

John Locke Institute 2018 Essay Competition (Philosophy)

Question 1: On 17 December 1903 Orville and Wilbur Wright's plane was airborne for twelve seconds, covering a distance of 36.5 metres. Just seven hundred and eighty-seven months later, Neil Armstrong flew ten million times as far to land on the moon. Yet we continue to argue about what Aristotle said twenty-four centuries ago.

What kind of progress is possible in philosophy? Is it worth it?

**Ashwin Pillai
Grade 12
Bellarmine College Preparatory**

Introduction: Philosophy and Natural Science

Considering the question of progress in philosophy, the most instinctive comparison one considers is with the natural sciences. The natural sciences have progressed with extreme celerity within the past centuries, and this progression is immediately obvious as it manifests itself in very physical ways. There is, in fact, progress within philosophy, but the manifestation of this progress is never obvious without introspection or in-depth examination. Within science, one person's empirical discovery or observation can lead to physical benefits to many people; this is why progression within science catches on quickly. On the other hand, within philosophy, one person's ideas and thoughts must influence a significant portion of the population before many will adopt a new mindset. As such, the paradigm shifts that come with philosophical progress take much longer.

The Natural Sciences: Speed in Sequence

The natural sciences historically descended from philosophical studies. In fact, the endeavor of natural philosophy was what people originally called the study of the physical world. Science, as a pursuit, eventually split from philosophy, but it still inherits and assumes important metaphysical concepts. Within modern science, one finds the assumption that human beings can trust our senses to accurately represent the external world. Moreover, the tools we build can accurately translate invisible aspects of the world into something at least comprehensible for human beings. These are incredibly large assumptions that have years of sophisticated and rigorous philosophical thought behind them.

It is largely due to this set of assumptions, which focuses the study of science near solely around the level of empirical observation, which allows science to advance so quickly. The physical world remains a relatively stable foundation upon which scientists can continually and

sequentially build. The physical aspects of atoms and elements have not changed for thousands of years although our knowledge of those aspects has been refined through centuries of focused observation. This is why it took merely seven hundred and eighty-seven months from the first plane flight to the landing of a man on Earth's moon. However, this is also the reason it took 3 million years from the stone age to the transition into the bronze age. The study which the natural sciences concern themselves with is a series of empirical observations that build upon each other, so progress seems to come at a blistering rate now that it has been building for millions of years.

Philosophy: Progress by Circumstance

When presented with the comparison between philosophy and the sciences, the natural question to ask is whether philosophy progresses in the same way as science does. The answer is a bit complicated. Atoms and elements do not change over time, but human perception of value certainly does. Due to this, philosophy derives its utility from its application to our changing circumstances. Within philosophy, progress occurs in two ways:

1. Sequential Progress – where philosophers take ideas pioneered by people previously and expand upon them. This mirrors the manner in which the natural sciences progress.

2. Circumstantial Progress – where dominant philosophical ideas are heavily influenced and changed by the major events of their time.

Aristotle, who lived thousands of years ago, (along with the pre-Socratic Ionians and other ancient Greek) provided the basis for much of the metaphysics that underlies modern thought and the fundamental tenets of democratic government. Philosophers that followed built upon those ideas and branched out in several different directions – this is sequential progress. Many prominent ideas within ethics and political philosophy find their origin in the foundation provided by the ancient Greeks.

Additionally, Aristotle and the rest of the ancient Greeks lived with very different conceptions of value than those that dominate modern society, and people like Aristotle thought differently than people like the absurdist Albert Camus because of the different circumstances they faced. This difference in thinking prompted by changing circumstances is essential for humankind to move forward and properly adapt to our ever-changing world.

In fact, it is no coincidence that the philosophy of the enlightenment era progressed the way it did. Empiricism, the view that the only true knowledge is that which is derived from experience and the senses, began to grow more popular at this time with the advent of the scientific revolution. The scientific revolution also fundamentally changed the traditional metaphysical notions of the time which included an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent god. Many empiricist metaphysical notions introduced during that time (such as the concept of absolute space) also correspond with Newton's scientific theories¹. The longstanding battle in analytic philosophy between rationalists such as Leibniz and the empiricists such as Newton often falls along these lines. This philosophical dispute was important because it set the foundation for modern science.

