

Intra-Disciplinary Research as Progress in Philosophy: Lessons from Philosophy of the City

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Abstract Philosophy of the city has recently emerged as a new subfield, garnering global interest. While most inquiries in this area have ‘the city’ or an urban issue as common ground, particular approaches engage in a kind of study identified as ‘intra-disciplinary research.’ An intra-disciplinary approach draws from different areas of philosophy to address problems that extend beyond the limits of individual subfields. A close examination reveals that this practice challenges assumptions holding that definitively answering philosophical questions is the only path to progress. Engaging in this kind of research adds to philosophy’s set of methods, and shows promise for philosophers wrestling with complex issues.

Keywords Intra-disciplinary research · Progress in philosophy · Heuristic view · Philosophy of the city

Introduction

Although the city is a recurrent topic in philosophy’s history, most contemporary philosophers neglect it (Cunningham 2007). Environmental philosophers have been emphasizing this point for years, urging their fellows to pay attention to urban issues (Gunn 1998; King 2000; Light 2001; de-Shalit 2003; Kirkman 2004). Light (2001), for example, points out that environmental ethicists view cities as antagonistic to nature, a leading cause of anthropogenic degradation. Considering that cities expend resources from the non-human world, approaching the city from an ecologically aware point of view makes sense, but the city is about more than the environment. Discussions about the city involve capital, power, democracy, technology, gender, morality, and justice,

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among others. Lessons from environmental philosophy add to discussions in philosophy of the city (POTC), but only as one contributing voice among many.

This point suggests that attaining a thorough, philosophic understanding of the city or an urban affair often requires that research must come from two or more branches or subfields in philosophy. While some theoretical cases in POTC focus on the nature of the city in the abstract, such cases do not necessarily require insights from two or more areas. Philosophical questioning reveals elements about the city that one cannot readily observe. Yet, for concrete topics such as cases concerning equality and justice in the city, researching these subjects as urban issues reveals particular facets of a given city. Although this routine appears normal, I argue that it counts as a new kind of research. This approach advances the discipline through ‘intra-disciplinary’ scholarship, a method that focuses on interrelated interests across philosophy’s fields and subfields. Exhibiting how intra-disciplinary approaches are a specific kind of research that challenges assumptions about progress in philosophy is the motivation behind this paper. This advancement strengthens the reciprocity between philosophy and the academy, providing new avenues for scholarship.

To argue that intra-disciplinary research counts as a form of progress for philosophy, I provide some background on the emergence of POTC, showing how it counts as a traditional subfield. Next, I examine the structure and benefits of interdisciplinary research. Through comparing the patterns behind interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary approaches, we understand how intra-disciplinary works differ from customary models, counting as a progress for philosophy. Lastly, I explore how such progress bolsters research in fields outside of philosophy and remains mostly consistent with Carlo Cellucci’s heuristic view, a position that he argues is the hallmark of fruitful inquiry (2014).

The Disciplinary Structure of Philosophy of the City

The range of topics within philosophy has progressed from the main branches of epistemology, logic, metaphysics, and value theory into several subfields such as philosophy of technology, philosophy of biology, and philosophy of law. In these subfields, the ‘of’ in ‘philosophy of X’ implies something like ‘examining X’s fundamental nature and elements,’ or ‘the epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic concerns of a subject.’ For revealing the philosophical dimensions of the city, such notions apply. In terms of its disciplinary direction, POTC resembles other subfields.

Similar to most areas in the discipline, a philosopher of the city aims to reveal an accurate understanding of the city or an aspect of urban life. She formulates questions that problematize the city so that fleshing out the answers provides a clearer understanding of how things are beyond initial observance. Using philosophy to expose a presupposition about the city or a particular dimension of urban life illustrates how this subfield follows the customary pattern found in the main branches and other ‘philosophy-of’ areas. In this regard, POTC remains straightforward. Standard questions, for instance, include concerns about the character of the city, the city’s relationship to nature, what makes a just city, among others. Contemporary inquiries delve into concerns about housing as a public good, democracy and smart infrastructure, and

decolonizing cities (POTC Research Group 2015). Arguments that address such concerns count as disciplinary progress, the standard approach, considering that POTC adds to the discipline's areas of concern.

The above approach to POTC does not directly challenge views holding that there is not progress in philosophy or that progress is even possible. For instance, Nielsen (1987) holds that philosophy fails to produce anything that qualifies as philosophical knowledge. Mironov (2013) argues that philosophy does not advance, but rather philosophers continually provide new interpretations of classic problems. Dietrich (2011) gives us a stronger version of this position, holding that philosophy has not made any progress throughout its history; philosophers suffer from mental illness when thinking that their work counts as progress.

