

Preprint. Published in:

Hansen, Ejvind: *The Hegelian Notion of Progress and Its Applicability in Critical Philosophy*

In:

Grøn, Arne; Raffnsøe-Møller, Morten; Sørensen, Asger (eds.): *Dialectics, SelfConsciousness, and Recognition : The Hegelian Legacy*, pp. 201–227, Aarhus Universitetsforlag, Aarhus, 2009.

The Hegelian Notion of Progress and Its Applicability in Critical Philosophy

In this paper I will discuss the relevance of the Hegelian notion of progress in relation to problems in present-day discussions of critical theory. I will claim that it is possible to distinguish between two levels of progress in Hegelian thought: a macro and an internal level. In Hegel's thinking these levels are inseparable, but due to certain insights into our embeddedness in contingent factors, it seems difficult to defend the notion of macro-level progress in its Hegelian shape in present-day philosophy. The question is, however, whether rejecting the notion of macro-level progress leaves the notion of internal level progress untouched, and, furthermore, whether it is possible to establish an alternative, non-metaphysically based account of the notion of macro-level progress.

Axel Honneth is an example of a philosopher who has rejected the metaphysical foundation of Hegel's view without at the same time being willing to reject the notion of macro-level progress. I will argue that his alternative strategies for establishing a notion of macro-level progress are not likely to be successful. I do not think, however, that he actually *needs* the notion of macro-level progress in order for his critical theory to have significant implications. Critique does not have to be based upon a firm notion of progress that never changes. I will argue that the defence against relativity (which seems to be urgent if the notion of macro-level progress is given up) does not have to stem from firm and robust ideals. Returning to Hegel's writings will show that absolute relativity is just as abstract an idea as robust macro-level progress. The renunciation of robust norms will, however, force critical theory to rearticulate its aims, since the aim of critical theory can no longer be to reveal norms for *solving* conflicts; at best, critical theory can reveal norms for *locating* disagreement, this being the first important step towards (perhaps) solving them.

* * *

In the following, I will take as my starting point the intimate connection between critique and some notion of progress. I will not claim this connection to be undisputable, but since this corresponds with the view that I am going to discuss, I will not address it in the present paper. I find it intuitively obvious that critique presupposes an idea that, perhaps in a very weak sense, a better state of affairs is possible. In pointing out that certain states of affairs are problematic, it follows that eliminating the problem would – *ceteris paribus* – lead to a better state of affairs. In this sense, critique presupposes a notion of progress.

But the notion of progress has gradually become problematic in the wake of a number of insights into our embeddedness in certain contingent factors that were revealed in the 19th and 20th centuries (such as embeddedness in linguistic structures, pragmatic outlooks and aims, physical, psychological or sociological constitutions, historical and cultural contexts, etc). It has therefore become problematic to defend an absolute robust concept of progress because the notion is itself embedded in such factors to some extent. So, what is seen as progress in one context may be seen as regress in another – or vice versa. It has thus become clear that the notion of progress has to be relativized in relation to certain factors of embeddedness.

Ultimately, these insights into embeddedness threaten to dissolve the notion of progress as such: the notion of progress is used to characterize the relationship between (at least) two states of affairs. But if the notion of progress were to be absolutely relativized, and the notion therefore differently conceived inside the two states of affairs, it could not be used to measure whether or not the development represented progress or regress. However, the insights into the various kinds of embeddedness do not necessarily take us that far. Even though they entail that relativization is unavoidable, they do not necessarily entail that relativization is absolute. But certainly the scope of both progress and critique has been relativized. In order to criticize – or at least make critique effective – it is necessary for the disputants to reach agreement on what should be taken as progress. There is no relation between facts and values that can be taken for granted in critical discussions.

Whether a development should be considered progress or regress is an open question, and in order to agree on this, it will be necessary to agree on a number of things in advance.

It thus seems that the notion of progress is under attack by the insights into our embeddedness. The extent of this attack can be demonstrated through a discussion of Hegel's writings, which are filled with reflections on the role of progress in the development of spirit.

