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Recognition as a Reference Point for a Concept of Progress in Critical Theory
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Ejvind Hansen

Recognition as a reference point for a concept of progress in critical theory.¹

In this paper I discuss the recent attempt of Axel Honneth of establishing a robust notion of progress through reference to recognitive structures. Given the post-metaphysical relativizations it is not an easy task to defend a robust notion of progress. It is questionable whether it is possible to maintain a view that both takes cultural and historical variations seriously, and still maintain some robustness. A notion of progress is necessary for Honneth because his aim is to articulate a starting point for a critical analysis of social relations. I discuss two strategies that can be found in his writings for founding a robust notion of progress. On the one hand he tries to found the notion of progress on how differentiated the recognitive structures are. On the other hand it sometimes seems as if he tries to found it on certain empirically revealed anthropological and psychological constants. I will argue that both strategies fail. The differentiation-strategy is too open, the psychological strategy is too narrow.

I will, however, argue that Honneth does not need the robust notion of progress. Even though it may be granted that a certain notion of progress is inevitable in critical discussions, it does not follow that it has to be a robust notion. I suggest that recognitive structures may serve as a universal *reference point* that can be used to *locate* disagreement (recognitive structures as such are always at play), rather than a robust universal *starting point* that can be used to *solve* disagreement (it is not given that we agree upon *which* particular recognitive structures should be furthered). I will argue that the quest for robust progress springs from a false alternative between an attributive and responsive account of recognitive structures.

I.

The relationship between critique and progress or improvement is very intimate. If critique is a pointing out of tensions between certain states of affairs (be it former, actual or future states of affairs) and certain ideas about how these states of affairs *should* be (have been, be, come to be) then at least a weak sense of progress is unavoidable: critique presupposes that it would – *ceteris paribus* – be *better* if these tensions did not exist. The critique does not have to entail a firm view on *how* the tensions should be resolved (whether to change the ideas or the reality). It does not even have to entail that the tensions *could* be resolved in a desirable way (maybe the tensions are necessary conditions for certain other, very desirable, states of affairs to be possible). It does, however, not make sense to point out tensions or problems if it is not entailed that it would – *ceteris paribus* – be better if these tensions were eliminated. Hence, critique (in this sense²) presupposes a notion of *improvement* or *progress*.

But how can we think of improvement or progress in a postmetaphysical culture? Due to a number of insights into embeddedness that developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (embeddedness in linguistic structures, pragmatic outlooks and aims, physical, psychological or sociological constitution, historical and cultural contexts, and so on) it has become hard to defend an absolute robust concept of progress – that is a concept of progress against which every state of affairs can be measured – because our embeddedness in contingent factors may change, leading to change in outlook and evaluative horizon. So apparently, what in one context is seen as progress may in another context be seen as regress

¹ The main body of this essay was presented at the Annual Meeting in *The Danish Philosophical Society*, February 21 2004. Another version of this discussion of Honneth's approach towards progress can be found in E. Hansen, "The Hegelian notion of Progress and its Applicability in Critical Philosophy", in *The Legacy of Hegel - Dialectics, Selfconsciousness, and Recognition*, A. Grøn, A. Sørensen, M. Raffnsøe-Møller (eds.), (Aarhus: NSU-press, 2008). In this paper I relate the Honnethian approach to the Hegel's notions of progress.

² I realize that it is rather brute to define critique in one paragraph and then leave it at that – given the very complex history of critical theory. In my Ph.D-thesis (not yet published) I have worked these analyses out in greater detail, but I will omit these reflections in this paper, since I take it that this is a point where there would not be a crucial difference between my own stance and the stance that I am going to criticize in the following – Axel Honneth's.

– or vice versa.

This is not to say that a notion of progress, and hence critique, is impossible. But certainly the reach of both progress and critique has been relativized. In order to criticize – or at least make critique effective – it is necessary that the disputants reach agreement on what should be taken as progress. There is, however, no relation between facts and values that can, undisputably, be taken for granted in critical discussions. Whether a specific alternative should be considered to be progress or regress is an open question, and in order to agree upon this, it will be necessary already to agree on a number of things in advance.

The problem with this situation is, certainly, that it seems to become possible to immunize oneself against all kinds of critique, because one can always claim not to agree with the presuppositions on which the critique is founded. This is the reason why certain critical theorists have invested a lot of energy in showing that there are still certain tools we can draw on in order to establish a more robust notion of progress – a notion of progress that it can be argued that we all (due to certain specifications) will *have* to ascribe to. The works of Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Hilary Putnam can be seen as an effort to come to terms with this problem.

II.

The works of Axel Honneth may also be inscribed in this tradition. In 1992 he published his most famous work – *Kampf um Anerkennung* – where he, drawing on insights of the young Hegel, showed that in mutual recognition the subjective interest of self-realization is intimately connected with the interests of others. Honneth furthermore argues that three kinds of recognitive relations generally play an important role in the formation of social structures: (a) Emotional devotion (often concretized as *love* or *friendship*); (b) Cognitive respect (often concretized in *rights*); (c) Social esteem (often concretized as *solidarity*).