The views above assume that the only way to advance the discipline is to find definitive answers for classic philosophical questions (free will, existence of God, etc.). Arguing that philosophy progresses in various ways, Chalmers (2015) takes the conversation in a different direction, asking why we do not have more progress in philosophy. Within his inquiry, he points out there are other ways to make progress, such as new methods of philosophical practice, citing recent advances in experimental philosophy (*ibid.*). Despite such optimism, he has reservations about making progress through reaching a consensus on classical philosophical problems (*ibid.*)¹

While I agree with Chalmers' idea that new methods could lead to progress, I am also sympathetic to Mironov's point that philosophers continually provide new interpretations of old problems. Showing how these views are compatible means highlighting two different senses of 'progress.' For Mironov, we can infer that he considers progress to count as conclusively answering philosophical questions. Chalmers (*ibid.*), however, considers that formulating innovative ways to ask better questions qualifies as a form of progress. The difference here is that the conception of progress, according to Mironov, remains narrow. One could argue that this limited view of progress is arbitrary, undermining the importance of framing precise inquiries.

For philosophers asking any research question, discovering that the answer has problematic elements suggests a mistake in reasoning. Considering the notion that philosophic enterprise is about formulating good questions and providing substantive answers, strengthening the former should count as advancement. Maintaining that headway for the latter is the only path to progress does not suggest that adherents to this position cannot make progress. Yet, it does discount the process that composes a substantive portion of the philosophical experience. Considering that there are several ways to frame an issue, it is challenging to argue that the way that one shapes a question will not have a bearing on the possible answers. What is more, one can hold that if a philosopher refines her question, she could find a better answer. While there might not be anything inherently wrong with the attitude that only definitive answers count as progress, discounting such important aspects regarding how one forms an inquiry does not encourage researchers to consider that the shape (or the scope) of the question could be part of the problem or the exact problem itself.

¹ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, investigating how "progress" intersects with various definitions of terms such as "reason," "teleology," "history" might provide new insights and additional areas of inquiry.

For Chalmers, his account includes aspects that help us proactively work toward answers. In line with his view, philosophers of the city make unique contributions to philosophy's set of methods. Through developing new methodological approaches such as intra-disciplinary inquiries, they advance the discipline in a manner that is consistent with Chalmers' position above. To clarify this view, the section below examines the pattern behind interdisciplinary research questions. Juxtaposing this pattern with the structure of intra-disciplinary approaches in POTC exhibits how they are similar. Interdisciplinary research involves insights that come from two or more disciplines, but intra-disciplinary approaches require insights from two or more subfields from a single discipline (philosophy). Although a philosopher can rely on interdisciplinary research to support an intra-disciplinary argument, he or she employs two or more of philosophy's subfields to build a case. Bearing in mind that such practices are currently developing, they deserve attention to pinpoint how they qualify as a new form of progress.

Progress in Interdisciplinary and Intra-Disciplinary Research

While wrestling with research questions in urban planning, Rittel and Webber (1973) coined the term "wicked problem" to describe complex issues wherein researchers lack sufficient knowledge about the nature of problems that involve several interconnected elements, along with social and institutional uncertainties. Within academia, scholars addressing wicked problems are turning to interdisciplinary research methods to understand such problems (Butkus and Kolmes 2011). One could argue that interdisciplinary scholars prove that traditional research models are not the best way to produce new, useful knowledge.

For instance, one aim of interdisciplinary work is to expose more dimensions of a problem than researchers could uncover working through traditional means (Klein 1990; Butkus and Kolmes 2011). Gaining this view starts when a scholar or group brings two or more fields together to deal with a complex issue using techniques from each discipline. This kind of research reveals that the initial research question is also an instrument for telling us more about the world than previously anticipated. This 'more' accounts for the array of results that interdisciplinary research provides, including predictable and surprising outcomes. Such approaches offer insights into the quality of knowledge that comes from each field involved in a research project, providing testing grounds for the soundness of disciplinary tenets. If research leads to unexpected outcomes when applying theory to practice, then scholars could come to realize that they need to reconsider established beliefs.

Alternatively, if they find consistency between theory and practice, then researchers reaffirm a discipline's foundation. Such reaffirmation makes interdisciplinary approaches better prepared to address complicated issues that require expert training (Khagram et al. 2010). It also exhibits that bringing disciplines together can lead to socially applicable knowledge, perhaps signifying a change in the future of research protocols and customs. Being aware of complex challenges and wicked problems facing the world today, employing research practices with the benefits of having 'real-world' outcomes is an added benefit.

