

Charles Larmore

History & truth

History, according to Schopenhauer, teaches but a single lesson: *eadem, sed aliter* – the same things happen again and again, only differently. “Once one has read Herodotus, one has studied enough history, philosophically speaking.”¹

If, like Schopenhauer, we survey human affairs from afar, assuming the stance of a neutral spectator, suspending all our own interests and commitments, we will have to agree. At so great a remove, what else will we see but, as he said, countless variations on the same old theme of people pursuing dreams they never achieve, or find disappointing when they do?

Consider the cardinal cases where history is held to do more than repeat itself, where it supposedly shows direction and progress. Theories that scientists in one age endorse meet nonetheless with refutation in the next. Technological innovations aimed at easing man’s estate go on

to create new needs and burdens. Modern democracies, despite their promise, do not end the domination of the many by the few. Progress is bound to seem an illusion if we look at life from the outside, abstracting from our own convictions about nature and the human good. For then we cannot make out the extent to which our predecessors, despite their defeats, were still on the right track. All that we will perceive is their inevitable failure to accomplish the ends that they set themselves. History will serve only to remind us that man’s reach always exceeds his grasp.

Yet ordinarily we think quite differently than Schopenhauer did about the past, and about modern times in particular. In reflecting on the course of the last five hundred years we usually conclude that great strides have been made in understanding nature and in creating a more just society. Patterns of scientific and moral progress come into view, once we lean on established conceptions of nature and scientific method, of individual rights and human needs. Classical mechanics constituted an advance over Aristotelian physics, we then say, because it came nearer to the truth about matter, force, and motion, and perceived

Charles Larmore, Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago, is the author of five books: “Patterns of Moral Complexity” (1987), “Modernité et morale” (1993), “The Morals of Modernity” (1996), “The Romantic Legacy” (1996), and “Les pratiques du moi” (2004).

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1 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will and Representation* (New York: Dover, 1969), supplements, chap. 38.

more clearly the importance of results expressible in the form of mathematical laws. So too in the moral realm: for all its imperfections, the rise of liberal democracy represented a turn for the better when measured against the conviction that political life, particularly where coercive force is involved, ought to respect the equal dignity of each of its members.

When we abandon the view from nowhere and turn to appraising the past by our present lights, new doubts arise, however. Relying as they must on our current ideas of what is true, important, and right, our judgments about progress can begin to appear irredeemably parochial. We may wonder whether they amount to anything more than applauding others in proportion to their having happened to think like us. Is not the notion of progress basically an instrument of self-congratulation? What can we say to someone who objects that our present standpoint is merely ours, with no more right than any other to issue verdicts upon earlier times?

One way of handling this worry has long proved immensely influential; indeed, it taps into the dominant strand of Western philosophy. Philosophers since Plato have generally believed that there exists a body of timeless, universally valid principles governing how we ought to think and act, principles that, they have also supposed, we can only discern by striving to become timeless ourselves. Standing back from all that the contingencies of history have made of us, viewing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, we can then take our bearings from reason itself.

Theories of scientific and moral progress are very much a modern phenomenon, of course. But the Enlightenment, which pioneered them, still found congenial the ideal of reason as transcen-

dence when articulating its vision of the progressive dynamic of modern thought. A prime example of this tendency is Condorcet's famous essay on progress (*Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, 1793). Once people in the West, he argued, threw off the yoke of tradition and recognized at last that knowledge arises only through careful generalizations from the givens of sense experience, scientific growth and moral improvement were bound to accelerate as they had since the seventeenth century.

In a similar spirit, we may believe that our present point of view amounts to more than just the current state of opinion, because we have carefully worked over existing views in the light of reason. We may regard ourselves as having achieved a critical distance toward our own age, even as we avoid the detachment of Schopenhauer's neutral spectator. For reason is not a view from nowhere. It lines up the world from a specific perspective, defined by the principles of thought and action it embodies. It allows us to determine which of our present convictions may rightly serve as standards for the evaluation of the past. Consequently, the judgments we then make about scientific and moral progress will not simply express our own habits of mind.