1. The Hegelian notion of progress

It makes sense to distinguish between (at least) two levels of progress in Hegel's thought. On the one hand, progress is crucial on a macro-level: Hegel's works generally have a progressive structure in the way that they describe a development from an immediate and abstract level to a concrete and absolute level, a development that is clearly thought of in progressive terms. On the other hand, progress is crucial on an internal level: each object of reflection in Hegel's writings is found to carry its own *Aufhebung* (alternation or elevation) by pointing to its own negation. The negation is understood as the mediate; it is derived from the immediate and is the medium through which the immediate (in its conflict with the mediate) develops an understanding of how the immediate and the negation can co-exist.¹ On this internal level, progress is, as it were, a product of the object under reflection. Consequently, progress may vary on this level along with the initial object of reflection. This is, briefly, the dialectical structure of Hegel's writings.

It should be emphasized that this distinction is not in accordance with Hegel's interpretation of his own work. According to Hegel, macro-level progress is a natural product of the various internally conceived forms of progress. The reason why this is so can be found in Hegel's dialectical approach, especially in his thoughts on *Aufhebung*, but this aspect of his thought is not uncontroversial from a philosophical standpoint today.

In Hegel's thought the dialectical movement happens through *Aufhebung*. The *Aufhebung* of the dialectic between the immediate and the negation (mediation) into the concrete (absolute) is not to be understood as an abolishment or dissolution of the dialectic relationship, but rather as an alternation or elevation (*Auf-heben* = up-lifting) into an understanding of how the tension is not a problem, but rather illuminates limits to the initial understanding of the two. Yet, this is not enough to ensure that the notion of internal level progress also leads to the macro-level notion because it could be argued that the various elevations led in various directions – for example, if the elevations happened through certain reductions in the initially tense relationship. Further specification is therefore necessary. Thus, in the conclusion of *Wissenschaft der Logik* (1812-3/1816/1832) he further characterizes his method:

In the absolute method the Notion maintains itself in its otherness, the universal in its particularisation, in judgement and reality; at each stage of its further determination it raises the entire mass of its preceding content, and by its dialectical advance it not only does not lose anything or leave anything behind, but carries along with it all it has gained, and inwardly enriches and consolidates itself. (Hegel 1812-3/1816/1832, 2nd book, p. 250)

Even though Hegelian elevation is not to be understood as a *dissolution* of the tension, the quote shows that Hegel sees it as an absolute *reconciliation* in the sense that both aspects of the initially tense relation are *fully* taken into account in the elevated understanding. There is no remainder. *If* the new approach is to be questioned, it will happen through a new elevation that is even more all-embracing. This is what makes it reasonable to claim that '*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*'²: gradually we come to understand things better because we come to realize how things are connected as a whole. At the same time, this gradual understanding shows that the previous views are inadequately conceived;

¹It is slightly misleading to speak of co-existence since the notion of being itself is reflected on in these terms (Hegel 1812-3/1816/1832, part I, book I; Hegel 1817/1827/1830, part I, section I).

²(Hegel 1807, p. 18). The page numbers refer to the *Gesammelte Werke*. Felix Meiner Verlag.

hence, only the ideas that embrace the world as a whole can be said to be true.

In the light of the insights into various kinds of embeddedness, this aspect of Hegel's understanding of the dialectical movements has come under pressure. The reason for this is that *if* it is granted that every understanding is situatively biased, and that the bias is different in different situations, it becomes difficult to talk about *one* notion of macro-level progress because the notion of progress will potentially be shaped by the bias. This does not in itself challenge the point that the best understanding would be the one that embraced *everything*, but the idea is that even though this may be intelligible as an ideal, it cannot have practical relevance, since every specific account of all-embrace is embedded in (varying) contingent normative outlooks. These outlooks are founded on certain criteria of relevance that indicate that certain aspects of the world are accentuated – at the cost of others. The ideal of all-embrace is being challenged because it may be argued that there is no stance from which the degree of all-embrace can be assessed.