Considering that philosophy now has a wide span of research topics, along with a lengthy history, a similar pattern emerges that resembles interdisciplinary approaches. When a philosopher brings two or more subfields together to deal with a complex topic, one could argue that she gains an enhanced view of the problem. Employing two subfields to deal with a complex urban issue means that any progress made will rest on two different strands of research history in philosophy.² In turn, this kind of progress combines arguments that originate at different times and places within the literature. Due to its anachronistic and displaced nature, Girenok (2013) refers to this kind of progress as “polydiscursive,” meaning that it comes from many areas of study, noting that theoretical research does not always follow a straight path. In an article published elsewhere, I provided an example that (in hindsight) fits such a description:

Considering mass transit as an approach to sustainability and a humble contribution to combating the super wicked problem of global climate change, public transit in Portland, Oregon created immoral outcomes for minority populations. Latinos living on the edges of the city, for instance, witnessed bus services decrease, fare increases, and they report that some operators treat them poorly (OPAL 2012). Due to these conditions, vulnerable populations suffer, often spending several hours per day in transit. While these community members do not typically suffer physical harm, lengthy commutes take away needed family time, social responsibilities, and quality-of-life experiences (OPAL 2012). One can argue that long transit times take away from opportunities for personal growth and flourishing, unfavorable actions for moral outcomes. Through actions such as increasing bus service, municipalities can alleviate some of the harmful conditions, improving moral outcomes for the people, non-human ecosystems that benefit from reduced carbon emissions, and future generations who will benefit from conserved resources (Epting 2015, 11).

Within the passage above, the problem of using mass transit as a means for combating global climate change requires that we ground such an approach in several philosophical research areas. For example, (1) one could argue that holding that municipalities should alleviate harmful conditions to improve moral outcomes is a utilitarian argument. (2) Combatting global climate change as part of sustainability and considering non-human ecological systems often requires an eco-centric defense, a position in environmental ethics (Callicott 1989). (3) Accounting for future generations means that one must reference scholars working on the non-identity problem (Parfit 1982). (4) Not harming marginalized groups finds support in the environmental justice literature (Figueroa 2006). (5) Technologies, including vehicles, mediate our behavior and should be designed as such, a common view that philosophers of technology maintain (Brey 2014). While examining the congruency of the beliefs in (1), (2), (3), (4), and (5) are beyond the goals of this paper, this case illustrates that accounting for all of the ethical considerations for sustainable transit requires insights from several

² There are also cases wherein philosophers could engage in intra-disciplinary research that includes interdisciplinary efforts. While such cases add an additional layer of complexity, they do not distract from the intra-disciplinary character of such problems. It is possible that other complication would arise due to this aspect, but such cases are beyond the scope of this paper.

subfields such as moral theory, analytic metaphysics, environmental philosophy, and philosophy of technology.

Considering that the subfields above are areas within philosophy, relying on them to understand a complicated issue such as implementing sustainable transit counts as intra-disciplinary research. Stacking this methodology next to interdisciplinary work, the pattern behind them is quite similar. While moral theory, environmental justice, environmental ethics, and philosophy of technology have their own positions and technical vocabularies, combining these attributes gives philosophers a better view of the moral considerations required for addressing complex cases. In turn, we can categorize them as polydiscursive intra-disciplinary (PI) approaches.

Similar to interdisciplinary research, the hope is that combining strengths from subfields will uncover aspects of problems that individual subfields cannot reveal. While the primary benefit is increasing the quality of knowledge regarding the city and urban issues, there are indirect benefits for interdisciplinary research topics. In the passage above, for instance, transportation planners appealing to the moral and justice dimensions of this argument could discover an overlooked tension between human and environmental systems. Relying on moral theory to mitigate such problems counts as an additional benefit of employing such an approach.

A possible problem for using PI approaches concerns indirect philosophical commitments that remain embedded in complex moral or other philosophic positions. Relying on such positions to build an argument would endorse unknown commitments that might conflict with other views in the argument. In turn, these commitments might cause unforeseen problems. Environmental philosophy, for example, faces several criticisms that could be problematic for philosophers using them to support PI arguments. Ramachandra (1989) holds that debates within the literature promote imperialism. Hargrove (2001) argues that environmental ethics largely ignores environmental racism. Lawson (2001) points out urban environmentalists neglect the plight of the urban poor. Mills (2001) argues that environmental inquires fail to account for the political nature of race and place. These arguments illustrate that individual subfields often, by virtue of concentrating on some problems, unintentionally neglect other issues.