Honneth acknowledges that both recognition and the three subspecies may take quite different shapes in different contexts – there is not just one way of showing emotional, cognitive or social recognition that can serve as a solid starting point for a concept of progress. But on the other hand, he is not willing to accept a purely local approach to recognition relations. So he has to navigate between a concept of recognition that on the one hand is open to different interpretations, but on the other hand helps us articulate a concept of progress that has some robustness. As early as in *Kampf um Anerkennung* he touched upon this issue, and it has been an ongoing concern ever since. Most explicitly it was accentuated in his contribution to the symposium on recognition in *Inquiry* 45 (2002).³

In this paper, which is a rejoinder to four critical papers on his general view, the difficulty of this balancing act is very marked. On the one hand, Honneth concedes that he is dependent on a robust concept of progress in order to justify the claim that current notions of recognition are not merely contingent, but the product of a learning process. He certifies A. Kauppinen's analysis of his view that it is an internal, reconstructive, strong critical approach – that is, the aim is to state a critique by pointing out tensions between actual states of affairs and norms that the addressees implicitly *necessarily* have to rely on. In this connection, the important implication is that he commits himself to be able to show *necessary* – that is universally valid – norms. On the other hand he acknowledges that it is necessary that the founding notions – that is self-realization and autonomy – have to be taken “in the most neutral sense possible”,⁴ since these notions have to be open to various cultural and historical shapings, and since he has to leave room for new improvements of them. The problem is, however, that the more neutral these notions are taken, the more they lose evaluative significance. In order for

³ A. Honneth, “Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions”, *Inquiry* 45 (2002), 499-519. See also his contribution to N. Fraser & A. Honneth *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. (London, New York: Verso, 2003), esp. 180-9+256-65.

⁴ Honneth “Grounding Recognition”, 516.

evaluative notions to have some kind of universal significance, they have – due to the insights into our local embeddedness – to be understood as open to various interpretations. But in order for this openness not to evolve into mere relativity, it is necessary to point out some point at which these notions are *not* open to interpretation. It thus becomes questionable whether it is possible to maintain a view that both takes cultural and historical variations seriously, and tries to maintain a notion of robust progress?

The notion of progress has to be less open to cultural and historical variation than that which is evaluated through it, because if the norm for evaluating the variations changed together with the variations themselves, it would not be useful as a comparison between two states of affairs. The norm for evaluation cannot vary as much as the evaluated object. But still the notion of progress may be open to certain variation. It may be that the notion of progress varies less often or at other times than the evaluated variation. A notion of *robust* progress would, however, have to be at least *partly* ahistorical. The robust characterization indicates that *something* does not change, that at least some aspects of the notion of progress resist cultural and historical changes – and hence can serve as a general norm for evaluating these changes.

According to which normativity can such a notion of robust progress be maintained – what could be the argument for a universal normativity inside an acknowledgement of historical relativity? Honneth is very well aware that this is a difficult question, and he does not pretend to have solved the problem, but it is his hope that the analyses into the cognitive structures of social relations can be shown to be fruitful for such undertaking. This is, however, not something that follows immediately from the original analyses, since they were mainly to be understood of analyses of how social structures develop through cognitive relations between individuals. At the outset the analyses were descriptive in a transcendental sense (that is they describe relations that are necessary conditions for the establishment of social relations), trying to extract some moral constraints that underlie social interaction.⁵ The task is thus to transform this description of moral constraints into a notion of progress that can be used in the analysis of the normative infrastructure of a given society. So the question is how these descriptions can give us insights into certain robust notions of progress.

I think that it is possible to distinguish between two strategies taken by Honneth in his working towards a solution. The subject of this paper is a critical *auseinandersetzung* with these strategies. I will show certain difficulties with both approaches. This raises the question whether this threatens the critical value of Honneth's general approach. In a further reflection, I will show that it does not. That Honneth does not need a *robust* notion of progress in order to maintain a critical impulse from his general approach. I will show that the quest for robust progress springs from a false alternative between whether to think of cognitive relations as attributive or responsive.

