

PHILOSOPHY AND THE STUDY OF ITS HISTORY

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Abstract: This article's goal is to outline one approach to providing a principled answer to the question of what is the proper relationship between philosophy and the study of philosophy's history, a question arising, for example, in the design of a curriculum for graduate students. This approach requires empirical investigation of philosophizing past and present, and thus takes philosophy as an object of study in something like the way that contemporary (naturalistic) philosophy of science takes science as an object of study. This approach also requires articulating a sense in which philosophy might make, or might have made, progress.

Keywords: history of philosophy, metaphilosophy, progress.

This article is guided by, and begins to make plausible, the idea that there can be a *naturalistic metaphilosophy*, that is, an inquiry that takes philosophy as an object of study in something like the way that contemporary (naturalistic) philosophy of science takes science as an object of study.¹ The article's more specific goal is to ventilate certain provocative speculations concerning the character of philosophy's cognitive achievement, especially over time; these speculations are loosely modeled on rather better-grounded claims in the philosophy of science about the character of science and of progress in science. But this more specific goal will be approached indirectly, through addressing in a preliminary way the following question:

PR (Proper Relationship) Question: What is the proper relationship between philosophy, on the one hand, and the study of philosophy's history, on the other?

By "philosophy" I mean the academic discipline that attempts to answer certain fundamental questions that are exemplified in philosophy textbooks and are familiar to us all. By "the study of philosophy's history" I

¹ A paradigm of naturalistic philosophy of science is Kitcher (1993), without which treatment of science the present treatment of philosophy could never have been written; the source of naturalistic philosophy of science is, of course, Kuhn (1970). I should also add that the philosophy I discuss does not include post-Kantian Continental thought or any non-Western philosophical traditions.

mean the academic discipline that systematically investigates philosophy's *past*, on the model of the study of cookery's history or the study of religion's history. And in speaking of "the proper relationship" between these two disciplines I mean, at least in the first instance, to raise very practical issues about the curriculum of graduate programs in philosophy, the range of reading of an effective philosopher, and even the proper constitution of departments of philosophy. But highly theoretical issues, and the provocation mentioned above, will arise soon enough.

1

Let me begin by laying out, without endorsement, two extreme responses to the PR question; even if these extreme responses have no advocates, they provide useful guidance in the formulation of more nuanced responses. The first response, because it assimilates philosophy to science, I shall call *scientism*.

Scientism: Philosophy should stand to the study of philosophy's history in the same relationship in which *physics* stands to the study of the history of physics. First, just as, in order to do physics—to be a physicist—you need not know the history of physics, so also, in order to do philosophy—to be a philosopher—it should not be necessary to know the history of philosophy. Second, just as the study of the history of physics is not part of the graduate curriculum in physics, so also the study of the history of philosophy should not be part of the graduate curriculum in philosophy. Finally, just as historians of physics do not usually reside in departments of physics but rather in departments of history, so also historians of philosophy should reside in departments of history, not in departments of philosophy.

In fairness to scientism, we should note that a physicist who resisted the suggestion that a historian of physics be added to the Department of Physics might quite consistently welcome such an appointment to the Department of History. Likewise, scientism does not say, and is not committed to saying, that there is anything at all *wrong* with the study of philosophy's history; its controversial stance concerns only the relationship between such study and doing—and learning to do—philosophy.

Keeping scientism in mind, let us turn now to the second extreme response to the PR question, what I shall call *historism*.²

Historism: What the PR question presumes to call "philosophy" should more accurately be called "*contemporary* philosophy." But obviously philosophy has been practiced in many eras, not just our own. Why privilege contemporary philosophy over that of earlier eras—over medieval philosophy, for example? Not, surely, because we think that we are *smarter* than the philosophers of

² I use this admittedly ugly coinage because my preferred term, "historicism," already has an established usage in philosophy to refer to the entirely different idea that there are laws of history.

earlier eras. So all eras of philosophizing, including the present era, should be treated equally. No philosophers should parochially restrict their attention to contemporary philosophy, and a philosophy department's faculty should, if possible, include specialists in *all* eras of philosophizing. Nor should contemporary philosophy be given any special treatment in the graduate curriculum. And historians of philosophy should, of course, continue to reside in departments of philosophy.