2. Honneth's attempt to revitalize the notion of macro-level progress

Axel Honneth is an example of a philosopher who tries to demonstrate how Hegelian insights are still fruitful in relation to critical theory in the wake of the embeddedness insights.³ An example of this is found in chapters 2 and 3 of *Kampf um Anerkennung* (1992) where he demonstrates that the early Hegelian reflections on recognition can be used as a starting point for understanding social relations.⁴ Honneth's point is that in relations of mutual recognition a contrast does not necessarily exist between social and individual interests. The argument is (in short) that self-realization depends on receiving different kinds of recognition from others, and we can only receive (or at least appreciate) recognition from subjects that we recognize. So, (1) on the one hand, in recognitive relations there is not an unbridgeable gap between egocentric and non-egocentric interests. (2) On the other hand, mutual recognition is shown to be a starting point for subjective and social relations. Honneth furthermore suggests a general division between significant kinds of recognition: (a) emotional devotion (often concretized as *love* or *friendship*), (b) cognitive respect (often concretized as attributing *rights*), and (c) social esteem (often concretized as *solidarity*).

The theory of recognitive relations did not initially aim towards establishing a robust norm of progress. At the outset it was a theory of moral psychology. Yet, at the same time, Honneth has sought to demonstrate that the notion of recognition can be used to establish a robust notion of progress. 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).

One could say that in doing so Honneth tries to reunite the notions of macro-level and internal level progress. He is well aware that a notion of macro-level progress does not make sense in abstraction of various contingently embedded outlooks. The notion of macro-level progress is therefore to be considered something that 'ha[s] become differentiated as the result of a historical learning process' (Honneth 2002, p. 513) – i.e. progress is not an ideal that is already there 'above' processes, but is rather the result of actually developing processes. However, Honneth is not satisfied with the Hegelian account of macro-processes because it is too shaped by metaphysical premises (Honneth 1992, p. 107), and these premises are not combinable with present-day insights into theoretical embeddedness. Honneth therefore undertakes to substantiate the thought by drawing on empirical psychological insights, with reference to Mead and Winnicott in the early phase; later he also refers to psychologists like Loewald and Stern. The question is, though, whether Honneth succeeds in presenting a strategy for substantiating a notion of progress in an alternative manner. This

³Another version of the following discussion of Honneth's approach to progress is published in a separate paper titled 'Recognition as a reference point for a concept of progress in critical theory' in *Critical Horizons* 10:1 (2009).

⁴*Recognition* is used here as a translation of Honneth's key term, *Anerkennung*. Recognition is probably not the best translation of the term, but since it is used in all published translations, I use it too.

is what I will discuss in the remainder of this paper.

In his *Inquiry* paper, Honneth states that he is dependent on a robust concept of progress. This is necessary, so he claims, in order to justify the assertion that current notions of recognition are not contingent, but rather products of a learning process. Furthermore, he corroborates A. Kauppinen's claim that Honneth's aim is to establish a critique that points out tensions between the actual practices of the addressees and the norms that they implicitly and necessarily rely on. In this connection, the important implication is that he commits himself to being able to show *necessary* – i.e. universally valid – norms. On the other hand, he acknowledges that the founding notions – i.e. self-realization and autonomy – must be taken 'in the most neutral sense possible' (Honneth 2002, p. 516), since they have to be open to various cultural and historical shapes (i.e. embeddedness), and he has to leave room for new improvements of them. The question is, however, how neutrally these notions can be taken without them losing their significance. How is it possible – given the embeddedness insights – to maintain neutral universal criteria for critique? Is it not a consequence of the embeddedness insights that robustness and universality are not reconcilable? The embeddedness insights entail that neutrality is only possible inside a local or regional field, and that universality is only possible in terms that are so abstract that they tend to lose their significance (in order to be open to the different shapes that the embeddedness may take). Is it possible to maintain a view that takes cultural and historical variations seriously and tries to maintain a notion of robust progress?

