# DOES CURRENT SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY DEVELOP PROGRESSIVELY?

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**Abstract:** This article begins with clarification of the notion of progress. The author believes that it is possible to consider progress objectively, if by progress we understand a positive change in the effectiveness of something. He mentions two types of progress: progress of improvement and progress of augmentation. He then distinguishes evaluative from reflective philosophy. Evaluative philosophy gives answers to the second and third of Kant's famous three questions; reflective philosophy answers the first, dealing with the limits of human knowledge. Progress in evaluative philosophy takes the form of augmentation. But in reflective philosophy it could take the form of improvement. The author believes, however, that it is not an easy task to improve contemporary social philosophy. Three main obstacles are: the "anthropological turn" in philosophy, the challenge of postmodernism, and the turning of social philosophy into a kind of useful knowledge.

Keywords: progress, evaluative philosophy, reflective philosophy, social philosophy, Kantian questions, postmodernism.

Does current social philosophy develop progressively? The answer depends on what we call progress and what we call philosophy.

First, about progress. Many contemporary scientists support the so-called theory of social change. This theory claims that objectively thinking researchers can and must indicate and explain the facts of social changes. But they must not evaluate these changes in terms such as "better-worse" and "progressive-regressive" and the like. These evaluations are believed always to be subjective, to depend on the evaluator's value preferences. And so it is widely believed that they should be avoided by science. This conception, of course, is based on Max Weber's ideas. According to Weber, science must be freed from any value proposition that cannot be verified as true or false.

I do not share this opinion completely; I share only half of it. As a matter of fact, evaluations are different. And there are two types of evaluative proposition.

The first type are "value propositions," which are related to the motivational preferences of persons who freely choose what is better for them: dying with dignity or living without it; the throes of creation or halcyon days with their families; longevity or a short life full of pleasure; and so on.

The second type are "significance propositions," which are related either to preferences of our body that are outside our choice ("Fruit juices are more healthy than heavy drinking") or to the means for attaining our goals ("If you want to live long, you had better go in for sports rather than give yourself up to gluttony").

It is true that evaluations of the first type cannot be verified gnoseologically. They cannot be true or false. But as for evaluations of the second type, science can and must use them.

Thus, reasoning about progress can be objective if it concerns the functioning of social institutions that are objectively destined to attain certain goals. In this case the measure of progress is the extent to which the institution accords with its end, the effectiveness of its work—for example, the efficiency of the military in defending the country, the efficiency of medicine in healing people, and so on.

Two types of progressive development must be distinguished: progress as an improvement and progress as an augmentation.

In the first case, development leads to better satisfaction of the wants of people. So we can speak about progress in medicine because it has made human life longer and overcome the diseases that were unconquerable by the medicine of the past.

In the second case, there is no improvement in anything; rather, there is the augmentation of significant human achievements that cannot be compared to each other. For example, we cannot compare Shakespeare to Tolstoy and decide who is better. But we can be sure that by having both Shakespeare and Tolstoy, literature is richer (and thus better) than if it were to have only Shakespeare.

Now, about philosophy. I am sure that there have been two related but not identical meanings of the word *philosophy* during the history of human culture. The first kind of meaning occurs in evaluative philosophy. The second kind occurs in reflective philosophy. And these two kinds of philosophy solve the problem of progress differently.

Philosophy of values, as Jaspers put it, involves not knowledge about the world but understanding the world. It involves the desire to evaluate the world in relation to human needs and ends; to realize what is Good and what is Evil; what is Truth and what is Falsehood. Evaluative philosophy deals not with the world as a matter of being but with the senses and the ways of human existence in the world. This philosophy aims to answer the last two questions of Kant's triad: what we must do in the world and what we can hope for in it.

Reflective philosophy is just the contrary. It aims to answer the first of the three Kantian questions, what we can know about the world. It is

considered in its proper logic, which is given us phenomenologically and does not depend on our value priorities.

The connection between the two kinds of philosophy is obvious: to evaluate the world we must somehow know it. These kinds of philosophy are also connected by the fact that many philosophers used to practice both. But all that does not cancel the evident differences between evaluative and reflective philosophy. The main difference is in their contrary attitudes to scientific knowledge. While reflective philosophy (founded by Aristotle) can be considered a specific form of scientific knowledge, able to prove its propositions, evaluative philosophy (founded by Socrates) has nothing to do with science. The propositions of this philosophy are the propositions expressing our duty. And duty can neither be reduced to what exists nor be deduced from it.