2

Now because historicism and scientism are extreme positions, they may strike readers as easy to reject and hence as uninteresting. Certainly they are extreme, but they still prompt interesting questions. Where exactly do they err? How, in principle if not in practice, could one of these extreme views be supported over its rival? And, relatedly, on what sort of principled grounds could some compromise view that avoids both extremes be defended—but without the arbitrariness that sometimes attends the moderate's instinctive tendency toward the middle ground?

Here, I suggest, is how we can get a handle on such questions: each of these two extreme positions on the proper relationship between philosophy and the study of its history can be made to seem plausible *given* a certain view concerning the *historical relationship* between contemporary philosophizing and the philosophizing of earlier eras. If so, then one way to support a position on the proper relationship between philosophy and the study of its history, whether extreme or compromising, is to defend the historical view that renders it plausible. Let us see how this suggestion works out when applied to the examples of scientism and historicism.

Scientism is rendered plausible by a historical view that I shall call *strong progressivism*.

Strong progressivism: Over the course of its history, philosophy has not just changed but *progressed*. More precisely: philosophizing in any given era is progressive relative to philosophizing in each of the eras that preceded it. Progressive in what sense? Just as a start, let us say that philosophizing in any given era is (strongly) progressive iff it embodies all that is valuable, from the standpoint of the cognitive goals of philosophy, in the philosophizing of earlier eras, while also embodying something new that is similarly valuable.

Two comments. First, since progress is a kind of improvement, any formulation of strong progressivism must eventually employ some evaluative notion. But the kind of value that is pertinent here is not moral or political value; for philosophy might corrupt the youth and yet still make progress in the intended sense. Nor can the pertinent kind of value be described merely as cognitive; for philosophy might impede our achievement of cognitive value generally, for example, by convincing us of skepticism, and yet still make (cognitive) progress in the intended

sense. My cumbersome talk of “all that is valuable from the standpoint of the cognitive goals of philosophy” is a first attempt to specify the pertinent kind of cognitive value. Second, I call this formulation of progressivism “strong” because there could be weaker kinds of philosophical progress than the one it assumes (for example, kinds in which philosophy could make progress overall, despite slipping back in certain respects), and hence correspondingly weaker formulations of progressivism.

Here is how strong progressivism motivates scientism. Strong progressivism entails that later eras of philosophizing embody all that is valuable, from the standpoint of philosophy’s cognitive goals, in the philosophizing of earlier eras. But if so, then *contemporary* philosophizing embodies all that is valuable, from the standpoint of philosophy’s cognitive goals, in the philosophizing of earlier eras. But if contemporary philosophizing really embodies *all* that is valuable, and so forth, then there is no need, from the standpoint of philosophy’s cognitive goals, for contemporary philosophers to study the history of philosophy, which contains nothing of value, from the standpoint of philosophy’s cognitive goals, that they do not already have.³ Contemporary philosophers might still study philosophy’s history out of sheer curiosity, just as contemporary chemists might study eighteenth-century chemistry; but neither contemporary practitioner could do so in the expectation of professional enlightenment. And it is presumably by analogous reasoning that physicists can justify their professional neglect of the history of physics: current physicists do not need to study, say, medieval impetus theorists, because to the extent that those theorists got anything right, their insights have been incorporated into current physics.

Historism, by contrast, is rendered plausible by a historical view I shall call *strong non-progressivism*.

Strong non-progressivism: Over the course of its history, philosophy has changed but not progressed. Philosophers in each of the traditionally distinguished eras have addressed philosophical questions in their own way, independently of the philosophizing of earlier eras—or, if not entirely independently, then dependently only in ways that fail to constitute progress. Either way, philosophizing in a given era fails to incorporate anything—or nearly anything—from the philosophizing of earlier eras that is valuable from the standpoint of philosophy’s cognitive goals; each era of philosophizing represents a more or less new beginning.

³ This conditional is open to question. For example, it might be argued that because great philosophers of the past were typically more systematic than contemporary philosophers, they should be studied by contemporary philosophers as exemplars of systematic philosophizing. Even if sound, however, this argument does not justify study of very much of the history of philosophy; a single historical figure might suffice as an exemplar of systematicity.

Here is how strong non-progressivism motivates historicism. If philosophy has made no progress from era to era, then, in the absence of any absurd assumption that contemporary philosophers are more gifted than their historical predecessors, there is no more reason to look for answers to philosophical questions in contemporary philosophizing than in the philosophizing of earlier eras. Exclusive, or even predominant, attention to philosophy of the present might reflect a permissible personal preference, but it has no principled rationale.