Or so it seems. The rub is that our conception of the demands of reason always bears the mark of our own time and place. To be sure, some rules of reasoning, such as those instructing us to avoid contradictions and to pursue the good, are timelessly available. But they can do little by themselves to orient our thinking and conduct; they have to work in tandem with more substantive principles if we are to receive much guidance. The reason to which we appeal when critically examining our existing opinions must therefore combine both these

factors. And yet the more concrete aspects of what we understand by reason involve principles we have come to embrace because of their apparent success in the past, or because of our general picture of the mind's place in nature. As these beliefs change so does our conception of reason, and earlier conceptions sometimes turn out to look quite mistaken.

Once again, Condorcet's essay offers a perfect illustration. His confidence in the existence of elementary sensations uncolored by prior assumptions and conceptual schemes belongs to a brand of empiricism, triumphant in his day, that we can no longer accept. Our own notions of reason, however self-evident they seem to us, may well encounter a similar fate. But even if they do not meet with rejection, they will certainly appear dated, shaped as they are by the particular historical path that our experience and reflection have taken.

Doubts of this sort about progress have intensified over the past century, as reason has shown itself to be less a tribunal standing outside history than a code expressing our changing convictions about how we ought to think and act. Hegel already undertook to 'historicize' reason, though he managed at the same time to hold on to the idea of progress. His strategy was to claim that the "Bachchanalian revel" in which one conception of reason has succeeded another exhibits in hindsight a pattern with an inner necessity: each conception of reason proved unsatisfactory in its own terms and could only be remedied by its successor – until there emerged our own conception (that is, Hegel's), which alone lives up to its own expectations.

Today our sense of contingency is far too acute for any such story to appear credible. We may believe that our present conception of reason has improved upon preceding ones, which themselves

rightly corrected the errors of those before them. Still, we have to admit that different improvements might also have been possible, and that our present view too may have to be revised. Even though the standards we invoke for judging ourselves and the past may be the best we have, they can seem therefore too much a hostage of chance and circumstance to justify any conclusions about progress.

In order to grasp the exact import of these doubts, we need to keep in mind the difference between *growth* and *progress*. Take the case of modern natural science. No one can plausibly see it as a mere succession of different theories, each one a fresh speculation about the world. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, the study of nature did often look like that – and parts of the social sciences still do. Beginning in the seventeenth century, however, physics and then chemistry and biology turned themselves into cumulative enterprises. They set their sights on securing conclusions solid enough to be passed on as guiding premises for future inquiry. In large part it was the combination of mathematics and experiment that made this possible; experimental laws in mathematical form lend themselves to precise testing and, once confirmed, are unlikely to be discredited later, even if they have to be fine-tuned in the face of new data. At the same time, their precision helps to orient further research, setting limits on the hypotheses that henceforth are to be taken seriously. Not by accident, the history of modern science displays a clear line of development leading to our present conception of nature. Each stage along the way has extended and corrected the achievements of its predecessors. Growth in this sense is unmistakable.

To be sure, growth has not always proceeded by simple accretion. Sometimes new theories have appropriated previous

results by recasting them within very different conceptual vocabularies. Sometimes well-corroborated theories have had to be rejected because they failed to square with newly available evidence. And sometimes these two kinds of theory change have gone together – as in the scientific revolutions dear to Thomas Kuhn, in which one “paradigm” replaces another by means of a “gestalt-switch.” It is nonetheless true that the revolutions occurring within the modern sciences of nature, as opposed to those that preceded or inaugurated them, have typically carried over an accumulated stock of experimental laws. Maxwell’s equations, for example, survived the advent of relativity theory, even though they had to be reconceived as making no reference to a luminiferous ether.

