that may take place as a result of a third party's intervention. A quite different course consists in a process of transcending the previous controversial field by leaving its common ground aside. Such move is usually considered a radical shift, particularly as compared with just refocusing and deepening old controversies. However, more often than not previous controversies may for a while continue in parallel to the new ones thereby creating a mixed controversial field. The notion of controversial field completes the framework I am outlining. As mentioned at the beginning, major controversies, which are those having widespread implications and involving a significant number of participants, are as a rule interlinked. The set of these linkages is what I call "controver-

sial field". Changes of controversial fields differ from just shifting between different controversies within the same controversial field. They are indeed good indicators of the existence of revolutionary conceptual shifts.

Taking now, as promised, a quick look at the history of twenty century philosophy of science, the first point I would like to make is that its controversial fields changed according to a sequence which fits the preceding model and its order of phases. Thus it is possible to distinguish between three main phases of such sequence: first, a normal phase, from the late twenties up to the late fifties; secondly, a revolutionary phase, from the early sixties until the mid-eighties, implying, as mentioned, refocusing and deepening of the previous controversial field; thirdly, a mixed phase in which, together with the continuation of the previous phase, there is an attempt at setting aside the previous debate, in particular the vocabulary in which it was coined, and substituting it by a new one. After referring quite briefly to each of these phases, I will address the question posed before, namely, why is in my view this sequence a case of intellectual progress.

Starting with the first, normal phase, it is clear that major controversies which took part of it were very rich and had rather complex trajectories such as, for instance, the discussion on the empirical meaning of theoretical terms or the debate around induction and confirmation. One may perhaps wonder why such normal phase lasted for about thirty years without reaching before the point of conceptual blockage. Several reasons can surely be invoked in this regard, both external and internal ones. An important external reason would be in my view the forced disappearance of the positivist movement from Central Europe as a result of political persecution and its continuation in England and, particularly, in the United States. The opportunities and challenges derived from settling in a new academic and cultural milieu contributed to shaping a new wave of creativity of the positivist movement. Positivism performed, so to speak, its own conquest of the Far Owest. As to the various internal reasons which may be invoked, I would especially pick up the publication of Popper's *Logic der Forschung*. As is well-known, Popper's defense of a critical form of rationalism, his refusal to admit induction and induc-

tive logic as reliable forms of justification, and his alternative way of demarcating science from metaphysics, represented a departure from the positivistic common ground. However, as turned out especially clear after the rise of the so-called "new" philosophy of science, Popperians still shared quite a few basic commitments with positivists so that their disagreement was not wide enough to produce a real break of the normal course of the controversial field. Among those shared commitments, two of them are usually stressed. In the first place, and despite some remarks by Popper in the opposite direction, the belief in the independence of observation with respect to theory so that it is taken as a neutral basis for deciding between competing theories. Secondly, the reduction of philosophy of science to a logic of science, thereby excluding not only psychological or sociological considerations but, strictly speaking, also history of science. Beyond the fact of being a reservoir of interesting examples, history of science is not according to this outlook really relevant to an epistemological appraisal of scientific theories because such appraisal should be an entirely logical business and, as such, context-free. Although from a second or third phase vantage point this analytic focus may seem too narrow, it may be argued that it was in fact progressive because thanks of it rigorous analyses of the relations between the theoretical and empirical components of scientific theories were made possible.⁸

Now, as any textbook on the subject tells, the new philosophers of science challenged the just mentioned commitments and put under discussion assumptions that were up to then part of the common ground. Quite independently of the possible intrinsic correctness and value of their points of view, there is no doubt that such challenge had the effect of refocusing and deepening the entire controversial field. This is then in my view a case of intellectual progress. Let us look at this point more closely. Any theory of science, in order to build its analytic frame, should identify certain elements in its object as basic and describe their relationships. So, in the first, normal phase, there were two basic elements, observation and theories or, more precisely, the logical structure of theories. With the rise of the new philosophy of science, the theory-observation relationship was still kept in place as the main analytic axis but the whole field was entirely reshaped. Such reshaping was performed in two ways, namely,