So scientism can be supported by appealing to a progressivist view of the history of philosophizing, while historicism can be supported by appealing to an antiprogressivist view of its history. And presumably the various imaginable compromises between scientism and historicism could likewise be supported by appealing to corresponding compromises between strong progressivism and strong non-progressivism. But strong progressivism, strong non-progressivism, and all compromises between them are obviously *empirical* theses, to be accepted or rejected on the basis of historical inquiry. So if the resolution of the dispute between scientism, historicism, and their compromising rivals is to be achieved in line with my suggestion, by examining the credentials of the various views of the history of philosophizing that sustain them, then it requires empirical inquiry. Thus can the metaphilosophical question of the proper relationship between philosophy and the study of its history be given a naturalistic treatment.

3

Unsurprisingly, I shall not undertake the sort of detailed historical inquiry that I have just recommended. But I shall offer preliminary remarks on the disagreement between strong progressivism, strong non-progressivism, and their compromising rivals. Strong non-progressivism, then, seems implausible straightaway, since it entails that each era's philosophizing was undertaken in ignorance of—or at least in uncomprehending knowledge of—the philosophizing of its predecessors, which is incredible. The writings of philosophers are rife with references or allusions to the work of earlier thinkers; and it is hard to believe that, for example, Hume learnt *nothing* from the Hellenistic skeptics to whom he refers. More generally, it is hard to believe that the philosophizing of any era can have been as hermetically self-contained as strong non-progressivism requires, at any rate if we confine our attention to Western philosophy.

Strong progressivism, on the other hand, appears to face a different but equally recalcitrant problem. It seems just false to say that philosophy has progressed, at least in any sense in which a branch of science like physics can be said to have progressed. Perhaps physics has progressed in the sense that it has accumulated more and more knowledge, so that

humanity today knows the answers to more questions about the workings of the physical world than it did in Maxwell's time, or Newton's, or Galileo's, or Aristotle's. But it would be hard to claim that humanity today knows the answers to more philosophical questions than it did even in Plato's time, as we seem not to know the answers to any philosophical questions. Perhaps physics has progressed in the sense of having generated a sequence of theories about the workings of the physical world such that each member of the sequence was at some time the object of consensus, that consensus arising from recognition at that time that the theory was more likely to be true than all the theories that had come before it. Alas, philosophy has clearly not progressed in this sense either. Textbooks in philosophy, in marked contrast with those in the natural sciences, do not expound the consensus answers to the various questions that concern the field, for there are no such consensus answers to expound. It sometimes seems that there are nearly as many accepted answers to any given philosophical question as there are philosophers to accept them; and among these accepted answers will be answers that were first suggested centuries or even millennia ago. Philosophers are no closer to achieving consensus on the nature of the good life, for example, or of knowledge, than they were in Plato's day. (Indeed, we may be further away, since we are aware of more theoretical options than Plato was, a point to which I shall return.) Strong progressivism, then, can easily seem hopeless.

4

But such a pessimistic conclusion is hard to credit. Can philosophy really have made no progress whatsoever, so that in good conscience we should either abandon the philosophical enterprise or else continue with it, but only on the explicit understanding that its goal is non-cognitive—sheer intellectual entertainment, perhaps? One possible approach to defending strong progressivism would be to suggest that philosophy has progressed not by achieving a widening consensus that certain answers to philosophical questions are *true* but by achieving a widening consensus that certain answers to philosophical questions are *false*—an approach enjoying the virtue of consistency with the observation that there is no consensus on the true answers. But the history of philosophy does not seem to have witnessed an increasing consensus on what are false answers to philosophical questions. Indeed, it is hard to think of even one philosophical view that was once taken seriously by a significant number of philosophers but that is now widely regarded as having been conclusively refuted.⁴

⁴ A possible example is the view that it is permissible to enslave some people. Such a view is now universally rejected but, notoriously, was taken very seriously by classical Greek