1. The differentiation strategy.

In the *Inquiry* paper Honneth tries to establish what I will call a *differentiation* concept of progress. In order to substantiate the concept of progress, Honneth turns towards the relationship between recognition on the one hand, and self-realization/autonomy on the other. He suggests that it is considered to be progress if the possibility of subjective self-realization and autonomy is furthered. And since this happens through cognitive relationships, self-realization and autonomy become richer, the more differentiated the cognitive relations become:

...it is the increases in individuality and social inclusion that jointly indicate progress in social acts of recognition [...] I have attempted to show that we ought to view the differentiation of various kinds of recognition not as an ahistorical *given* but rather as the

⁵ See for example Fraser & Honneth *Redistribution or Recognition*, 248-56.

result of a directional [EH: that is positive] process.⁶

The idea seems to be that societies that have differentiated cognitive structures (that is the cognitive structures embrace many different kinds of cognitive relations) is better than societies with less differentiated cognitive structures, because such differentiated societies would allow the participants to realize their potentials more fully. In order to assess this idea, it would be helpful to contemplate what “cognitive differentiation” could mean. In Honneth’s view, cognitive relations are (mainly) relationships between acting agents that love, respect or esteem each other in various respects. A differentiation of these relations would therefore mean that the notions of love, respect and esteem are broadened. The involved agents can love, respect or esteem in more differentiated ways – that is there are more aspects or dimensions of the recognized agents that are seen to be worthy of love, respect or esteem. This would entail that more agents are being recognized, and they are recognized in more subtle ways.⁷

Intuitively it seems reasonable to say that individuals that can relate to (and recognize) many kinds of individuals are richer than individuals that only recognize people like themselves. There is, however, a problem. Should we either feel devoted towards, respect or esteem a society that systematically tyrannizes certain groups? Perhaps yes, because there are other aspects of such a society that deserve recognition. But should we also feel devoted towards, respect or esteem the very tyrannizing aspects of that society? Are cognitive structures that entail esteem of tyranny *better* than cognitive structures that do not esteem tyranny?

It is easy to see that the tyrannic society itself – due to Honneth’s notion of progress – is to be assessed as inferior, because it most likely will show rather simple cognitive differentiation. But that is not the question. The question is whether it is wrong not to recognize tyranny itself. Is it not reasonable in such situations to say that there are certain aspects of society that *should* not be recognized? I doubt that anyone would deny that. It is true that, in order to criticize those in power in such societies, we will have to reach a cognitive relationship with them. But this does not mean that at the outset we have to recognize the tyrannic dimensions themselves – it is very likely that a critique will have to refer to some less brutal dimensions of these societies, and then try to convince the addressee that due to these humanist dimensions, should the tyrannic dimensions be dismissed.

The point is not that we should refrain from recognizing certain societies, because we assess them to be tyrannic. I think Honneth is right that cognitive relations are necessary in order to criticize and engage with despotic regimes. I merely claim that the recognition of such regimes has to be partial (focus upon the non-tyrannic aspects as a means to break down the tyrannic). And I claim that the differentiation strategy cannot account for this limitation in the cognitive outlook.

Hence, it is not always progress to widen the scope of recognition – there are certain differentiations that could be argued to be regressive. But is it then possible to say anything about when it is so – which differentiations are good? A robust notion of progress hinges on the possibility of making this distinction.

In order to defend the differentiation strategy on its own terms, one could argue that the recognition of tyrannic dimensions or aspects would not mean “increases in individuality and social inclusion” – that even though it may be called recognition, it does not constitute progress, because on a global scale it leads to less recognition: the recognition of the tyrannic dimensions (which in isolation is a social inclusion) furthers excluding relationships in a broader context. This *will* in certain cases free the concept of progress from its contra-intuitive

⁶ Honneth “Grounding Recognition”, 511 – emphasis by Honneth.

⁷ This relationship between cognitive differentiation and recognition of more dimensions of the agents are also spelled out in Fraser & Honneth *Redistribution or Recognition*, 181+184-5.

implications, but the problem remains whether we would not in some cases say that no social inclusion would have been preferable in relation to a particular kind of inclusion that is actually realized. Sometimes social inclusion is used to disarm a critical impetus. When a segment in society for example realizes that they in certain decisive respects are excluded from society. If the establishment does not find it attractive to include the group in the desired way, it is a common strategy to include the group in other (from a general perspective less decisive) respects. The group is thus included in a certain respect (attributed with devotion, respect and esteem), but on a broader scale this inclusion could be characterized as a regress, since it removed the impetus for a more significant inclusion.

A second way to defend the differentiation-strategy could be to grant that it *would* be progress to be able to recognize tyrannic and exploiting dimensions in the sense that the agents deserve recognition but not realization. So we should – for example – recognize the Nazi minorities of a society as participants in our legal system as having the right to express their views, but that they should not be allowed to *realize* their ideals. But this would lead to a rather abstract notion of recognition that would make it difficult to defend recognition as a reference point for critical reflexions. A notion of recognition that allow for no practical consequences (or at least only the consequences of *expressing* something) would be open to all kinds of repressive dimensions.⁸

It should be clear by now that I find it hard to see how the quantitative differentiation strategy could be the sole criterion for a robust concept of progress. The problem is that it does not narrow the concept of progress enough, because it is too open to different interpretations: we still need a more robust criterion for what to count as “good” recognition.