Kuhn complained that science textbooks write the history of their discipline backward from the present, disguising its dramatic twists and turns as step-by-step contributions to the present-day edifice of knowledge.² No doubt they do distort the past. Yet only in modern times have such textbooks played much of a role at all. Only recently has it become both possible and essential to expound past results as a body of systematic doctrine, complemented by problem sets and answer keys. The very prominence of these texts testifies to the cumulative character of modern science.

Growth is not the same as progress, however. Progress means movement toward a goal, whereas growth is essentially a retrospective concept, referring to a process in which new formations emerge by building upon earlier ones. Progress generally entails growth, but it posits, in addition, a terminus toward

which that growth is thought to be advancing. Now common opinion holds that science aims at the truth and that therefore its astounding growth in the modern era represents progress in the direction of that goal. So simplistic a statement certainly calls for some immediate qualifications. The modern sciences of nature do not seek truth in general, as though scientific knowledge were the only sort worth having. They focus on the natural world and they devote their energy not to merely piling up truths (the more the better), but to assembling truths that can help explain the workings of nature. Moreover, the truth at which science aims need not be a single, rock-bottom order of things, as defined, for example, by microphysics. Nature may embrace an irreducible plurality of levels of reality.

Yet these amendments do not address the fundamental objection that the common idea of modern science has come to provoke: that the concept of scientific progress begins to appear suspect once we recognize the historical contingency of the standards we use to judge the present and the past. If our current view of nature counts as well founded only by reference to a conception of reason that itself arises from the vicissitudes of experience, how can we maintain that its improvement on previous views represents progress toward the truth? The question does not challenge the existence of scientific growth: plainly, since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there has been a steady accumulation of experimental laws, and where earlier theories met with difficulty they were corrected in ways that produced the body of knowledge now expounded in the textbooks of the various disciplines. But with what right can we regard this process as leading to anything other than simply the prevailing opinions of the day? Why should we suppose that it has

2 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970; original edition, 1960), 136ff.

at the same time brought us closer to the goal of discovering the truth about nature?

Kuhn gave eloquent expression to this widespread skepticism. Though he continued to refer to ‘progress,’ the term as he used it meant solely growth in puzzle-solving ability. Progress toward the truth seemed to him an idle notion, irrelevant to the analysis of modern science: “Does it really help to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to that ultimate goal?” His answer was no, since “no Archimedean platform is available for the pursuit of science other than the historically situated one already in place.”³ Scientists do not decide among rival theories by invoking truth as a standard. Or if they do, it is but shorthand for the principles on which they actually rely, namely, the methods and scientific values sanctioned by the present state of inquiry. Truth – that is, nature as it is in itself – makes sense as a goal only so long as reason is thought to offer the means for pulling ever closer to it. Once the ideal of reason as transcendence loses its plausibility, giving way to the recognition that science always takes its bearings from a historically determined body of beliefs, our understanding of the aim of science must be similarly downscaled. Its goal, Kuhn claimed, consists in solving the puzzles that current doctrine happens to pose.

This mode of argument has become a familiar refrain in many areas of contemporary thought. It fuels, for example, the vast company of postmodern theorists who regard the idea of science pro-

³ Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 171; and Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 95.

gressing toward the truth as the paradigm of those illusory stories, or meta-narratives, by which modernity has sought to give its achievements a universal legitimacy.⁴ Historicist attacks on scientific realism, as we may call them, stem from an important insight. Contrary to one of the deepest aspirations of the Enlightenment, if not of philosophy in general, reason does not pry us free from the contingencies of time and place. Substantive principles of rationality are always framed in the light of beliefs and ways of life bequeathed by a past that could have turned out otherwise.

All the same, the contemporary skepticism about progress also trades upon a false assumption, which it shares with the ideal of transcendent reason it rejects. The givens of history are not obstacles, but means. Reasoning from where we find ourselves is the very way by which we match our claims against the world. Creatures of chance though we are, the world itself remains the object of our thinking, and the reasons we find to prefer one belief to another must be understood as the reasons we have to think we are drawing closer to the truth.