In what follows, I shall attempt a partial vindication of strong progressivism (and hence of scientism) by articulating a notion of cognitive progress that will permit us to claim, with some plausibility, that philosophy has indeed progressed. Before doing so, however, let me explain why I am confident that there is even such a thing as philosophical progress. My optimism is sustained by two considerations. The first begins with what will strike some readers as shocking, even offensive, observations: a well-trained graduate student in philosophy of mind today has a better understanding of the mind-body problem than Descartes did; a well-trained graduate student in philosophy of science today has a better understanding of the problem of induction than Hume did; and so on. Offensive or not, such observations can hardly be doubted: just imagine how much Descartes and Hume could *learn* about the philosophical problems I mentioned if they were resurrected today and enabled to chat with the sort of graduate students I have in mind. In fact, however, no offence should be taken, for these observations imply no disrespect at all to the great philosophers of history. My remarks say nothing about what Descartes and Hume *would* have achieved *had* they been time-transported into the present; and well-trained graduate students today enjoy the deep understanding of philosophical issues that they do *because* they stand on the shoulders of such giants as Descartes and Hume. But these observations about well-trained graduate students of today provide evidence that philosophy as a field has in some sense progressed. For how else can we explain how comparatively modest intellects of today could acquire a philosophical understanding that exceeds that of towering intellects of the past unless by supposing that the more modest minds of today have drawn upon the fruits of progress achieved within the field as a whole?⁵

The second consideration sustaining my optimism that there is such a thing as philosophical progress arises from our reaction to what good

philosophers. However, it is not clear whether the rejection of this view came about because of philosophical activity or for reasons external to philosophy; if the latter, the rejection of this view cannot be paraded as an example of cognitive progress in philosophy. Another possible example is the view that knowledge is justified true belief, a view sometimes said to have been conclusively refuted by Edmund Gettier. The trouble with this case, however, is that the view of knowledge as justified true belief does not seem ever to have been taken seriously by a significant number of philosophers.

⁵ In speaking of the more modest minds of today, I do *not* mean to suggest—what some partisans of “great books” seem sometimes to assume—that no living thinkers do or even could meet the standards of the great thinkers of the past. It is certainly not easy to predict which twentieth-century thinkers will be ranked by posterity alongside Descartes and Hume, but that some will be so ranked seems overwhelmingly likely. Not only is there no reason to think that the twentieth century was unusually short on intellectual talent; the twentieth century’s historically unprecedented widening of access to education also probably means that a higher proportion of those with exceptional intellectual gifts were able to develop them than was the case in any preceding era.

students have achieved by the time they have completed a course in philosophy. We describe such students, of course, as having made progress. Now *part* of their progress no doubt consists in their refinement of certain generally applicable intellectual skills that have no closer connection with one field of philosophy than another, and perhaps no closer connection with philosophy than with other rigorous disciplines, such as economics. But surely *most* of their progress lies in something they have accomplished with regard to, as we say, the course content. But what is that something? Obviously we do not judge students to have progressed just in case they have come to accept a certain set of substantive answers (for example, the instructor's) to the philosophical questions with which the course is concerned. Nor do we judge students to have progressed *merely* to the extent that they have come to accept *some set or other* of substantive answers to those questions. For if they have picked that set of answers at random, we do not judge them to have progressed; and conversely we *do* give them credit for philosophical agnosticism, that is, for not accepting any set of philosophical answers, so long as the agnosticism is principled. Let me suggest, then, that in our grading of philosophy students we implicitly acknowledge the existence of a kind of individual cognitive progress, in regard to philosophical content, that they have exemplified to varying extents.

Let me further suggest, as a working hypothesis, that this kind of progress is the *same* kind of progress as that exemplified by well-trained graduate students of today when compared with great philosophers of the past. It might be objected that it is not the same kind of progress, on the grounds that progress is determined relative to goals, and the student's (academic) goals may not be the same as those of the professional philosopher or the discipline of philosophy. However, I doubt that the (academic) goal of a philosophy student, qua philosophy student, can really be all that different from the goals of the discipline of philosophy itself. For the (immediate) point of studying philosophy is surely to achieve at high speed and with comparatively little effort (some of) the very same things that the discipline of philosophy has achieved over much time and with very considerable effort. More generally, education in any discipline aims (though not exclusively) to transmit to new minds the cognitive accomplishments of the discipline, whatever character those accomplishments have.

The question, then, is how progress of this kind should be elucidated. To answer, I shall proceed in two stages. First, I shall attempt a characterization of the cognitive condition, philosophically, of a single individual at a single instant and shall then try to characterize the sorts of *changes* in the philosophical cognitive condition of an individual that count as progressive. Second, I shall attempt the same two tasks in connection with the cognitive condition, philosophically, of the discipline of philosophy, thus yielding a notion of *disciplinary* philosophical pro-

gress. I shall then be able to speculate more fruitfully on the question of to what extent philosophy has progressed, and hence to what extent strong progressivism (and hence scientism) can be vindicated.