2. The psychological strategy.

The next strategy that I want to consider tries to limit the concept of progress further. It is the strategy of drawing on empirical psychoanalytic or anthropological constants. To claim that this is a strategy of Honneth’s is actually not strictly correct. I have not encountered an explicit statement by Honneth that his concern with these issues aims at a foundation of a robust concept of progress. On the contrary he sometimes warns against making too much of the importance of empirical psychology in his account.⁹ At the same time, however, he immediately after this states that,

...here we have a weak idea of the good, without which a conception of justice would have no aim.¹⁰

The significance of the moral-psychological elements is thus going to reach beyond the mere individual level, and attain implications about which directions the justice (which in Honneth’s account is a social notion) could have. The importance of the psychological elements for the establishment of social aims is also very marked in his “Unsichtbarkeit – Über die moralische Epistemologie von ‘Anerkennung’” (2001).

The strategy seems to be that if it is possible – through empirical psychological investigations – to point out certain human constants in types of recognition that are necessary, in order for the subjects to become persons in a society, then we would have a universal norm for progress: Activities that further this kind of recognition would universally

⁸ This is, furthermore, very clearly *not* a strategy that Honneth wants to take. He has, to the contrary, argued that the notion of realization should actually be a parameter in assessing whether recognitive structures should be considered to be genuine or merely ideological. See Axel Honneth, “Anerkennung als Ideologie”, *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* Vol. 1 (2004), pp. 51-70. The reason why I do not consider this strategy in this paper is that I take it to have the same deficiencies as the differentiation-strategy: it is in a certain sense also only quantitatively conceived, and as such does not delimit the notion of progress enough.

⁹ For example in Fraser & Honneth *Redistribution or Recognition*, 258.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

mean progress, and activities that prevent this kind of recognition would universally mean regress.

Honneth is very much at home in current empirical psychology. In *Kampf um Anerkennung* he draws heavily on D.W. Winnicott's insights into the relationship between mother and child, and how the individuality of the child is dependent on recognition and trust in the mother. Later, he also draws on H.W. Loewald's insights that even our instincts may be interpreted as mechanisms to establish intersubjective relations.¹¹ In his *Tanner Lectures*¹² he demonstrates how the work of Michael Tomasello and Peter Hobson illuminates the importance of recognitive relationships for the establishment of cognitive relationships. In the following, I will especially reflect on his use of Daniel Stern's insights into the importance of facial gestures between mother and child as a necessary condition for the evolving subjectivity and sociality of the child.¹³

Through the research of Stern, Honneth claims that we get to see in a clear light "make especially clear what those forms of expression through which a human being becomes 'socially' visible consist in" – namely the facial gestures between mother and child. The aim is to reveal "the fundamental mechanism of becoming socially visible and, in this in turn see the elementary form of all social recognition".¹⁴ And the implications hereof are that "every form of social recognition of a person then depends – in a more or less mediated way – on a symbolical relation to the expressive gestures".¹⁵ So, the aim is, through the mother-child relationship that is especially close to "nature", to get a clear sight of some of the necessary recognitive mechanisms that we have to take for granted in order to have intersubjective relationships at all. The nature of human psychology determines certain recognitive mechanisms that have to be available as a minimum.

I have three objections against this strategy. The first problem is a point that H.J. Schneider has developed.¹⁶ It is not fundamental in relation to the strategy of drawing on psychological insights as such, but is rather against a common approach towards the strategy. Schneider's point is that there is no direct link between mechanisms that are at play in a simple pre-subjective phase to mechanisms in the much more complex adult phases. It does not follow from the necessity of facial recognition between child-mother that this kind of recognition is crucial between adults too. Honneth reflects on this objection at the end of the paper. Honneth realizes that there is no such direct connection. The problem with recognitive relations between adults is just that it is difficult to determine whether they are a product of nature or culture. Human psychological nature is most clearly visible in children. But the price to be paid is certainly that we cannot be sure how crucial the mechanisms revealed actually are at a further developed stage!

As a development of this objection, one could furthermore argue that the analyses of Stern are most clearly relevant in relation to the recognitive relationship of love and care. Even if it is granted that Stern's results *can* be used to indicate the fundamental importance of love and care, it still needs to be demonstrated in what sense these insight are relevant in relation to the other dimensions of recognitive relationships.

The second objection turns towards the status of empirical psychology itself. The problem is that in order to function as a basis for a non-relative notion of progress, it is important that

¹¹ A. Honneth, "Objektbeziehungstheorie und postmoderne Identität" (2000) , in *Unsichtbarkeit. Stationen einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität*, A. Honneth, 138-61 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003).

¹² A. Honneth, "Reification: A Recognition-Theoretical View", *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 14-16 (2005), 91-135.

¹³ Honneth has written about this in Honneth "Unsichtbarkeit".