There is no better way to develop these points than to look in some detail at the most famous skeptic writing today. Richard Rorty, a self-styled “left-wing Kuhnian,” provides the clearest expression of all that is right- and also wrong-headed in the antirealist philosophies so common in our culture. Unlike many other friends of truth and progress, I shall not be engaging in a round of Rorty-bashing in order to declare victorious, as though by default, the orthodox views he seeks to overthrow. Enough has already been said, I trust, to evidence my sympathy

⁴ See Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition post-moderne* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

with the historicized concept of reason that serves as the springboard of his thinking. I intend instead to lay bare the single line of argument that, amidst his changing formulations and proliferating references to other figures, ties together his work as a whole. My object is to locate the spot where insight turns into error.

Common sense says that there is a world ‘out there’ that exists independently of the mind, and Rorty wisely denies that it is his wish to doubt so plain a fact. Even where we do shape the world to suit our purposes, we proceed by exploiting the laws of nature at work in the things around us. But truth, Rorty insists, is not similarly out there. Truth is a property of the sentences we utter, a property we judge by standards we ourselves invoke. Although sometimes the relevant standard may demand that we simply look and let the physical world determine the truth or falsity of a given statement (e.g., “the cat is on the mat”; “the proton has crossed the cloud chamber”), our very idea of when perception can settle an issue, as well as the interpretation we then place on what we see, depends on a whole web of other beliefs and ways of dealing with the world. To call a statement true amounts therefore to saying that those who share with us a certain framework of beliefs have reason to endorse it.

Being true is not, of course, the same as being justified. Yet for Rorty the fact that a statement justified by our lights might still turn out false signifies only that a better view of things may come along in which the statement would no longer pass muster. The distinction between ‘true’ and ‘justified’ serves, he argues, simply a cautionary function, warning us that we may always find reason to change our minds. ‘True’ does not refer to some final point of view that we

are laboring to attain and that, once achieved, will show us the world as it really is. Or, more exactly, Rorty’s position is that we do not need to think in these terms. The idea of such a viewpoint plays no part in our actual decisions about what to believe. Truth, not being ‘out there,’ does not therefore constitute a goal of inquiry, and scientific progress cannot mean getting closer to the truth. What progress does signify for him, as for Kuhn, is not strictly progress at all, but rather growth: an increased ability to make successful predictions.⁵

“The world does not speak,” Rorty likes to quip, “only we do.” We have no other vocabularies than the language games we have invented ourselves. Since truth is always judged by their means, he has occasionally gone on to announce, in an evident desire to disconcert, that truth is something *made* rather than *found* in a reality lying outside our forms of speech.⁶

It is tempting to snap back that while our sentences are manifestly our own creation, what renders them true or false – namely, the world – is not. True statements are made, but their truth is not made; it is discovered.⁷ This easy rejoinder misses the point, however. It fails to do justice to the historicist insight inspiring Rorty’s and many others’ rejection of traditional ideas of truth and progress. What sense can there be in holding that truth is found, if the very standards by which we determine truth and falsity – in other words, the roles we

5 Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5, 39.

6 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6–7.

7 See John Searle, “Rationality and Realism,” *Dædalus* 122 (4) (Fall 1993): 55–83.

have the world play in shaping our thinking – are as much a product of human history as the beliefs they serve to evaluate? Reason, it then seems, does not teach us how to let the world make our statements true or false; it shows us how the world as presently conceived bears on the statements we happen to utter. If truth is not found, why not then conclude that it must be made?