The point is that the notion of progress has to be less open to cultural and historical variation than the relations which are evaluated through it. If the norm for evaluating the variations changed along with the variations themselves, it would not be able to compare the two states of affairs. However, this condition does not preclude that the notion of progress may be open to variation to *some* extent. It is possible to conceive of a notion of progress that (for certain reasons) changes. This merely implies that the preceding assessments should be revised. But a notion of *robust* progress would 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? In other words, what could be the argument for a universal normativity (given an acknowledgement of historical relativity)? Honneth is aware of the difficulty in answering these questions and he does not pretend to have solved them. I think that it is possible to distinguish between two strategies adopted by Honneth in his effort to find a solution. In the remainder of this section I discuss these strategies, pointing out certain problems with both approaches. Since Honneth himself claims critical theory to be dependent on a robust concept of progress, this raises the question whether the critical impulse of Honneth's work can still be defended. In section 3 I argue that it can. Honneth's quest for a robust notion of progress springs from a false alternative between an attributive and responsive account of recognitive relations. In section 4 I return to the Hegelian account of progress in order to show that it entails a possible approach to Honneth's concern over the possibility for critique without a robust norm of progress.

2.1. The differentiation strategy

In his *Inquiry* paper, Honneth seeks to establish a notion of progress based on *differentiation*. Honneth argues that the notion of progress can be substantiated if one analyses the relationship between recognition and self-realization/autonomy. According to Honneth, it is an example of progress if individual self-realization and autonomy are furthered, and since this happens through recognitive relationships, progress is achieved by differentiating the recognitive relations:

...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 result of a directional [EH: i.e. positive] process. (Honneth 2002, p. 511 – Honneth's emphasis)

The point is that a society which recognizes many different kinds of subjectivity is richer than one with limited structures of recognition – because a differentiated society leaves room for diversity. Not only the individuals who resemble those in power are recognized; also odd individuals are allowed to flourish. And this recognition benefits the odd individuals, but it is also good for those who recognize these odd individuals. In this strategy, progress is viewed quantitatively: an *increase* in kinds of recognition equals progress.

This strategy is in fact closely related to the Hegelian conception of progress. The Hegelian move from the immediate and abstract level to a concrete and absolute level is in fact a shift away from a narrow and simple understanding of limited phenomena to an understanding of how plural and complex the concrete world actually is. The question is, however, whether the notion of differentiation in itself can serve as foundation for a notion of progress. Just as the *Ganzheit* ideal has proven unfeasible, it could be argued that it is difficult to establish which recognitive approach is the most differentiated; maybe the degree of differentiation turns out to be revealed only in relation to an embedded standpoint; the differentiation may turn out to merely focus on certain kinds of recognition to the detriment of others.

This objection is, however, less serious in relation to Honneth's approach than in relation to Hegel's. Honneth is well aware that ideals should be understood as regulative *critical* ideals that can only be substantiated in concrete (embedded) situations. There is no such thing as *one* ideal of differentiated recognitive approaches. Which approach is to be considered most differentiated is something that is determined in actual practices. But the question remains whether it is reasonable to say that differentiated patterns of recognition as such are better than less differentiated patterns. Is it possible to infer from a quantitative differentiation to a qualitative assessment of progress?

Intuitively, it certainly seems reasonable to say that individuals that recognize many different kinds of individuals are richer than individuals that only recognize people like themselves. But can this intuition be broadened infinitely? Would the intuition also confirm that we should recognize evil practices? This question is a difficult one because it immediately opens the discussion of the nature of evil. However, this is not a discussion that needs to be solved in the present context, since the question can be reformulated thus: Should we recognize *every* kind of practice? Is it progress to include practices in our recognitive outlooks that are explicitly, and intentionally, harmful towards large groups? In many cases, the answer could be yes, because these practices may serve some purpose that we take to be fruitful (to an extent that the fruitfulness counterbalances the harm). But the question can be pressed even further: Should we also feel devoted towards, respect and esteem the harmful dimensions of these practices? It is easy to see that societies with many tyrannical practices are – according to Honneth's notion of progress – low on recognitive development. But that is not the question. The question is whether it is progress to recognize evil, tyranny or other harmful practices.⁵ I claim that it is not. It is true that we will have to reach a recognitive relationship in order to criticize and hence try to convince those in power to change these evil practices, but this does not mean that at the outset we have to recognize the evil practices themselves. Hence, it is not always progress to widen the scope of recognition.