5

The cognitive condition, philosophically, of an individual at a single instant should, I suggest, be thought of as comprising two elements. The *first* element is a *complex state of understanding*, complex because directed at numerous objects of several different kinds. I must leave the nature of the understanding mentioned here unanalyzed, except to say that understanding any object must include understanding its relations to other objects that you understand. But I can say more about the different *objects* of understanding. At least eight kinds can be distinguished. There are *questions* that frame philosophical issues; *philosophical theories* that purport to answer philosophical questions; *arguments* that can be offered for or against a philosophical theory; *objections* to arguments (and replies to objections, further objections to replies, and so forth); *distinctions* between phenomena that are prone to be confused; *implications* from one philosophical claim to a second, implications that need not constitute an argument for the second claim and might even be used as part of an argument against it; *concrete examples*, that is, descriptions of specific circumstances, that are philosophically significant for some reason, perhaps because they illustrate a philosophical theory or are notoriously hard to treat adequately; *argument strategies*, patterns of argumentation more abstract than the concrete arguments already noted but less abstract than the argument forms familiar from logic, for example, showing that an argument is defective because it proves too much or arguing that an account of something's *nature* is defective because the account fails to mesh with an adequate account of how *knowledge* of the thing might be achieved.

The *second* element making up the cognitive condition, philosophically, of an individual at a single instant is a set of *cognitive attitudes toward* (perhaps degrees of belief in, or levels of commitment to) the eight objects of understanding mentioned above. Examples of such attitudes toward objects of understanding are the favoring of certain philosophical theories, the endorsement of certain arguments, the acceptance of certain distinctions, and the commitment to certain argument strategies. Now understanding something plainly does not entail taking a favorable attitude toward it; so the objects of a philosopher's understanding need not, and typically will not, be the same as the objects of the philosopher's favorable attitudes. Indeed, there may be objects of understanding with regard to which the philosopher suspends judgment, and toward which, therefore, he or she has neither favorable nor unfavorable attitudes.

Consider an individual whose philosophical cognitive condition, as just now elucidated, we characterize at an earlier and then at a later time. Given that this individual's philosophical condition has changed over time, what would constitute the individual's having progressed philosophically? Since this condition involves two elements, a different answer to this question may be both possible and appropriate with regard to each element. Consider the second element of an individual's philosophical condition, that is, his or her cognitive attitudes toward the objects of understanding. In principle, at least, we could set up criteria for judging which changes in these attitudes were progressive; for example, we might claim that coming to know the true answers to more and more philosophical questions was progressive. In practice, however, the application of such criteria to actual cases would be just as controversial as first-order philosophical views; for example, arguing oneself into dualism might be counted as progressive by a dualist but regressive by a materialist. So I shall not explore individual philosophical progress of this kind any further, since widespread agreement on whether progress of this kind has been achieved is unlikely to be reached.

Let me turn instead to the first element of an individual's philosophical cognitive condition—understanding—and ask what sort of changes in *this* element of an individual's philosophical condition would constitute progress. Intuitively, there is progress in understanding if, over time, some understanding of the issues is gained while none is lost. It is therefore tempting to propose the following account of a *sufficient* condition for individual progress in understanding:

An *individual* has enjoyed progress in understanding from t_1 to t_2 if (1) the individual at t_2 still understands every object (argument, objection, distinction, and so forth) that he or she understood at t_1 and (2) the individual at t_2 understands at least one object that he or she did not understand at t_1 .

Unfortunately, this proposal cannot be quite right, since it entails that an individual who loses no understanding but comes to understand an obviously ludicrous argument for some familiar philosophical thesis (for example, “Dogs bark; therefore, mind-body dualism is true”) has progressed, even though intuitively the individual has no better grasp of the mind-body problem than before. On the other hand, one cannot insist that new objects of understanding be correct (for example, that new arguments be sound, new theories true, new distinctions accurate, and so on); for coming to understand a series of interesting new answers to a philosophical question is surely progressive, even though, because they are incompatible with one another, at least one of them must be false, and they may all be false. What we need to appeal to, I suggest, is some notion of *objective plausibility* for objects of understanding. Although I have no good account of it to offer, the intuitive idea is that an object of understanding may in fact be incorrect (for example, a new argument

may in fact be very subtly fallacious) but still meet some standard of minimal adequacy, and that this standard of minimal adequacy is not purely subjective, so that an individual's merely *finding* an object plausible cannot make it so. The proposed account of a sufficient condition for individual progress in understanding can therefore be emended to yield this:

An *individual* has enjoyed progress in understanding from t_1 to t_2 if (1) the individual at t_2 still understands every objectively plausible object (argument, objection, distinction, and so forth) that he or she understood at t_1 and (2) the individual at t_2 understands at least one objectively plausible object that he or she did not understand at t_1 .⁶

Stating a *necessary* condition for individual progress in understanding would, of course, be very much harder, because it would have to address cases where some understanding is gained while some is also lost; fortunately, however, a sufficient condition will meet our present needs.

The sufficient condition for individual philosophical progress in understanding proposed above is capable of explaining and vindicating our judgments as instructors of philosophy that, in some cases at least, students have progressed over the course of a semester. For such students seem clearly to have satisfied this condition, something quite independent of the substantive philosophical conclusions, if any, that they have reached. The sufficient condition proposed above is also capable, with a little adjustment, of explaining and vindicating such observations as that well-trained graduates student in the philosophy of mind today exceed Descartes in their grasp of the mind-body problem. For the philosophical condition of such students is clearly progressive in understanding (with regard to the mind-body problem) relative to the philosophical condition of Descartes.

So much for individual philosophical progress. What about disciplinary philosophical progress, that is, progress in the whole *field* of philosophy? Modeling our procedure on the development of a partial account of individual progress, let us begin with an account of the philosophical cognitive condition at a single instant of the discipline as a whole. This condition, I suggest, can also be thought of as comprising two elements. The *first* element is the objects of understanding (of the eight kinds distinguished above) *available for understanding* by members of the philosophical community at the time in question. (So a new argument whose discoverer keeps it entirely to himself or herself is not part of the philosophical cognitive condition of the discipline as a whole.) Such objects become available for understanding by being made public, but publication can occur in informal as well as formal ways, for example,

⁶ Perhaps objective plausibility in the case of individual progress should be understood as minimal plausibility relative to the rest of an individual's cognitive set.

by word of mouth as well as through published writings. The *second* element of the philosophical cognitive condition, at a single instant, of philosophy as a discipline comprises the *cognitive attitudes* of the members of the philosophical community toward the various objects of understanding that are available for understanding in the community.

Suppose, then, that in this way we characterize the philosophical cognitive condition of the discipline as a whole at an earlier and then at a later time. Given that the discipline's philosophical condition has changed over time, what would constitute its having made philosophical progress? Let us ignore questions about what would constitute progress with regard to the second element of this condition, since, as already noted, we are unlikely to find actual disciplinary progress with regard to cognitive attitudes. So what sort of changes in the first element of the discipline's philosophical condition would constitute progress? An intuitive sufficient condition for disciplinary progress in regard to understanding suggests itself (and, as in the case of individual progress, a merely sufficient condition will have to do):

The *discipline of philosophy* has enjoyed progress in understanding from t_1 to t_2 if (1) every objectively plausible object available for understanding at t_1 is still available for understanding at t_2 and (2) some objectively plausible object is available for understanding at t_2 that was not available for understanding at t_1 .⁷

An objectively plausible object (for example, a question, argument, or objection) that was not available earlier presumably *becomes* available for understanding because some individual discovers it and then makes it available; and that, presumably, is one important way in which an individual can contribute to philosophical progress.

6

Let us now return to the thesis of strong progressivism:

Over the course of its history, philosophy has progressed in the sense that philosophizing in any given era embodies all that is valuable (at least as regards the cognitive goals of philosophy) in the philosophizing of earlier eras, while also embodying something new that is similarly valuable.

Strong progressivism can obviously be understood in the light of my proposed sufficient condition for disciplinary philosophical progress in understanding. Let us call the result *strong progressivism**.

Strong progressivism*: Over the course of its history, philosophy has progressed at least in the sense that (1) every objectively plausible object available for understanding in the philosophizing of each earlier era is available for

⁷ Perhaps objective plausibility in the case of disciplinary progress should be understood as some kind of intersubjective plausibility.

understanding in the philosophizing of each later era and (2) some objectively plausible object is available for understanding in each later era that was not available for understanding in some earlier era.