Nonetheless, precisely because he considers truth to be of little consequence in our actual decisions about what to believe, Rorty eschews in his more careful moments the contrast between making and finding. If truth is indeed an uninteresting notion, it scarcely deserves to be the object of a striking theory. We are indeed to discard as useless the mantra that science and morality aim at the truth about nature and the human good. But Rorty's more considered proposal is that we learn to regard their goal as seeking to expand the horizons of intersubjective agreement, accommodating new experience and hitherto neglected interests. His favored contrast becomes one between objectivity and solidarity. If objectivity means taking our bearings from reality itself, it needs to give way to the more coherent ideal of striving for solidarity, the unforced agreement with others. We do better to make hope rather than knowledge – reasoning together rather than answerability to the world – our highest aspiration.⁸ For science itself does not undertake to discover more and more of the truth about how nature works. Its purpose is instead, Rorty avers, to devise by reasoned argument ever more satisfactory syntheses of theory and experiment. So too, our moral

8 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999); and Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21 – 34.

thinking is most profitably understood not as trying to determine what we truly owe to one another, but as constructing increasingly inclusive communities in which free and open discussion replaces force. Agreement, not truth, is Rorty's preferred idiom for formulating his "pragmatism."

The classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, and Dewey) always looked with suspicion at philosophy's habit of setting up dualisms, particularly those that oppose the absolute and permanent to the relative and changeable. Theory and practice, reason and experience, duty and desire do not exclude one another, they insisted, but work together from different angles to help us make sense of the world. Rorty also prides himself on being an antidualist. Yet he seems unable to state his position without resorting to one or another philosophical dualism of just this sort – if not finding versus making truth, then objectivity versus solidarity. His dualist rhetoric is not accidental. *Le style c'est l'homme même*. Rorty has staked his all on playing off a historicized concept of reason against the idea that inquiry aims at the truth; the conventional antithesis between timeless truth and human mutability structures his thought from the outset, and he cannot escape its hold simply by trying, as he does, to downplay the former's importance by arguing that only the latter matters.

Herein lies Rorty's fatal mistake. For consider how far from obvious it is that solidarity stands opposed to objectivity. Agreement with others can take a variety of forms, depending on the motives that move us to pursue it. Sometimes, for instance, going along with whatever our fellows say affords a cozy kind of companionship. But what makes *reasoned* agreement a good worth achieving, if not that it enhances our prospects of

grasping the way things truly are? The opposition between solidarity and objectivity proves evanescent. The best way to see this is to look again, but now more closely, at reason and justification.

Deliberating about whether to accept a problematic statement consists, as Rorty says, in determining how well it fits with our existing beliefs. Reason may guide the appraisal, but the requirements that we see reason imposing reflect the changing self-understanding of the community of inquiry to which we belong. All this is correct.

Yet it offers no basis for denying that truth forms the object of our endeavors – and truth conceived as fitting the way the world really is, as correspondence with reality. Indeed, the practice makes no sense without that idea. For what serves to justify or disqualify the statement under scrutiny is not the psychological fact that we hold the beliefs to which we appeal. Our own state of mind, in and of itself, has no bearing on the issue. The probative consideration is rather, so we presume, that the beliefs are true – in other words, that the world is as they describe it to be. Justifying a hypothesis means, in turn, showing that it deserves to stand alongside our established beliefs, to join them in their role as premises for the resolution of future doubts. It follows that when we examine the credentials of a problematic proposition, our intention is to settle whether it matches the way the world really is. Background beliefs may themselves be mistaken, and we can always err in what we say about reality. Fallibility, however, does not make truth any less our goal. Rorty is right that justification proceeds by appeal to what we already believe, by seeking conclusions that others equipped with similar beliefs can equally see reason to embrace. Yet this very activity is indissociable from making our

thought answerable to the world. Solidarity and objectivity go hand in hand.

A similar verdict applies to the allied dualism he often deploys between coping and copying. Different descriptions of the same thing can prove appropriate, depending on which of our various purposes we are pursuing and which audience we are therefore addressing. Sometimes we speak of water as a collection of H₂O molecules, sometimes as an essential nutrient for all of life. Does this mean, as Rorty argues, that our talk aims merely at being useful, not at representing the way the world is in itself? Once again, we are given a false alternative – utility and truth are inseparable. We cannot cope with the things around us unless we consider how the world looks from the particular angle we have chosen. Agreed, no single description is the one and only true description. But the existence of many equally true ones mirrors the fact, as I suggested before, that the world itself comprises multiple levels of reality.⁹ Water is both those things, and a lot more besides.