In order to defend the differentiation strategy on its own terms, one could argue that recognizing evil practices would not entail 'increases in individuality and social inclusion' – that evil practices does not constitute progress because on a global scale it leads to less recognition; in other words, the recognition of evil, tyrannical or harmful practices (which in isolation would constitute social inclusion) furthers exclusive relationships in a broader context. In certain cases this *will* free the concept of progress from its counter-intuitive implications. The question is, however, whether in some cases one should say that *no* social inclusion is preferable to certain kinds of inclusion that are actually realized. The following example serves to illustrate this idea.

In 1999, nurses in Denmark began carrying out contractual wage negotiations because their wages had fallen behind those of other comparable trade groups. Their own explanation of why this

⁵This question cannot be avoided by referring to the lack of consensus about what should be considered evil, tyrannical or harmful. It can only be avoided by a reader who thinks that nothing is evil, tyrannical or harmful.

had happened was that they had been recognized as a very special kind of worker for a long time – the kind who does not primarily work for money but to help people in distress. They talked about the Florence Nightingale narrative. In a certain sense, one could say that the Florence Nightingale narrative is actually very positive. People considered someone with a nurse's uniform a Good person (with a capital 'G'), whereas a hospital manager is considered less valuable because he does his job in order to earn a salary. At the same time, however, this recognitive narrative served as a tool for repression: the nurses were not paid well and they had poor working conditions.⁶

For the sake of argument, I take it that at the outset the Florence Nightingale attitude was not a mere strategic tool developed in order to exploit the nurses. Rather, it was a means of social inclusion, indicating something along the lines of 'I recognize you as a good person'. The nurses were thus inscribed in a certain social position. And the question is whether this position, which is founded on high recognition, is preferable in relation to the simpler recognitive approach at play between other wage earners and their employers. It is very clear that the nurses themselves (in the 1999 wage negotiations) preferred not to be recognitively included in this way because it furthered some mechanisms that they regarded as oppressive. This particular situation shows that in some cases social inclusion helps to maintain rather repressive social institutions because the social exploitation is hidden behind a varnish of social respect. Inclusion is therefore not in itself a guarantee for progress.

It could be objected that the reason why the increase in the recognitive capabilities of the Florence Nightingale defenders is not progress is that the expressed recognition is not symmetrical and therefore not genuine legal recognition. But this defence is also problematic. In a certain sense, every recognitive relation between different subjects is asymmetrical because what can be recognized in the other is different from what can be recognized in oneself. In another sense, though, it is true that (at least legal) recognition also has to be symmetrical in a certain respect: it is not possible to engage in legal recognitive relations without both participants recognizing each other as worthy of cognitive respect. In this sense there *is* certainly symmetry in the example. But this could also have been achieved without the Florence Nightingale ideal and its negative side effects.

A second way to defend the differentiation strategy is by granting that it *would* be progress to be able to recognize evil, tyrannical and harmful practices, in the sense that the practitioners deserve recognition but not realization. So we should – for example – recognize the Nazi minorities of a society as participants in our legal system and therefore also recognize their right to express their views, but not allow them to *realize* their ideals. However, this would lead to a rather abstract notion of recognition that would make it difficult to defend recognition as a reference point for critical reflection. A notion of recognition that allows for no practical consequences (or at least only the consequences of *expressing* something) would be open to all kinds of repressive practices.⁷ The most obvious objection to such a strategy is that it is not always clear exactly *which* practices should not be allowed to be realized. In addition, it is not always easy to sum up exactly how 'many' kinds of recognitive relations are furthered through particular practices.

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 differentiation strategy does not limit the concept of progress enough because it is too open to different interpretations. A more robust criterion is still needed to identify cases of 'good' recognition. The metaphysical foundation of the Hegelian approach served as such a criterion. Having rejected this part of the Hegelian approach, Honneth has to deliver an alternative.

2.2. The psychological strategy

⁶This is the self-narrative that the nurses articulated in their wage battle. The truth is probably much more complicated, and personally I am not quite convinced that the nurses made the right decision in the battle, but for brevity I will accept this narrative in what follows.

⁷Honneth himself has rejected this strategy (Honneth 2004, pp. 51-70). The problem is that recognizing practices that are not allowed to be realized may serve rather oppressive ideological strategies.