Strong progressivism* supports scientism, of course, just as strong progressivism did. The question is whether it is true.

Before I consider the empirical plausibility of strong progressivism*, let me briefly address a conceptual objection to it. Strong progressivism* represents philosophical progress as the accumulation over time of objectively plausible philosophical questions, arguments, objections, and so forth. And yet it is natural to connect progress in an activity with the achievement of the activity's *goal*, and the goal of philosophy is *truth*, in the sense of true answers to certain kinds of questions. The concern, then, is that strong progressivism* seems not to honor this connection between philosophical progress and truth. However, I think that strong progressivism* can honor this connection—indirectly. The following picture suggests itself. Philosophy indeed has as its primary goal to discover true answers to philosophical questions; and if its progress is assessed by reference to this primary goal, it must presumably be judged non-progressive, as its critics in science and elsewhere maintain.⁸ But since this primary goal itself is so difficult to achieve, and since such activities as refining questions, devising possible answers to them, and assembling considerations for and against these possible answers are *necessary preliminaries* to its accomplishment, it is reasonable to assess philosophy's progress by reference to the preliminaries instead—which is what strong progressivism* in effect does.

But how plausible is strong progressivism* empirically? At least it does not require for its truth that philosophy should have generated consensus on the answers to an ever-widening range of philosophical questions. On the contrary, because the achievement of disciplinary progress by meeting the sufficient condition stated above *increases* the number of theoretical options available for acceptance, it might actually make the reaching of consensus *less* likely; the striking absence of consensus on the answers to questions in contemporary philosophy might even be interpreted as a sign of philosophy's intellectual health. Certainly the absence of consensus does not count against strong progressivism*.

On the other hand, evidence in favor of strong progressivism* is provided by the fact that the objects of understanding available in contemporary philosophy include numerous items that can be traced back to the great philosophers who contributed them to the field in previous eras, including the earliest eras. So later eras of philosophizing have clearly incorporated many contributions to the field made by the practitioners of earlier eras. And the fact that *many* contributions made

⁸ Only “presumably,” because the successes of sciences, like psychology, that were spawned by philosophy should perhaps count also as successes for philosophy.

by philosophers of earlier eras are included among the objects made available for understanding in contemporary philosophizing provides some *prima facie* inductive reason for thinking that *all* such contributions are so included—which is what strong progressivism* requires. Yet such a conclusion—and hence strong progressivism*—is hard to believe. For if *all* the contributions made by philosophers of the past are included among the objects made available for understanding in contemporary philosophizing, then the *mechanisms of transmission* (whatever they are) that were responsible for transmitting these contributions across the generations must have operated *perfectly*. But that is most unlikely, given that these mechanisms involve inevitably fallible human institutions.

So, given that strong progressivism* is not strictly true, how closely does it approximate the truth? A systematic answer to this question would require determining *how* reliable the mechanisms of transmission have in fact been. Let me end this section with two comments on this question of reliability. The first is that determining the reliability of the mechanisms of transmission would seem to require empirical—presumably sociological—investigation. For the mechanisms of transmission, whatever their precise character, are sure to be features of the social institutions of philosophizing—features of, for example, canon formation in philosophy, the education of young philosophers, past and present, and the conventions governing the inclusion of “histories of the problem” in papers and books. One indirect form such sociological inquiry might take would be to measure the reliability of mechanisms of transmission by trying to estimate how often objects become available for understanding because of the discovery, arising from research into the *history* of philosophy, of previously neglected ideas of past philosophers. To my knowledge, however, such an estimate has never yet been attempted, even though the importance to philosophy of studying the history of philosophy is often said to lie precisely in its recovery of neglected or forgotten philosophical moves that will enrich current debates.⁹

My second comment is a response to an objection. It is plausible to suppose that sociological inquiry into the reliability of the mechanisms of transmission that have operated in recent philosophy would reveal that one of the most important such mechanisms was graduate courses in the history of philosophy. But if that is so, then doesn't scientism actually *require* that philosophy students take courses in the history of philosophy? I shall argue that it does not, for we must distinguish between two kinds of course in the history of philosophy. Courses of the first kind, which we may call *purist*, aim at such goals as understanding the system of