Evaluative philosophy speaks the language of values. As I have already said, its claims address the realm of the free human choices and cannot be verified as being true or false (if they deal with the ultimate ends of human existence and not with the means of attaining those ends). That is why the problems of abortion, of legalizing euthanasia, of the death penalty, and the like are questions about the consensus of values and have no scientific solution. People will always answer these questions differently, depending on which value, the fact of life or its quality, they appreciate more. Attempts to prove one of these points of view are like attempts to prove that brunettes are more beautiful than blondes or that meat tastes better than fish. Of course, value claims can be general and even obligatory for all (if they are ordered by law, as was the case in the USSR), but it does not make them objectively true. If a philosopher enters into discussions of this kind he plays the role of a preacher who wants to convince his audience of the truth of his choice, but who is not able to prove it in the way a scientist proves the fact that heated bodies enlarge.

So, in consideration of what was said above, progress in evaluative philosophy takes the second form that was noted—augmentation. We cannot prove who is closer to the truth: Epicurus or Seneca, Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. But the multiplication of value doctrines is no doubt a progress. It gives each person a chance to hear arguments for a point of view that may appeal to her own certainties.

Progress in the parts of reflective philosophy that claim to be true has different dimensions. In this case a philosopher must understand his subject and persuasively prove his point of view. The better he does it, the stronger he is as a philosopher. I do not doubt that Weber had a deeper understanding of history than Schelling, who believed that I, the philosopher, reason about history. The last thing Schelling is interested in is history itself, because all of his statements are proved independently of what actually occurs in history.

That is why improvement in reflective philosophy is quite possible. However, this fact leads to another question: Does this possibility ever

become real? Alas, I think that contemporary reflective social philosophy, which aims to understand the logic of the history of humankind, is developing not in a progressive but in a regressive way. Today I cannot see any thinker who can be compared to Marx, Simmel, Weber, Sorokin, Ortega y Gasset, or even Raymond Aron.

The possible reason for this fact is that contemporary social philosophy has faced three circumstances that have exerted unfavorable influence on it.

The first circumstance is the so-called anthropological turn in philosophy, carried out under the slogan of "return to the human being" (Zygmunt Bauman). This turn involved an attempt to desubstantiate society, to reduce it to individuals. It is a nominalistic denial of supra-individual, impersonal matrices of social interaction and of their capacity for autonomic evolution, independent of human desires. It denies there are cases in which it is not that people "do something" but that instead "something happens" to them, something that they do not wait for, do not want, and do not control.

The second unfavorable circumstance is the challenge of postmodernism, which has questioned the essentialist strategy of knowledge. This strategy is oriented toward seeking and explaining the stable, essential, and necessary connections in the social process. I must say that I have much sympathy for Michel Tournier's motto "The uniform is out of fashion"—but only so long as this motto applies to nothing more than the realm of value consciousness and does not turn to an attempt to pluralize the truth, which kills the very possibility of scientific knowledge.

Finally, the third unfavorable circumstance is the attempt to turn social philosophy into what our American colleagues call useful knowledge. Social philosophy has been excessively pragmatized. In my opinion, the current Western trend of making social philosophy close to everyday life has obviously gone too far. As a result, it has been restricted to discussing only (no doubt really important) social problems such as abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. But, alas, fundamental problems about the social organization of humankind, including the typology of contemporary societies, the deep mechanisms of their interaction, the long-range tendencies of their development, and so on, do not draw philosophers' attention any more.

My explanation of this situation is the following. For a long time Western society has been moving along a smooth historical road. It has developed spontaneous mechanisms of self-regulation that did not need any philosophical analysis because they seemed to work without assistance. Theorists were not much interested in questions about how our civilization is arranged and what its future is. In fact many of them, like Francis Fukuyama, decided that history is finished, that Western social realities are settled for evermore, and that these Western realities must apply to all countries and nations living in a globalizing world.

Today, however, the situation is changing very rapidly. Humanity has entered another stage of bifurcation, related to the change in the dominant type of functioning. A similar situation occurred in the first half of the twentieth century, and it provided a very strong urge for fundamental sociophilosophic investigations. I think that the situation is going to be the same today, when our understanding of the foundations of society's existence and of history is a condition of our survival in a dangerous world, the world of unwarranted outcomes in which we all now find ourselves. We do not want social philosophy to base its progress on the crisis in world civilization, of course; but I am afraid that this result is rather likely.

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