My point here is not to censure environmental philosophy. The motivation behind listing some of the problems in the environmental ethics literature is to point out that researchers engaged in PI research are at risk of unintentionally smuggling such shortcomings into their arguments. In turn, they should exercise discretion when employing theoretical devices, specific vocabularies, or specialized positions when building PI arguments. Due to the added benefit of employing research from two or more areas to address a complex urban issue, one could argue that the prospect of gaining insights into such problems outweigh the risk of carrying over unwanted commitments, holding that additional research or peer review could detect problematic commitments. Nevertheless, PI approaches could greatly vary, drawing on any combination of branches or subfields, creating challenging conditions for developing research protocols. Although this condition reveals difficulties, it does not entail the impossibility of developing such protocols.

One could question the originality of the PI approach, holding that other areas such as bioethics or neurophilosophy could also include PI arguments, benefiting interdisciplinary research inquiries. While that criticism is fair, it does not eliminate the claim

that such arguments result from the progression of philosophical research. On the contrary, this concern supports claims about the emergence of PI arguments through providing additional examples of their development. Examining several developing subfields could indicate that there is an increasing change in how contemporary philosophers address research questions.³ While such an undertaking is outside the purview of this paper, there are further implications concerning how PI arguments affect philosophy.

On the Heuristic View, the Global View, and Progress

Cellucci's 'heuristic view,' establishes criteria for what defines a fruitful enterprise in philosophy, and this view stacks up well against PI approaches, illustrating how they count as headway (Cellucci 2014). Through providing guidelines that identify philosophy that is progressive, he gives the progress-in-philosophy conversation a broad focal point for philosophers of all stripes to employ, providing a means to recognize philosophy that complements other disciplines and society. For instance, he argues that fruitful philosophy is continuous with the sciences, makes use of the results of scientific discovery, and strives to obtain a global view (*ibid.*).⁴ One might assume that a global view in this context concerns a position that is not subject to the interpretation of a particular culture. For Cellucci, this is not the case. A global view is one that spans across disciplines, suggesting multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary involvement from the sciences, humanities, and arts. For example, Cellucci (2015, 268) holds:

Only if we have a global view of the world and our place in it we may understand who we are and where we are going, and this requires that philosophy be an investigation about the world, and needs to use the achievements of the present sciences. Humanistic disciplines need not be viewed as opposed to the sciences, they can be viewed as disciplines that study human beings. Not only there are already several scientific disciplines that study human beings, such as psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, linguistics, but even the traditional humanistic disciplines, such as art and literature, may contribute to this study.

Considering that PI arguments emerge from different philosophic research strands, their composition must contain at least two views. For instance, Cellucci (2014, 273) argues: "According to the heuristic view, philosophy provides a global view. It is not limited to sectorial questions, so there cannot be a philosophy of mathematics alone, or physics alone, or biology alone, and so on." By virtue of this fact, polydiscursive intra-disciplinary research in philosophy of the city contributes to the formation of a global view. In other words, due to its intra-disciplinary character, POTC favors a global view, in

³ These increasing changes in philosophical research could also signal a need for philosophers to work or write as part of an interdisciplinary research team.

⁴ Although he gives fifteen indicators of fruitful philosophy, exhibiting how PI arguments satisfy these specific criteria could suggest a fruitful character. For more information, see Cellucci (2014) Rethinking Philosophy, *Philosophia*, 43: 271–288.

contrast to the sectorial ‘philosophy of’ positions that Cellucci discusses. In the example above that addresses sustainable mass transit, for example, we saw that such arguments can come from five different research areas. PI arguments, then, are conducive to forming a global perspective. In the same manner that philosophers can employ research from outside of their discipline, researchers across the university can employ PI arguments to support research about the city or an urban issue.

On a similar note, as a research area, the city holds steady as an interdisciplinary locus, drawing in researchers from across the university, from sociology to physics. For example, two theoretical physicists, Luis Bettencourt and Geoffrey West et al. (2007, 2010) illustrate how growing cities follow basic principles that allow for a significant degree of predictability by analyzing data sets covering over one hundred urban centers. Based on their findings, they call for researchers and professionals to contribute to a grand theory of urban sustainability (Bettencourt and West 2010).

From their research, they develop a ‘science of the city’ to help urban planners address problems that arise from population increases. They exhibit, for instance, that doubling the size of a city’s population only requires about an 85 % increase in infrastructure, including essentials such as roads and wastewater treatment facilities (Bettencourt and West 2010). From this finding, Bettencourt and West (*ibid.*) argue that high-density urban centers are efficient when it comes to resource consumption. While they provide valuable insights for understanding urban sustainability issues, they do not address the moral dimensions of urban planning or the related justice concerns such as the equitable distribution of public services. Although such dimensions fall outside of physics’ territory, philosophers can provide needed normative assessments. In turn, philosophers can contribute to a grand theory of urban sustainability while supporting the disciplines’ place in the world.