⁹ Jonathan Barnes, who knows more than most about the history of philosophy, has expressed skepticism that such recoveries are at all common (see Barnes 1995, xvi–xvii). I myself, of course, would not venture an opinion on the matter before learning the results of the sort of sociological inquiry that I have suggested.

thought of a particular philosopher, exploring the historical roots from which it arose, examining its reception history, noting its effects on the wider culture of the time, and tracing its *Nachleben*. To pursue such goals, the ideal student would need to possess such attributes as knowledge of the original language of the pertinent texts, expertise in textual criticism, familiarity with contemporaneous texts, including non-philosophical ones, and general knowledge of the contemporaneous culture, in addition, of course, to considerable philosophical acumen and a good knowledge of contemporary philosophy.¹⁰ Courses of the second kind, however, which we may call *impure*, are best viewed—and properly appreciated, for I think there is nothing wrong with them—not as components in the training of students of the history of philosophy but rather as systematic attempts to expose students of philosophy to those objects available for understanding in contemporary philosophizing that were contributed by the historical figure or figures under discussion; and so such courses make do with translations of original texts, place only a modest emphasis on exegetical accuracy, show little or no interest in the broader historical context of a philosopher's ideas, and, most important, are extremely selective in the texts to which students are exposed, typically confining themselves to the “greatest hits” of the author(s) concerned.¹¹ However, it is only *impure* courses in the history of philosophy, not purist ones, that are necessary for the reliable transmission of philosophical achievements from earlier to later generations. For reflection on the features of purist courses in the history of philosophy by which they differ from their impure counterparts—see the goals and methods listed above—shows that purist courses would not make better vehicles than impure courses for the reliable transmission of philosophical achievements from earlier to later generations. And scientism has no quarrel with impure courses in the history of philosophy.

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My aim in this article has been not to answer but merely to raise some fascinating questions about the cognitive achievement of philosophy and,

¹⁰ The exact qualifications for an ideal student of the history of philosophy do not affect the main contentions of this article.

¹¹ A dramatic thought experiment will illustrate what I have in mind. Suppose that historical scholarship revealed that in fact Hume was advancing *none* of the positions and arguments on the strength of which he is today so highly esteemed as a philosopher, and that the positions and arguments that he *was* advancing turned out to be essentially valueless. Because of the enormous influence and philosophical interest of what turned out to be *misreadings* of Hume, these misreadings would *still* be taught, and rightly so, in impure courses in the history of philosophy, though obviously their status as (fruitful) misreadings would need to be made quite clear. I am very sympathetic temperamentally to purist history of philosophy, but criticisms leveled by purist historians against the impure kind seem to me to overlook the very different aims of impure history.

by throwing out some speculative answers, to stimulate further consideration of them. And yet it seems indecent for the article to end without some conclusion, albeit highly tentative, concerning my original question, the proper relationship between philosophy and the study of its history. But I fear it must. For if my earlier discussion is correct, then the original question turns, at least in part, on whether strong progressivism* is true, but this further question is an empirical one that only a social scientist would be qualified to investigate.

Suppose, however, that social science more or less vindicated strong progressivism*, hence scientism, hence the idea that it is not necessary for a philosopher to have trained in, or to be knowledgeable about, purist history of philosophy. Scientism, I want to suggest, would *still* have to be tempered with the recognition that philosophy can and should avail itself of the division of cognitive labor. Even if philosophers do not need to *be* purist historians of philosophy, philosophers would be wise to create and maintain institutionalized connections with those who are; for example, prudent philosophers would keep an eye on developments in purist history of philosophy, and take the trouble to share developments in contemporary philosophy with purist historians. They would be prudent to do so because they would thereby provide insurance against two contingencies. The first is the near certainty that the mechanisms of transmission have operated less than perfectly, with the result that important contributions from philosophy's past have failed to become available for understanding by the present generation. The second contingency is the possibility that later developments in philosophy should alter the *significance* of some earlier idea, so that although in the era in which it was originated it was justly neglected, and hence not made available for understanding by succeeding generations, it should be made so now. Given either contingency, effective communication between philosophers and purist historians of philosophy could enable imperfections in the results of the mechanisms of transmission to be removed.¹²

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¹² An ancestor of this article was delivered as a presidential address at the 2002 annual meeting of the Central States Philosophical Association. I am grateful for both the forbearance and the critical reactions of the audience on that occasion. Thanks are also due to Peter Markie and to Peter Vallentyne for their very helpful written comments.

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