Even before that, a similar effect can be seen with political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. During his time, he witnessed multiple bloody and difficult civil wars. As a result, his political philosophy involves a heavy emphasis on an overwhelmingly and absolutely powerful government. In his view, a sovereign authority must be so powerful that it can settle any disagreement and control the basis of value and meaning for each and every one of its citizens². For many people now, this might seem to be an extreme position for a government to assume,

¹ Janiak, Andrew: "Newton's Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/newton-philosophy/>

² Hobbes, Thomas: *Leviathan*

but for someone who witnessed multiple violent revolutions depose governments that were at least relatively peaceful, an all-powerful Leviathan appeared to be a better option. Hobbes's striking political argument influenced political philosophy and international relations theory for years afterward in a clear case of changing circumstances leading to philosophical progress.

After the first World War, the horrors witnessed by much of Europe greatly changed conceptions of value, and this was seen within the continental philosophy of the time. French thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus write about existentialism and notions of the absurd when confronted with these unique catastrophes. In previous times, war had been painted as glorious and honorable, but the circumstances surrounding this conflict shocked many civilians who were seeing a new, more terrible side to conflict. This forced many to re-evaluate and deeply question what people traditionally valued. Philosophers like Camus responded to this difficult situation with the idea that human beings can affirm value in their lives by affirming the individual choices they decide to take³, and this idea gave comfort to many who faced distress due to their frightening circumstances. Within literature, this represents itself through literature of the 'Lost Generation,' and within philosophy, this represents itself through the existentialist philosophers who argue that people must create their own value within life. These circumstances led existentialist philosophers to bring forth some of the most influential ideas in the past centuries, changing the way people think and interact with the world around them.

Outside of major historical circumstances, philosophical subjects such as morality also progress with circumstance. Looking at the past couple centuries – a long time for a human being, but a short time for a civilization – we find many things which used to be considered morally permissible and are now deemed repugnant. Institutional structures such as caste

³ Camus, Albert: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

systems, racism, and slavery were once not only tolerated but endorsed by multiple groups in several countries. Progress within philosophy in the context of ethics occurs slowly; it often takes generations for major change. However, given time and changing circumstances, morality progresses.

Since the circumstances surrounding philosophers cause their arguments to change as notions of value evolve, some might argue that this makes progress within philosophy worthless. After all, if philosophy is simply a product of the environment, it seems that progress cannot be determined to advance toward some sort of utile end goal. The problem with this way of thinking is that it discounts the true source of value in philosophy. An ultimate end goal matters not in the context of value because human conceptions of value have no necessary end point either. As I wrote near the beginning of this section, philosophy derives its utility from its application to our ever-changing world, and this circumstantial progress is what makes philosophy consistently relevant.

Philosophical Progress: A Worthwhile Goal

Philosophical progress has always been an important part of human development, but recent advances in human technology make it incredibly relevant. Within the next decades, the very structure of our lives is set to change drastically. The potential for increased automation on an unprecedented scale looms around the corner, and artificial intelligence is increasingly making human labor obsolete. It seems that within this century, humanity may come to a point where work is no longer a necessity or even an option for many. The circumstances surrounding our lives are on the verge of being completely revolutionized, and with that kind of change comes a major shift in value.

With the potential for change in the structure of human life comes a great deal of important questions that must be answered. Questions such as whether work is something to be valued within human society, whether forcing artificially intelligent machines to work for humans would be akin to slavery, whether humans can have outstanding moral obligations to robots, etc. must be sufficiently answered if we want to effectively deal with the unprecedented changes headed our way.

Is philosophical progress possible? Well, it does not happen in the immediately obvious way that natural science progresses. Progress in philosophy happens both in a sequence of ideas and in relation to the circumstances surrounding human life. This is what makes philosophical analysis so unique within every stage of human development and society. Is this progress worth it? Absolutely. The analysis of value as the world changes around us is what allows humankind to keep with its blistering progress in other fields. The philosophical questions that confront us today are perhaps even more pressing and difficult than those that confronted humankind centuries ago, and it is for this reason that philosophical progress is imperative for the future flourishing of humanity.

(Word Count; not including title page, headers, footers, footnotes, or this comment: 1669)