This is where Honneth's psychological strategy enters the picture. With this strategy Honneth tries to limit the concept of progress further. It is the strategy of revealing certain empirical *psychoanalytic/anthropological constants* in order to take these as a starting point for substantivizing the notion of progress. Honneth has never explicitly stated that his interests in psychoanalytic insights aim towards establishing a robust notion of progress. On the contrary, he sometimes warns against an immediate shortcut between these insights (and his interest in them) and general critical theory (Fraser/Honneth 2003, p. 258). At the same time, he has, nevertheless, indicated a hope that these insights can lead towards a general idea of the good (Fraser/Honneth 2003, p. 259). In (Honneth 2001) it also seems quite obvious that this is his aim.

Through insights gained from empirical psychological investigations, the strategy seems to be to point out certain human constants in types of recognition that are necessary in order for subjects to become persons in a society, and then to identify a universal norm for progress. Activities that further this kind of recognition would universally signify progress, and activities that hinder it would universally signify regress.

Honneth is very much at home in current empirical psychology. In his writings he draws on D.W. Winnicott's and Daniel Stern's insights into how the individuality of the child is dependent its mother's trust and recognition. He also draws on H.W. Loewald's insights into the idea that even our instincts can be understood as mechanisms to establish intersubjective relations (Honneth 2000). In what follows, I will focus upon Honneth's use of Daniel Stern's insights into the importance of facial gestures between mother and child as a necessary condition for the child's evolving subjectivity and sociality.

Through Stern's research, Honneth claims that we 'make especially clear what those forms of expression through which a human being becomes "socially" visible consist in' (Honneth 2001, p. 18) – specifically, the facial gestures exchanged 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...' (Honneth 2001, p. 19). And the implications of this 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...' (Honneth 2001, pp. 19-20).

Through the mother-child relationship, which is especially close to 'nature', the aim is therefore to gain a clear image of some of the necessary cognitive mechanisms that have to be present in order for intersubjective relationships to exist at all. The nature of human psychology determines certain cognitive mechanisms that have to be available as a minimum.

To my mind, three objections challenge this strategy. The first problem is that it is not certain that one can infer from mechanisms at play in simple pre-personal phases to mechanisms at play in more complex adult phases. This is a point that H.J. Schneider has developed (Schneider 2001). It therefore does not follow from the necessity of mother-child facial recognition that this kind of recognition is crucial between adults too. Honneth reflects on this objection at the end of (Honneth 2001) and acknowledges the point. The problem with cognitive relations between adults is precisely 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!

The second objection is directed towards the status of empirical psychology itself. In order for empirical psychology to serve as a basis for a non-relative robust notion of progress, the insights of the psychological sciences themselves must be non-relative – i.e. empirical psychology must escape the relativizing implications of the embeddedness insights. Yet this is not the case. It is impossible to approach psychological objects through non-embedded points of view. The results of psychological research should therefore 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. Hence, the results of psychological research may serve as effective tools for criticizing actual states of affairs, but they cannot serve as a foundation for an ahistorical notion of progress. In the ahistorical perspective psychological insights may – due to later developments – turn out to be at best inadequate, at worst repressive themselves.

My third objection to this strategy is based upon the other two. The point is that a critique that is based on psychological insights may be too narrow: even if it were possible to isolate some universal aspects of a human psychology, it is not certain that we could base a concept of progress on these. On the one hand, other aspects of human nature (that are not yet revealed) could demand opposing cognitive structures. On the other hand, some aspects of human *culturation* could require that the demands of the human nature be put aside. The point is that no demands are isolated; rather there are often opposing demands. Even if it is demonstrated that certain cognitive structures are universally demanded by human nature, it is not certain that the *universal* demands are always the most *important* demands. In some cases it should not be considered progress to redeem the universal demands – because sometimes the non-universal demands that oppose the universal demands are more important. A development that is abstractly considered progress may actually be regress in a global perspective because abstract progress involves 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. The above example of the nurses' wage negotiations could (at least if one does not take the nurses' self-narrative as the only one possible) be used to demonstrate how cognitive structures contradict each other:⁸ The nurses had to choose whether to be recognized as altruistic persons or as wage earners who deserve a decent income. They could not have it both ways.

