

Zubiri and Progress in Philosophy

Editorial

This issue of the Review is published shortly after the very successful V International Zubiri Congress in Bari, Italy, organized by Paulo Ponzi. In his Congress presentation, Diego Gracia raised an important issue which can be read in his paper, “Amicus Plato: Philosophy as Profession of Truth” on page 61 of this volume. It is a question that has plagued philosophy since its inception, and caused many to become very skeptical about its value. The question is, “Does philosophy ever make progress?” Each philosophical system purports to finally answer key questions, but each, in turn, falls to criticism—Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel—the list goes on (though some such as the Scholastics might disagree). Professor Gracia has pointed out that even Zubiri changed his view on some important topics. This situation contrasts rather sharply with that of mathematics and science, where progress seems to occur almost daily.

So why, then, do we spend time on Zubiri’s philosophy, pouring over his works, and attempting to answer real-world questions using his ideas? We could, of course, say that progress comes in a negative way: we know that a lot of ideas about reality and knowledge are false, such as Kant’s attempt to base philosophy on Newtonian physics by making human knowing the result of a synthesis according to Newton’s laws.

We must also consider that science has not definitely told us the nature of physical reality: we do not understand dark matter or dark energy, have not achieved the sought-after unification of forces, and cannot explain the 100+ order-of-magnitude discrepancy between theory and measurement with respect to the energy density of the vacuum. In biology, abiogenesis is poorly understood, and there are outstanding problems lurking at the heart of evolutionary theory. Science itself, over its history, has undergone major “paradigm shifts”, and may do so in the future. In that sense, the progress of science is not definitive, either. Nonetheless, there have been important conquests: the Periodic Table will not be overthrown, the existence of forces in nature and fundamental particles such as atoms, protons, electrons, quarks are all exceedingly well established, as is the heliocentric theory and the germ theory of disease, to take just a few examples.

But can we credibly claim that Zubiri was able to take the decisive step, and move philosophy forward in a way not done before, in a way that will compel thinkers in the future to start from his analyses and philosophical understanding of problems? Professor Gracia has pointed out that Zubiri’s thought underwent an evolution over the course of his life, and that there are inconsistencies between earlier and later works on important issues. Zubiri did not have time to resolve these inconsistencies during his lifetime, so they remain as questions to be answered. The advance of knowledge in other areas, and the march of history, will always surface new problems and give new perspectives that need to be absorbed by and integrated into philosophy.

Philosophy should be regarded as the apex of a generalized quest for knowledge, and as such—as Zubiri has done—utilize the results of other disciplines to formulate its basic principles. Clearly, philosophers in the past have sought to do this: Aristotle, Descartes, Hegel, and Kant immediately come to mind. But the key is to do it in the right way, a way that does not involve making any particular scientific, political, or historical theory the framework for philosophical principles. The important point is to establish a solid ground for this quest, and that ground will always be based in philosophy, considered as our best understanding of reality and knowledge. This was Zubiri’s goal, and his starting point was the history of philosophy and the state of knowledge at

the time of his writing, which fortunately occurred after the great 20th century revolutions in science. Certainly the foundation that Zubiri created, especially in *Sentient Intelligence*, is very solid indeed. His “Copernican Revolution”—the notion that we are in direct contact with reality, and that knowing and perceiving are inseparable—is a formidable advance, unlikely to be superseded. It resolves many longstanding problems, especially that of how we can have knowledge of the “external” world at all—the problem that bedeviled all of the British Empiricists.

It is also the case that what I said earlier, that one philosophical system succeeds and replaces another, is not quite true. Each builds on the preceding efforts: Plato on the Pre-Socratics, Aristotle on Plato, even Descartes on the Scholastics, and Kant on Hume as well as the Continental tradition. For Zubiri, this is clearly the case—his debts to Husserl, Heidegger, Kant, Aristotle, the Scholastics, and others is obvious, and he wrote extensively about the history of philosophy and was always intimately engaged with it (see Armando Savignano’s article on Zubiri and Suárez). In this way, there has been a progression of thought, a sharpening of our understanding of reality, not in the sense that philosophy can dictate answers to physics, but in the sense that we now have a deeper understanding of reality, even if we know that some previously theories were not completely true but held key insights. Platonic theories, for example, recur throughout philosophy, and now even in modern physics, where the notion of symmetry—akin to a Platonic “idea”—dictates reality. The hope is, therefore, that Zubiri’s philosophy, despite incompleteness and inconsistencies, represents a significant and definitive new phase in the quest for knowledge of reality.

How can this be judged? Philosophy is not an empirical science, and does not operate the same way. Nonetheless, it is not completely isolated from the world since it seeks to explain reality and knowledge; as such, its theories perforce have repercussions in the world—effectively, predictions. Perhaps progress in philosophy should be judged as it is in science: not as final “theories of everything”, but in terms of *our ability to address key questions that concern real-world matters*—the intersection of theory with the real world. This can take the form of explanation or prediction, or some combination. (See Juan Cornejo’s article on mystical experience). It must be possible to show that real-world happenings confirm a philosophical theory, and that there are some that would refute it if they occurred. It is certainly possible for philosophers to say things about the real world that are untrue (Hegel) or are not borne out by subsequent discoveries (Kant).

Although philosophy (and theology) do not have a good track record with respect to pronouncements about science and scientific matters, accurate claims may be able usher in a whole new world for the relationship among disciplines. Zubiri’s philosophy definitely lends itself to this effort. The article by Carlos Lechuga explores the tight relationship that exists between philosophy and science, especially with respect to metaphysics—something that most scientists do not realize or simply ignore. Thus, it is possible that science itself is encountering fundamental limits because the questions that it seeks to answer are, in part, metaphysical. Science has always had to make metaphysical assumptions (if not claims) in order to formulate new theories or reject old ones; Darwin and species; Newton, Einstein, and absolute space and time come to mind. Advances in science and philosophy may provide an opening for a fruitful interaction between these two disciplines. The papers in the special section on artificial intelligence in this volume are a step in that direction.

In this way, the relevance of Zubiri’s thought, and its great contribution, can become manifest to the world and place philosophy in an entirely new light. More about this in future Zubiri Congresses, and future issues of *The Xavier Zubiri Review*!

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