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁶ H.-J. Schneider "Universale Sprachstrukturen? Zu R. Brandoms 'expressiver Deduktion' der Gegenstand-Begriff-Struktur", in *Die Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft und die Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit*, Wingert/Günther (eds), 151-91 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001).

the insights that stem from it are non-relative themselves. And here, certainly, the history of psychological science ought to lead to caution. Early critical theory drew heavily on Freudian psychology, but during the last 30 years this Freudian influence has decreased radically – in parallel with the increasing critique of the Freudian stance from the psychological and philosophical sciences. In later times, the psychological theories of Piaget and Kohlberg have been used, even though none of these theories can claim to stand undisputed inside the psychological sciences. The same goes for psychological scientist like Winnicott, Loewald, Erikson and Stern who, even though the project of decentralization of the individual is recognized as important, do not stand undisputed either. Especially as to their concretizations, they have been disputed in recent years. My point is that psychology is not a neutral science itself. Just as it is the case that philosophical theories are embedded in certain contingent factors, it is also impossible to approach psychological research from a non-embedded point of view. Consequently, the results should be assessed as interpretations that make sense in relation to quite specific kinds of questions, rather than as revelations of some definite naturally existing object. Taken as such, these results may be quite effective tools for criticism of actual states of affairs (states of affairs that have made the questions posed relevant), but they cannot function as a basis for an ahistorical notion of progress. In the ahistorical perspective the psychological insights may – due to later developments – turn out to be at best inadequate, at worst repressive themselves.

So when, for example, Honneth uses the insights of Stern as an indicator of how the child turns into a person, he is relying on theoretical constructions that are at best working-hypotheses that currently seem to be able to bring the psychological sciences further in relation to some problems in these sciences. But this does not mean that the mystery of the creation of the person in the mind of the child is solved. Honneth would probably not claim the mystery to be solved either, but still he wants to press the significance of the research beyond its reach.

One might claim that Honneth in his more recent *Tanner Lectures* demonstrates an awareness of the above objections. In the *Tanner Lectures* Honneth first demonstrate that recognitive structures *ontogenetically* must precede cognitive structures, but then he goes on to say:

these kinds of speculations cannot of course substitute for the arguments that would be necessary if one wished to assert the priority of recognition over cognition in a conceptual sense.¹⁷

He then continues to show how the necessity of recognition also be shown in relation to the possibility of interpersonal communicative relationships. He does not connect these reflections with the notion of progress, but the question arises whether a similar strategy could be taken in order to reestablish the strategy of leaning against universal constants. For several reasons I do not think this to be the case. First of all because it merely allocates the problem from the status of the psychological to the sociological sciences. Secondly, because transcendental arguments of this kind do not establish criteria of progress, but of failure/success: if the transcendental conditions for communicative relations are violated we do not end up with *bad* communication, but rather with *no* communication at all.¹⁸ Finally (and most importantly), the turn to interpersonal communicative relations does not answer my third objection:

The third objection emerges from objections one and two. The point is that a critique that is based on psychological insights may be too narrow: even *if* we should succeed in isolating certain aspects of a human psychological nature, it is not certain that we could base a *robust*

¹⁷ Honneth “Reification”, 119.

¹⁸ This is also Honneth’s objection against Lukács (Honneth “Reification”, 125-7).

concept of progress on these aspects. On the one hand it could be that other aspects of human nature – that perhaps were not yet revealed – demanded other recognitive mechanisms. On the other hand it could be that certain aspects in human culture at certain times had a stronger influence on the persons involved, and if the interests of these aspects contradicted the interests of the universal natural aspects, respecting the natural aspects could lead to a regress all in all. The point is: in many situations there are both pros and cons, and in these situations it cannot be taken for granted that the aspects that are known to be universally important also always have the *greatest weight*! In some situations it makes sense to think of something as progress even though it may be said to be a slight offense against certain aspects of human nature – if it is in crucial favour of either other aspects of human nature, or of certain very important sides of human culture.¹⁹ A development that is abstractly considered as progress may in a global perspective actually be regress, because the abstract progress is at the cost of certain crucial losses. The psychological strategy focuses on aspects in isolation (even though these may be quite *complex* aspects), whereby the global state of affairs is reduced.

* * *

Taken together, I think that these objections show that the concept of recognition does not in itself provide a robust norm for progress, at least not as developed in the thought of Honneth. The problem is that the concept of recognition is itself too open to various interpretations to provide such norms. The differentiation strategy cannot account for “wrong” recognition relations, and the psychological strategy narrows recognition relations too much in (at best) only being able to take single aspects into account at a time. Perhaps it is possible to show certain recognitive relations to be necessary, but that is only in relation to *certain* features – and it still needs to be shown that these features are always to be counted the *most* important, that they always have enough weight to determine whether a relation constitutes progress relative to other relations.

III.