For instance, today’s cities face several challenges: rapid urbanization, vast social inequalities, resource scarcity, and climate change impacts, to name a few. A science of the city can produce information about the problems above, but it does not provide any guidelines for how municipalities *ought* to deal with such issues. Considering that the manner wherein municipal practitioners address such concerns remains subject to moral scrutiny, one can argue that the need for philosophy is paramount. As such, a philosophy of the city benefits a science of the city. The relationship between philosophy and science as described above suggests that relationships between philosophy and other disciplines are possible. Such reciprocal exchanges could also make philosophy fruitful, due to the production of new knowledge.

In addition to keeping philosophy continuous with science and making good use of its results, philosophy must also aim for a global view. For instance, Cellucci argues (*ibid.*, 274):

Classical analytic philosophy adopts the Socratic method of questions and answers, but preserves only its outward form, not the substance, that is, the serious search for answers to general questions. There is no evidence that a minute work on sectorial questions may lead to what is essential.

On the contrary, philosophy must not be limited to sectorial questions but

must give a global view. As Plato says, “anyone who can have a global view is a philosopher, and anyone who can’t isn’t.”

(Plato, Republic, VII 537 c 7).

Although Cellucci leaves the reader guessing about the exact definition of a global view, one can suppose that it is more-or-less synonymous with a view that is not limited to one particular position, school of thought, or discipline. Despite the challenges to knowing the entailments of a global view, we can infer that such an outlook requires that philosophers of the city reconcile new discoveries about the city or urban issues with other accounts within the discipline, views in the university, and social perspectives. They must examine how discoveries geared toward answering sectorial questions can challenge or complement existing knowledge.

During the comparison between interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary research, I argued that interdisciplinary findings can support or call into question basic disciplinary tenets. The same notion applies to PI arguments. They rely on research that comes from several distinct philosophical areas, involving several sectorial questions. One could argue that bringing several of these sectorial questions together to deal with a PI question increases the likeliness of obtaining a global view, rather than relying only on one philosophical research strand. The hope is that engaging in this kind of research leads to new forms of knowledge, giving philosophers and researchers across the university new directions for exploration.⁵

Future Research

One direction for future research is to examine how intra-disciplinary approaches could have additional impacts on the social world. Cellucci’s indicators for fruitful philosophy show how the discipline has academic and social value, and this notion suggests that we cannot discount the importance of knowledge that comes from other disciplines. For instance, several applied areas such as environmental ethics often rely on interdisciplinary support. Consider that environmental ethicists are in the business of making normative claims, often basing arguments on ‘real-world’ cases (Callicott 1989). While intra-disciplinary research accounts for new ways of conducting philosophical research, one can argue that certain cases will heavily depend on interdisciplinary elements. Perhaps this facet signifies a change in the goals of philosophical exploration. That is to say, this shift could involve philosophers working with researchers outside of the discipline or at least becoming familiar with their works. Philosophical progress, in a teleological sense, includes using other disciplines’ knowledge to address or solve problems in the world.

For example, to support a philosophical approach to urban sustainability, we can use research from human geographers such as Harvey (2008) and Smith (1986) to illustrate how forces such as capitalism shape cities, making them unsustainable due to the lack

⁵ While philosophers have advice for scientists and professionals dealing with normative issues, this is not their only contribution. For example, philosophers could benefit scientists through exploring how different forms of knowledge can be compatible or wherein difficulties might arise when there is incongruence.

of considerations for social justice. Such insights provide the necessary bridge between theoretical and applied research, giving philosophers examples that support normative and justice arguments. For instance, Harvey's work deals with residents' right to participate in selecting the kind of city that fits their needs while Smith argues that gentrification makes such rights available only to elite individuals (Harvey 2008; Smith 1986). Philosophers could engage in research projects that elucidate how Bettencourt and West's discoveries about the general regularities of urban growth intersect with injustices that Harvey and Smith illustrate.

Through using philosophy to make moral assessments of scientific results and established views in the social sciences, urban planners gain a well-researched perspective. Through employing this information, one could argue that they are better prepared to make decisions about how to create cities that support human flourishing. Although such benefits typically fall outside of most academic norms, this notion exemplifies how philosophers using PI arguments to work with municipalities on urban projects, perhaps signaling a 'hands-on' shift in research practices.

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