by reconceptualizing the previous notions of theory and observation and by incorporating to the basic analytic frame two new elements: the temporal, historical dimension of science on the one hand and the social dimension on the other. Despite the differences, sometimes quite big, between the philosophers of science who introduced the new conceptual elements such as Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, Laudan and others, none of them simply returned to the previous phase in which those elements were ignored or played down. It is this conceptual enlargement, and its implied increased capacity to capture the complexity of the object subject to philosophical scrutiny, what I think justifies to regard the development of the historicist movement within philosophy of science as a case of intellectual progress. A related consequence of the new frame which also contributed to an enlarged perspective was the fruitful link made by philosophers of science like Kitcher,⁹ Laudan and many others with the controversy around a naturalized epistemology triggered by Quine's¹⁰ famous paper on the subject.

The third phase in the development of philosophy of science would have started as of the eighties and more fully along the nineties. The existence of such new phase seems to be contradicted by the fact that discussions and controversies belonging to the previous phase continue to take place and are far from being marginal. In fact, what in my view happens is an overlapping between second and third phase discussions. The existence of overlapping periods between different controversial fields is frequent in intellectual history and does not invalidate per se the claim that a new phase is taking shape.

The main characteristic of such a new phase would be that emphasis is not placed any longer on the theory-observation axis but on science as practice or, to use Wittgenstein's term, as a form of life. Therefore, there is a change of the main conceptual axis of both the first and the second phases. The third phase is not then a move towards refocusing and deepening any previous controversial field, while keeping its basic axis in place, but towards transcending and substituting it by a new one. Such a radical move is of course fraught with a number of consequences which would be impossible even to list here. Just to mention a couple of them, I would first recall the new view of experiment advocated, for example, by Ian Hacking,¹¹ as

not necessarily related to theory testing but playing and independent heuristic role. And, secondly, the focus placed by a large group of sociologists and anthropologists of science, especially since the publication of the polemic book by Latour and Woolgar¹² up to recent works by authors like Knorr Cetina¹³ and many others on microsocial processes in scientific communities taken as a key to the epistemological assumptions and beliefs of their members. McGuire has aptly described the basic elements of such third phase vision of science as “a complex network of skills, competences, negotiations, persuasions, and intellectual and material resources”.¹⁴

I hope that the preceding little outline of the three main phases, and their respective controversial fields, of twenty century philosophy of science is, despite its lack of detail, enough to show that, according to the definition that has been introduced above, they have been of a progressive kind. It seems clear that the work done during those phases has contributed to identify and relate to each other an increasing number of aspects or dimensions of science, from the purely theoretical and logical to the historical, sociological, and practical ones. In spite of the lack of consensus on any of those aspects, such process of enlarging the conceptual framework to deal with an object called “science” would thus qualify as as a form of intellectual progress, in the sense I derived from Russell.

To conclude, I believe that an analysis of the historical trajectories of other philosophical problems and their respective controversial fields would lead, at least in some cases, to similar results. But even on the exclusive basis of the case I have referred to above I would stand for a positive, though perhaps more qualified answer than Russell’s one, to the question chosen as heading for this paper.

Keywords

epistemic progress; controversial field; common ground; historical phases; refocusing

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Notes

- ¹ B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1964 (first published, 1912), p. 161.
- ² B. Russell, *op. cit.* p. 157.
- ³ N. Rescher, *The Strife of Systems. An Essay on the Grounds and Implications of Philosophical Diversity*, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 1985.
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- ⁶ I. Lakatos, "Falsifications and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes", I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- ⁷ Though Kuhn abandoned after his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962, the term "paradigm", he kept the distinction between normal and revolutionary science to which the term was originally associated.
- ⁸ See for example the classical article by C.G.Hempel summarizing the development of this issue "Empiricist Criteria of Cognitive Significance: Problems and Changes", C. G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*, The Free Press, New York, 1964.
- ⁹ P. Kitcher, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁰ W. V. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized", *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass, 1968.
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