It has not been *proven* above that a robust notion of progress is impossible. It has merely been shown that Honneth’s account of recognition has not yet been shown fruitful for such notion. And as Honneth himself acknowledges: in our culture, a hypothesis of robust progress bears a heavy burden of proof.²⁰ I must admit that I am sceptical about the possibility of a robust concept of critique along the lines taken. As stated in the beginning of this paper, I agree that a notion of progress is necessary for critical theory. But I think that a *weak*, implicit, reconstructive approach to the notion suffices – as opposed to Honneth’s *strong*, implicit, reconstructive approach. Or in more plain words: critique does not have to draw on robust norms that are necessarily avowed by the addressee. It would certainly be easier to put forward a critique, if it could be taken for granted that the disputants agreed upon certain robust universal norms of progress. Weak universal norms can, however, also suffice as *reference points* for critical exchanges where no robust agreement exists. It is, for example, possible to think of a situation in which the disputants cannot agree upon particular norms of recognition. But recognition can still serve as a tool to *localize* disagreements, because the disputants can take it for granted that *some* notion of recognition must be at play. From this point, it is possible to deliberate differences and similarities in a critical exchange. Recognition can thus serve as a reference point in establishing notions of progress. But we cannot universally take for granted exactly *what* notion of recognition to turn to. This is open for the critical deliberation too. In that sense the notion of progress is always to some extent open for discussion too.

¹⁹ One should be careful with the distinction between nature and culture when discussing a Hegelian inspired approach like Honneth’s. I mainly use the distinction in order to point out historically variable institutions and constellations that may sometimes be considered more important than the protection of certain aspects of the human psychological nature.

²⁰ Honneth “Grounding Recognition”, 509.

I will elaborate on this weak notion of progress below, but before doing this it is important to notice what role the notion of progress is supposed to play. Why does Honneth believe that a robust concept of progress is necessary? The reflections on progress spring from a rejoinder to some considerations on the concept of recognition that Arto Laitinen and Heikki Ikäheimo have put forward.²¹ Honneth takes these considerations to show that it is necessary to choose between two main approaches towards critique: on the one hand, we can understand recognition to be a merely *attributive* relationship (that is recognition thought “on the model of attributions as a result of which the other subject acquires a new, positive property”²²). On the other hand, we can understand recognition as a *responsive* relationship (recognition thought of as “a certain kind of perception of an already independently existing status”²³).

Honneth’s problem with this situation is that both approaches may lead to relativism. The attributive approach leads to relativism because a purely attributive approach would lack

an internal criterion for judging the rightness or appropriateness of such ascriptions; instead, the variability of recognition would then have no boundaries, since anything could end up having to count as a capacity or status, as long as it comes about through an act of attribution.²⁴

The problem with the responsive approach is that in order to account for the status of the *reasons* for different kinds of response, it is also open to relativism, since these reasons will have to be founded on values that “represent lifeworld certitudes whose character can undergo historical change” – that is the responses depend on lifeworld-embeddedness.²⁵ This again opens for relativism, since the lifeworlds are culture-specific – apparently with no bridge between them.

It is in order to account for this kind of relativism that Honneth turns towards the concept of progress:

I have to rely on a conception of progress; for in order to show that the currently dominant norms of recognition are not just relatively but rather universally valid, it must be possible to assert their normative superiority over all previous recognition regimes.²⁶

In this quotation, Honneth does not talk about a *strong* (or *robust*) conception of progress, but I think that in order to establish norms of recognition as universally valid, it must be presupposed.

This is where I am more sceptical than Honneth: I do not think that we can show that currently dominant norms of recognition are universally valid. I do not even agree that we can neutrally argue that the present norms of recognition “have become differentiated as the result of a historical *learning process*.”²⁷ – that is that the current dominant norms necessarily must be thought of as better than preceding norms. Throughout history we may notice instances where it may well be argued that the then current dominant norms were rather a result of a historical oblivion process. An example of this could be the cognitive structures that came to surround the Jews in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. We cannot be sure that our present dominant norms of recognition will not be judged likewise. Honneth could of course

²¹ In A. Laitinen, “Interpersonal Recognition: A Response to Value or a Precondition of Personhood?”, *Inquiry* 45 (2002), 463-78 and in H. Ikäheimo, “On the Genus and Species of Recognition”, *Inquiry* 45 (2002), 447-62.

²² Honneth “Grounding Recognition”, 506.

²³ *Ibid.*, 506-7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 507.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 508.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 517.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 513 – my emphasis.

object that this assessment presupposes that the critic (in this case: me) himself has been through a learning process which has led him to the insights on which he bases his critique. In the moment of critique there has to be an assumption of a learning process that justifies a problematization of current states of affairs. In this sense, claiming the necessity of a learning-process-assumption is not to assume that we always move forward towards better constellations of recognition, but rather that *at the moment of critique* someone has been through a learning process that has shown critique to be called for. I would agree on this point, but do not see in what sense a *robust* notion of progress is called for to secure it. That would only be necessary if the critique was to be considered as non-criticizable itself.

