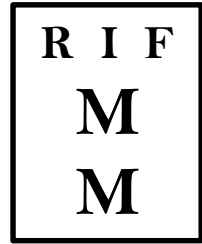


Is it Possible to Advances Philosophy?

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Recepción: 05.12.2013 Aceptado: 20.01.2014

«There is a widespread assumption amongst non-philosophers, which is shared by a good many practising philosophers too, that ‘progress’ is never really made in philosophy, and above all in metaphysics. In this respect, philosophy is often compared, for the most part unfavourably, with the empirical sciences, and especially the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry and biology. Sometimes, philosophy is defended on the grounds that to deplore the lack of ‘progress’ in it is to misconceive its central aim, which is to challenge and criticize received ideas and assumptions rather than to advance positive theses. But this defence itself is liable to be attacked by the practitioners of other disciplines as unwarranted special pleading on the part of philosophers, whose comparative lack of expertise in other disciplines, it will be said, ill-equips them to play the role of all-purpose intellectual critic. It is sometimes even urged that philosophy is now ‘dead’, the relic of a pre-scientific age whose useful functions, such as they were, have been taken over at last by genuine sciences. What were once ‘philosophical’ questions have now been transmuted, allegedly, into questions for more specialized modes of scientific inquiry, with their own distinctive methodological principles and theoretical foundations.

This dismissive view of philosophy is at once shallow and pernicious. It is true that philosophy is not, properly speaking, an empirical science, but there are other disciplines of a non-empirical character in which progress most certainly can be and has been made, such as mathematics and logic. So there is no reason, in principle, why progress should not be made in philosophy. However, it must be acknowledged that even professional philosophers are in much less agreement amongst themselves as to the nature of their discipline and the proper methods of practising it than are mathematicians and logicians. There is more disagreement about fundamentals in philosophy than in any other area of human thought. But this should not surprise us, since philosophy is precisely concerned with the most fundamental questions that can arise for the human intellect» (Lowe, 2006).

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E.J. Lowe's objective is here twofold: he highlights the reasons of those who think that progress is never made in philosophy, and he shows how progress in philosophy is in principle possible.

The first objective is fulfilled by identifying three critiques to of the possibility of progress in philosophy. The first critique is based on the assumption that only empirical sciences advance. In this way, the lack of progress in philosophy is direct consequence of its non-empirical nature. The second critique considers philosophy as the discipline that criticizes the various hypotheses and ideas derived from the different scientific disciplines. Thus, it is possible to identify the lack of progress in philosophy in two different ways: pointing out the fact that philosophers do not propose positive thesis and that they do not have the competence to operate as multidisciplinary critics. Finally, the third considers philosophy as a 'dead' discipline, whose questions and useful features are changed, also from a methodological point of view, from philosophical to scientific. Therefore, according to this critique, progress concerns nowadays only sciences.

The second objective is achieved through the recognition of the non-empirical nature of philosophy. This non-empirical nature also characterises disciplines such as mathematics and logic, but does not prevent, *de facto*, progress in these disciplines. We would never admit that no progress has (ever) been made in mathematics and logic despite their non-empirical nature. Therefore, Lowe concludes, the mere fact that philosophy has a non-empirical nature does not suffice for implying that no progress is possible in philosophy.

I will not dwell further on Lowe's thesis. Rather, I will try to answer the same question he deals with: is progress possible in philosophy? And to be more accurate: can scientific progress contribute to philosophical progress? In my view, progress in philosophy is both possible and factual. But what is it about? And, what is the relationship between philosophical and scientific progress?

In the following paragraphs I shall focus on the contribution that scientific progress can give to philosophical reflection, trying to figure out if this contribution can also be an opportunity for progress in philosophy. Such a reflection will be essentially introductory, since I shall not exhaust the reach of the debate in question, but only indicate a possible strategy that allows us to show how scientific progress may contribute to philosophical progress. I do not want to argue neither that progress in philosophy can be related solely to its relationships to scientific disciplines, nor that the relationship between science and philosophy is unilateral.

Let's start from scientific progress. It may perhaps surprise how, on the one hand, there can be not particular difficulties in the use of the term 'progress' in science¹, while, on the other hand, a definition of 'progress' may appear somewhat problematic. Indeed, we can have no

¹ However, some philosophers criticize the effectiveness of scientific progress. See for example: Niiniluoto, 2011.

difficulty in pointing out Newtonian physics as a step forward compared to Aristotelian physics, or current physics as a progress compared to the nineteenth-century physics. The same consideration can be extended, for example, to medicine. It can seem pretty obvious that current medicine is more advanced compared to eighteenth-century medicine, and that this, in turn, represents a progress compared to Hippocrates's medicine. But how is it possible to define 'scientific progress'? Looking in the handbooks of philosophy of science, the debate on this topic is controversial. Without claiming to be exhaustive, we can identify in the contemporary debate at least four main different positions that define scientific progress. The first considers progress as a cumulative development of knowledge. The second sees it as an approach to truth, through a process of selection of knowledge. The third contemplates progress in terms of validity of theories. Finally, the fourth subordinates scientific progress to a complex network of cultural factors that define progress in this way.

Now, as Lowe does, let's do not call into question the effectiveness of scientific progress, and let's assume that there is progress in science. Therefore, can this scientific progress contribute to progress in philosophy?

Let's take the example of physics. As we said, for the sake of argument we can have no difficulty in considering current physics as a progress compared with nineteenth-century physics. Part of this progress is made, among others, by theories such as relativity or quantum mechanics. These theories have a significant philosophical impact, especially for themes such as time, and identity and identifiability of objects. The same is true, for example, for disciplines as cognitive science or neuroscience. We easily admit the progress of these disciplines and that such disciplines strongly contribute to the philosophical debate on issues such as inter-subjectivity, perception and relations between action and perception, and so as well as they contribute to the development of new areas of philosophical research.

This connection between the results of scientific research and philosophical reflection does not mean that scientific discoveries have to function as referees for philosophical research. Admitting this would annul philosophical research, leaving it at the mercy of the discoveries of sciences. It just means that the results of scientific research can contribute to the development of philosophical reflection, providing new empirical evidence and new theories. At the same time, however, given these scientific contributions, philosophical reflection can hardly choose to ignore them, especially when science and philosophy deal with mutual topics. Unlikely, for example, we will accept a philosophical thesis about 'time' that ignores or contradicts the theory of relativity, although this does not mean accepting the relativity in an uncritical sense.

In this way, in my view, scientific progress contributes to philosophical debate giving new impulses to this debate through new theories and empirical evidence that philosophy cannot ignore, and which may lead, *de facto*, also to progress in the philosophical debate. It is true that, so conceived, progress in philosophy would be indirect compared to scientific progress

– progress indeed seems to be external to philosophical reflection. Perhaps the difference between scientific and philosophical progress can be lead back to the diversity of their own methods of investigation. But even indirect progress seems sufficient to show that progress in philosophy is not only possible, but also actual².

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² Italian version: Tambassi, 2011.