These objections show that it is not possible to provide a robust norm for progress through the notion of recognition (as it is developed in Honneth's writings) because the notion of recognition is itself too open to various interpretations to provide such a norm. The differentiation strategy cannot account for 'wrong' recognition relations, and the psychological strategy narrows down recognition relations too much in (at best) only being able to take single aspects into account at a time. It may be possible to show the necessity of certain cognitive relations, but only in relation to *certain* features – and it still needs to be shown that these features should always be considered the *most* important, that they always have enough weight to determine whether a relation constitutes progress relative to other relations.

3. Do we need the notion of macro-level progress?

This does not prove that a robust notion of progress is impossible. It has merely been shown that Honneth's account of recognition has not yet been proven fruitful for such a notion. The psychological approach has not been proven fruitful as a form of compensation for the metaphysical premisses that founded the Hegelian approach. 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 article, I agree that a notion of progress is necessary for critical theory, but, unlike Honneth, I do not think that the notion needs to be robust. In other words, I think that the notion of internal level progress makes sense even if it is not possible to have *one* macro-level notion. The concept of progress is necessary in order to explicate the importance of critique and the results of critique. But I do not think that it is necessary or possible to say once and for all *in what way* critique is important. The critique advanced is always itself open to further criticism and evaluation, precisely because the underlying notion of progress is open to discussion. However, this openness towards variation in norms of progress calls for reflection on the sense in which the openness is limited – that is, in what sense the notion of progress does not dissolve into mere relativism. This is probably Honneth's main concern when arguing for a more robust notion of progress.

In this section I will argue that a possible key to articulating how relativism is avoided can be found in the *Inquiry* symposium. His reflections on progress spring from a rejoinder to some considerations on the concept of recognition that Arto Laitinen and Heikki Ikäheimo have put forward (In Laitinen 2002 and Ikäheimo 2002). 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

⁸The example does not contain cognitive structures that have been shown to be *universally* relevant for acting agents. Since I am sceptical about the possibility of demonstrating such structures, I obviously find it difficult to offer an example of them.

recognition as a merely *attributive* relationship (i.e., recognition considered ‘on the model of attributions as a result of which the other subject acquires a new, positive property’ – (Honneth 2002, p. 506)). 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’ – (Honneth 2002, pp. 506-7)).

Honneth is uneasy about both approaches because they may both lead to a relativism that would make critique impossible. 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’ (Honneth 2002, p. 507). The problem with the responsive approach is that in order for it 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’ – i.e. the responses depend on lifeworld embeddedness (Honneth 2002, p. 508). This in turn paves the way for relativism, since the lifeworlds are culture specific – apparently with no bridge between them.

In order to avoid relativism, Honneth introduces his reflections on 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. (Honneth 2002, p. 517)

In this quote, 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, a strong conception must be presupposed.

As should be clear by now, I am more sceptical than Honneth about the possibility of revealing norms of recognition that are universally valid. Nor do I agree that we can neutrally argue that the present norms of recognition ‘have become differentiated as the result of a [unequivocal] historical *learning process*’ (Honneth 2002, p. 513, my emphasis) – i.e., that the current dominant norms must necessarily be thought of as better than preceding norms. It may be argued that history reveals several instances of existing dominant norms resulting from a historical process of oblivion. Our present dominant norms of recognition may be judged likewise. Actually, some critical grassroots groups make these arguments already (e.g. the Attac and Seattle movements).⁹

Honneth might object that the criticism raised inside these movements presupposes that the critics themselves have been through a learning process which has led them to the insights on which they base their critique. The critics have to presuppose a learning process that justifies the problematizations. In this sense, claiming the necessity of a learning-process assumption does not involve assuming 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 the necessity of critique. I would agree on this point, but do not see why a *robust* notion of progress is called for to secure the notion of a learning process. This is only necessary if the critique is considered to be non-criticisable itself.