One could press the point further and say that thinking of the current dominant norms of recognition as universally valid actually *precludes* critique. But I think that this would be a misreading of Honneth. Honneth is very well aware that universality-claims are fallible. That is: in his outlook, even if we take the current norms of recognition to be universally valid, we may still be aware that they are products of a learning process that is still ongoing. Consequently, it *is* possible that the current normativity could be shown *not* to be universally valid. We may be proven wrong, which would then lead to a new conception of recognition. And the new conception would then be taken to be universally valid – in the same way as the old one was. But the question is whether the universality of the norms for progress should not be thought of as fallible too? It needs to be shown in what sense it is possible, inside a fallibilist universality view, to extract certain norms for *progress* that are not fallible. And if this point is granted, I find it hard to see the decisive difference between a *strong*, implicit, reconstructive critique and a weak one. Or in other words: what is the point of characterizing the underlying notion of progress as *robust*? If the notion of progress is to be based upon norms that are extracted from the recognitive relations, and it is not possible to articulate robust norms for recognition, it follows that the notion of progress will vary (to some extent) together with reinterpretations of the recognitive structures. Just as in the weak approach it is admitted that the addressee of critique may try to avoid the critique by questioning the presupposed norms for progress, in the strong fallibilist approach the addressee may try to avoid critique by showing the underlying notions of recognition to be fallible.

I therefore suggest that we think of the notion of progress as something that is open to deliberation in the critical process too. It is true that the critic has to presuppose a norm of progress when criticizing, but in responding to the critique, the addressee may always take the strategy of rejecting this norm of progress.

IV.

What help is, then, the theory of recognition that has been developed by Honneth? How do we escape the threat of relativism that is so clearly one of Honneth's main concerns? How does an approach that takes progress as "open to discussion" differ from mere "relativism"? I think that relativity is not to be avoided, but just because questioning norms is *possible*, it does not mean that it is *easy* to do so! I think that Honneth's statement that we have to *choose* between the attributive and responsive approaches to recognition shows that he misses this point: it seems as if he thinks that attribution and response can be thought of independently. That if recognitive values are merely attributed, then there is no constraint of what might *successfully* be attributed. And that if recognitive values are merely a product of response towards certain states of affairs, then there will be no spontaneity (in the Kantian sense) or creativity (attribution) involved in the relation. But is this really a tenable analysis of recognition?²⁸ Is it not more reasonable to think of recognitive relations as both attributive and responsive. For instance in the parent/child relationship: it is evident that the way the parents relate to the

²⁸ Actually, it is not what neither Laitinen nor Ikäheimo suggest. Especially Laitinen emphasizes that inside the response model it will be necessary to think of recognition as attributive (or generative) too – Laitinen "Interpersonal Recognition", 468+474. See also Ikäheimo "On the Genus", 450 for Ikäheimo's point that the attributive recognizer has to be "recognizee-sensitive".

child to a certain extent “creates” the character (or the personality) of the child. And it makes a difference to the workers in a factory whether they are recognized as comrades or inferior wage-slaves. The recognitive relationships in these examples are attributive in the sense that they generate a self-relation that did not exist before. But this does not mean that recognitive relations cannot go wrong. The recognizer has to be recognizee-sensitive (Ikäheimo’s expression): if the parents relate to a baby with colic as being a generally happy child, then the attribution will fail, because the recognition will find no response. Absolute relativization is not possible.

My point is that recognitive relationships most obviously are *both* attributive *and* responsive.²⁹ If this point is granted, then it should be clear that even though we may not avoid relativity in toto, absolute relativism is no option either: recognitive relations may vary in relation to different kinds of lifeworld contexts, and may even change these contexts – but only to a certain degree. It is still possible to say that some recognitive relations will fail – due to recognizee-insensitiveness. The point that recognition has both an attributive and a responsive side is crucial in order to account for “wrong” or “bad” recognition (which is not the same as *lack* of recognition), because it is necessary in order for this idea to make sense that one can talk about a *tension* between attribution and response.

In critical discussions: even though it is possible to relativize, this does not mean that it is without consequences to do so. And sometimes the consequences may seem less attractive than granting the critique! This is actually where I think the importance of Honneth’s recognition analyses comes in: Honneth has shown us that it has severe consequences to reject the participation (both as a recognizer and recognizee) in existing recognitive structures and the norms that are inherent in these structures, since in a certain sense it means excluding oneself from the existing society, the communicative community, and rejecting important aspects of one’s self-image (self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem).³⁰ And even if it is possible to reject (or at least modify) these notions (the possibility of this we may encounter looking through historical and anthropological research)³¹ it is not *easily* done – at least not consistently. And the consequences of doing so may be regarded as harder to bear than accepting the critique posed.

