

Daniel Stoljar,

‘Pessimism about philosophical progress—why is it so widespread?’

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1 Sociological work for a second-order theory of Grounding

1. As I understand it, Stoljar’s answer appeals to the institutional home of philosophy in the contemporary university:
 - (a) The twin ‘functions’ of the university are ‘advancement of knowledge’ and ‘preservation and promotion of [] ‘liberal culture’ ’ (3–4)
 - (b) This makes contemporary university professors—including we philosophers—act (as such), and be popularly thought to act, in service of one or both of these goals
 - (c) The latter, ‘curatorial’ function is inherently nonprogressive, so if we do/were to act in its service, philosophy does/would not progress and is/would be correctly popularly thought not to (4, 7–8)
 - (d) While the former, knowledge-producing function is progressive, it is popularly stereotyped in the image of natural science; accordingly, popular opinion will not recognize our activities as serving this function unless they produce the same sort of knowledge as those of the natural scientists (5–6)
 - (e) And they do not: their and our activities alike both produce knowledge about ‘dependency networks’, but for them the dependencies are ‘causal’ while for us they are instead ‘constitutive’ (7, 12)
2. The ingredients are in place for an error theory about this pessimism:
 - (a) Reality does not discriminate between the two sorts of dependency network in respect of genuineness, and we do indeed make progress in articulating one of them—so philosophy progresses: the widespread pessimism is erroneous
 - (b) And the widespread error can be explained: only with the seminal works of Fine, Schaffer, and Rosen has it at last been made articulate what philosophy has been after for lo these many millennia (5n7)—small wonder the news has yet to reach the folk

2 What work for the humanities?

3. Some worries about the twin functions:
 - (a) Are these twin functions supposed to track the more familiar division into the ‘natural sciences’ and ‘humanities’ (with the ‘social sciences’ of contested allegiance)? Is the idea that the biologists and chemists handle the advancement of knowledge, while the lit and art history profs busy themselves with preserving and promoting liberal culture?
 - (b) Stoljar elucidates ‘liberal culture’ as ‘in effect a certain sort of sensitivity to knowledge’ (4): setting to the side the nonspecificity in *which* sort of sensitivity is involved, is the idea that when someone writes a paper on, say, images of nature and sentiments of loss in George Eliot, the overarching aim is to throw a sandbag against a rising tide of insensitivity to knowledge?
 - (c) If so, what is the sort of knowledge, sensitivity to which is being protected? Ordinary observational data? Knowledge of dependency structures, whether causal or constitutive? Is anything left? If not, are we to treat the lit profs as a secret police force for the philosophers and natural scientists, set loose on the populace so they don’t forget about our stuff?
 - (d) More seriously, it is surely the case that a *benefit* of the university is the preservation of liberal culture—but the university has many ‘side benefits’, none of which are plausible constitutive aims of any of its researchers (soaking up the mass of unemployable, wild youth; providing exhibition space for experimental theater; hosting sport): and it seems very unlikely that the lit profs see their central research aim as preserving liberal culture
4. OK, so what *are* the humanities about, and why is philosophy among them?
 - (a) The division of *Wissenschaft* into *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft* was important to the designers of the 19th century German university, which in turn set the model for our universities, with their familiar division into ‘natural sciences’ and ‘human sciences’

- (b) They saw the division as tracking a fundamental contrast in the perspective taken by the investigator: in the natural sciences, a *dispassionate* or *objective* perspective, *on* the matter under investigation, the product of which is *Erklärung*; in the human sciences, an *empathetic* or *pseudo-subjective* (‘simulational’) perspective, *as from* the matter under investigation, the product of which is *Verstehen*
- (c) This was regarded as a hard-won, major intellectual achievement, emanating from the history-making ‘critical philosophy’ of Kant, according to which investigating reality isn’t enough: we also have to investigate our own cognitive structures, and even those of others, both as a matter of intrinsic interest and in order to improve investigation of reality (through, say, error-checking, conceptual enrichment, or limitation of ambitions)
- (d) For these neo-Kantians, putting philosophy in with the human sciences was a pretty obvious choice

3 Philosophical progress: the view from 1900

- 5. Analytic philosophy coalesced around the Vienna Circle’s war on the human/natural divide—a blindspot for which developed soon after, and still prevails:
 - (a) Neurath really disliked it, articulating his ‘fundamental conviction’ as the possibility of ‘investigating the stars and myself with the same scientific dispassionateness and the same logical tools’; inveighing against a web of intellectual sins including ‘metaphysics’, ‘empathy’, and ‘*Verstehen*’; and going to the trouble of setting in motion the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* to capture the human sciences and reformat research in the humanities along natural-scientific lines
 - (b) The sword and shield, wielded by Carnap, was the logic Frege developed for representing natural-scientific reasoning (a broadly Kantian project: small irony); the questionable move (‘Psychology in physical language’) was invariably to accuse the opponents of reasoning in ways unrepresentable by Frege-style logic, and therefore of illogicality (‘nonsense’)
 - (c) Stoljar’s brief remarks on ‘noncognitivism’ (9) are symptomatic (*expressivism* coupled with *deflationism* is a venerable project); but so, more importantly, is Stoljar’s image of philosophical theorizing as concerned with ‘constitutive dependency’

6. Philosophical progress as semantic progress:

- (a) Stoljar’s central cases of philosophical progress, here and in his 2017 *Philosophical Progress*, are in ‘semantics’, construed somewhat broadly to include ‘rational psychology’ and ‘logic’—belief as a propositional attitude (98); Russellian quantificational definites (101); possible worlds analysis of modals (101–2)—which he classifies as advances in the characterization of constitutive dependency networks
- (b) I agree that semantic progress accounts for a large chunk of philosophical progress: in addition to Stoljar’s examples (and others in this vein), there are such spinoffs as the computer, linguistics, rational choice theory, and sizeable regions of pure mathematics; plausibly also, progress on ‘boundary problems’, a major issue in *Progress*, usually (perhaps always) demands (or consists in) ‘conceptual clarification’, which is more of the same
- (c) But Stoljar’s assimilation of the progress here to ‘constitutive dependency structures’ (‘the facts in virtue of which’, e.g., ‘various sentences mean what they do’, or ‘propositions are necessary and possible’: *Progress*, 100–01; ‘a belief state consists in a relation between a person or animal and an abstract object that is truth-evaluable’: 98) elides *semantics* with the (arguably less progressive) projects of *metasemantics* or *metaphysics*

7. The ‘Copernican Revolution’ and a non-Stoljarean antidote to pessimism:

- (a) In 1900, no educated person would have worried seriously about philosophical progress: Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’ (then more recent than ‘On denoting’ is today) was rightly seen as revolutionary, and as setting the program for the ‘critically’-envisaged university; it is because this picture has now largely vanished from scholarly consciousness that we can no longer articulate what then seemed obvious
- (b) The analytic tradition should acknowledge its own culpability here: philosophy departments should, I think, exercise at least a limited ‘curatorship’, over good, important, hard-won philosophical doctrines and practices; but in the present case, our practice has been not just negligent, but actively malevolent
- (c) Defending philosophical progress will require us to understand *semantic* progress, understood as the articulation of ‘cognitive structure’; and this will require us—odious though many may find it—to articulate, in our own terms, what the Copernican Revolution actually amounted to (two hints: (i) forget Berkeleian idealism; (ii) what if propositions are truth-evaluable in no more than a ‘deflationary’ sense?)