These remarks about Rorty imply that scientific growth must also count as progress toward the truth, when the series of later theories building upon earlier ones results in some element of our present understanding of the natural world. I am not suggesting that the two concepts are synonymous after all. But the only way in which growth may fall short of being progress is by failing to produce beliefs of the sort we ourselves endorse. (Thus in Ptolemy's hands the geocentric theory grew in sophistication, without moving any closer to the truth about the planetary motions.) For to believe that something is the case

9 Cf. John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

means holding it to be true, and if our current beliefs about nature are the outcome of a self-correcting process, which the history of modern science has undeniably involved, then this process merits the title of progress. Where past views do not fit our present convictions they must be deemed false, and where they were corrected so as to yield what we presently believe, we must suppose that we have drawn closer to grasping the world as it really is.

To be sure, truth is then being judged by existing standards. Yet, one might ask, what other standards should we use instead? Rorty and many others today share a defining assumption of the notion of progress they seek to overturn. They assume that we would be entitled to consider ourselves nearer the truth than our predecessors, only if we could rise above our historical situation and vindicate our present views from a vantage point outside the vicissitudes of experience. That is why, arguing rightly that our idea of reason is part and parcel of our changing web of belief, they go on to reject truth as the goal of inquiry.

Precisely this assumption is the dogma we need to dispel. The real revolution in philosophy would be to regard the contingencies of history as the means by which we lay hold of reality. We cannot look back (as Hegel supposed) and see in the developments leading to our current body of beliefs a path that mankind was destined to travel. What we can do is show how our present views represent an improvement over earlier ones, and, to the extent that we can do so, we ought to conclude that the reasons for preferring the new to the old are reasons for thinking we have now a better comprehension of the way the world is.

The principles by which we make these judgments may themselves change as our conception of nature changes. But reason, though historicized, does not

lose its authority to regulate our thought and to determine the progress we have achieved. To have good grounds to alter our beliefs is to have learned from our mistakes, and such are the terms in which we should also view the changes that the notion of reason has undergone. As the history of science demonstrates, we have learned how to learn in the very process of learning about nature.¹⁰ In other words, the principles of rationality we have come to accept are themselves truths, about how we ought to think and conduct our inquiries into nature, that we now hold to be timelessly, universally, valid. But as essentially the result of a learning process, they cannot count as timelessly accessible.

The idea of moral progress lends itself to a similar reconstruction, though I do not have the room to tackle this complex subject here. For it would first be necessary to explain how such a thing as moral knowledge is possible.¹¹ And then I would have to point out how the parallel between moral and scientific progress nonetheless ceases at a crucial point. Moral progress consists not only in a deeper understanding of the right and the good, but also in the achievement of a better life – and one of the important truths we have learned is that every way of life secures some things of value at the expense of others. Gains come with losses. Because science aims simply at knowledge, scientific progress does not involve an analogous balancing of pluses and minuses.

In both domains, however, the way forward is to break the grip that the old dualisms continue to have on the philosophical mind, even among those who

10 Cf. Dudley Shapere, *Reason and the Search for Knowledge* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Reidel, 1984), 233.

11 See my book, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

claim to fight against them. Truth itself is timeless; if Newtonian mechanics now appears importantly mistaken, then it was always false, even in its heyday. Our thinking takes place necessarily in time, and has no other resources than those that the past and our own imagination happen to provide us. Yet the finitude that marks every step we take tracks the world that lies beyond. Reasoning from where we find ourselves means reasoning about the way things really are. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *Burnt Norton*, “only through time time is conquered.”