In a meeting between people with very different outlooks, the theory of recognition may also prove to be of value when trying to establish a meeting from where discussion can take place. I think that Honneth has shown it to be reasonable to expect some notion of recognition is at play in all human cultures. And even though I may expect there to be a greater degree of discrepancy between different notions of this than Honneth, I still think that these analyses can be an important tool for establishing a meeting between greatly differing horizons: since we may expect the others to have a notion of recognition too, we can use this knowledge as a *reference point* for the further discussion. A discussion may start out trying to articulate the similarities and differences between norms of recognition, and from this point try to localize the fundamental differences that seem to prevent the parties from being able to meet. Having articulated these similarities and differences, they may be subject to further deliberation and discussion, where the parties may try to argue for or against the reasonableness of the differences. And *perhaps* a meeting may hereby afterwards take place. Honneth is certainly right that the lifeworld relativity opens up the possibility of not being able to meet. But the turn towards notions like recognition (Honneth), conditions for linguistic practices (Habermas), freedom (Foucault), or life goods (Taylor) will make this less certain.

This weak universality approach may be situated between robust universalism (Honneth’s

²⁹ Honneth might respond that his account of responsiveness also has room for the creative aspect that I mention, but then I find it hard to see what is meant by his “being forced to choose” (paraphrase of Honneth “Grounding Recognition”, 505) between the two approaches.

³⁰ For example in Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung*, esp. ch. 5+6.

³¹ In Fraser & Honneth *Redistribution or Recognition*, 138-42 Honneth actually admits that his tripartition of the recognitive structures is most clearly relevant in modern times.

approach) and absolute relativism in the following way: it differs from robust universalism in leaving the standards of recognition open to historical and cultural variation. In relation to absolute relativism, it makes a difference whether we on the one hand have to accept that recognition is not a necessary notion to deal with at all (the relativist stance), or we on the other hand can say that recognition is always to some extent at play, and that it can always be characterized through certain issues that are also always at play (such as emotional devotion, respect, esteem) – even though these issues are open to variation (the weak universalist stance). Because in the latter case some issues are indicated that we can always turn towards (and try to navigate within) when deep discrepancies appear. Then we can look into how the “strange” view positions itself inside this scheme, and whether this navigation seems to be coherent and tenable. And this can then be a *reference point* for discussion. Through the weak universal issues it becomes possible to *locate* discrepancies and hence also to discuss them. But this does not mean that we can always reach an end when discrepancies appear. It only means that we have some tools to turn to. Recognition as a universal *reference point* (in a weak sense) means a tool to *locate* disagreement, rather than a strong tool for *solving* it.

This is a less ambitious notion of the relevance of recognition in relation to critique and progress than the one Honneth seems to aim for. The decisive difference is that Honneth takes it that when criticizing we have to presuppose we are right (until proven mistaken in this presupposition), whereas I take it that it is possible to criticize with the presupposition of being less wrong. Granting that no view is without tensions, it would be preposterous in the critique to presuppose that we are right at the outset. The critic may very well take the critique to be merely a suggestion for further discussion. We may very well criticize somebody for being too repressive towards children, for instance. But this does not have to presuppose that we in advance definitely take ourselves to be right in our own cognitive relations. It may just as well be meant as a way of expressing our own presuppositions, in order for the addressee to object to it (giving reasons for why she thinks that her own approach is better – why either it is good for the children to be repressed in that way, or why the designated relation is actually not repressive). Through this discursive process we can perhaps arrive at a “better” solution in the end, this final (but still at the outset unknown) notion being the initial aim of the critique.

V.

Summing up, my point is that both of Honneth’s strategies towards reaching a robust concept of progress are bound to fail. The differentiation strategy, because it is too open, not being able to articulate in what sense some notions of recognition actually *should not* be taken as progress; the psychological strategy, because it narrows the concept of progress too much: it does not allow for a notion of progress in cases where regress in relation to the designated universal aspect is balanced by more important progress in non-universal areas.

But this does not prove the results of Honneth’s analyses to be without importance. Instead of being applicable in a robust, strong notion of progress, the recognition insights may be used in a weak notion of progress: a notion of progress that has to be settled on in concrete situations, where the recognition insights may be used as a *reference point* – a point from where we can *localize* differences in outlooks, hereby making it easier to arrive at a mutual understanding on the norms for progress.

This is the real importance of the search for universals in contemporary philosophy: taking the post-metaphysical situation seriously means acknowledging that robust universals (such as a robust concept of progress) are not possible, because the universal ideas on which we can agree have to be so abstract that they leave room for interpretations. But weak universals are possible because it is not without consequences to take a stance: ascribing to a certain outlook determines a certain relation to reality (attribution and response are mutually dependent). That is why relativity does not have to equate absolute relativism. It is true that this account gives

the critic a weaker tool against what she takes to be *very* wrong. But the question is whether it is possible to establish a stronger tool. The proposed strategies at least seem untenable. Would it not then be better to focus on what are the real gains of the proposed theory?

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