Honneth’s search for universals, however, does not aim at such critique-blocking arrangements. Honneth is very well aware that universality claims are fallible and hence criticisable. In other words, in his view, even if we take the current norms of recognition to be universally valid, we are still aware that they are products of an ongoing learning process. Consequently, the current normativity could be shown *not* to be universally valid. We may be proven wrong, which would then lead to new conceptions of recognition. And the new conception would then be considered universally

⁹A good example of this can be found in (Klein 2000, especially chaps. 9-11). In this book the author argues that the wealth produced in welfare states in Western Europe and North America is to a large extent made possible by oblivion of the poor conditions under which people work in sweatshops.

valid – in the same way as the old one. But the question is whether the universality of the norms of progress should not be thought of as fallible too. If the universality of the robust norms of progress is thought of in fallible terms, I find it hard to see what the significance of the *robust* characterization should be. Because, just as it is admitted in the weak approach that the addressee of critique may try to avoid the critique by questioning the presupposed notion of progress, in the robust fallibilist approach the addressee may try to avoid critique by proving the universal notion of critique 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.

The question is where this leaves Honneth's general theory. Is the theory of recognition fruitful in a critical theory? How is the threat of relativism to be avoided? How does an approach that takes progress as 'open to discussion' differ from mere 'relativism'?

In the following, I will argue that some of Honneth's problems stem from a false alternative. I think that Honneth's statement that we have to *choose* between the attributive and responsive approaches to recognition shows that he misses an important point. He appears to think that attribution and response can be thought of independently; that if recognitive values are merely attributed then there are no constraints on what might *successfully* be attributed – and that if recognitive values are merely a product of a response towards certain states of affairs, then there will be no spontaneity (in the Kantian sense) or creativity (attribution) involved in the relation. However, this is not a tenable analysis of recognition.¹⁰ Rather, recognitive relations must be understood as *both* attributive and responsive. It is, for example, evident that to a certain extent the way parents relate to their child 'creates' (or shapes) the character of the child. Similarly, it makes a difference to factory workers whether they are recognized as 'Florence Nightingales', comrades or inferior wage slaves. The recognitive relationship in these examples is attributive in the sense that it generates 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 employer relates to the nurses as 'Florence Nightingales' but they do not identify themselves as such, the recognitive relationship will fail – there is, as it were, no foundation (response) for the recognition. Absolute relativization is thus not possible.

Recognitive relationships are therefore most obviously *both* attributive *and* responsive. This is of relevance to the discussion of relativism: even though we may not avoid relativity, this relativity is not so absolute that critique becomes impossible. Recognitive relations may vary in relation to different kinds of lifeworld contexts, and may even change these contexts, but only to a certain degree. Some recognitive relations will fail because of recognizee insensitiveness. The relationship between the attributive and the responsive aspect of recognitive relations is open to critical discussion. 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 in order for this idea to make sense it is necessary to be able to speak of a *tension* between attribution and response.

Honneth's analyses have shown us that rejecting existing norms of recognition has severe consequences, since in a certain sense it means excluding oneself from the existing society and the communicative community, as well as rejecting important aspects of one's self-image (self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem). Even if it *is* possible to modify these notions, it is not *easily* done – at least not if the alternative recognitive structures are to be both consistent (consequent attribution) and adequate (sensitive towards responses). The consequences of such relativization may thus be regarded as harder to bear than accepting the critique posed. So even though it is possible to relativize, it is not always attractive to do so. Sometimes accepting the critique may be more attractive.

¹⁰Actually, this is not what either Laitinen or Ikäheimo suggests. Laitinen in particular emphasizes that inside the response model it is necessary to think of recognition as attributive (or generative) too (Laitinen 2002, pp. 468 and 474). See also (Ikäheimo 2002, p. 450) for Ikäheimo's point about the attributive recognizer having to be 'recognizee-sensitive'.

The analyses of recognitive structures may, furthermore, be of value in meetings between people of very different backgrounds. I think that Honneth has shown that it is reasonable to expect that some notion of recognition is at play in all human cultures. And even though I may expect a greater degree of discrepancy between different notions of this than Honneth does, I still think that this can be an important tool for establishing a meeting between greatly differing horizons: since we may expect others to have a notion of recognition too, we can use this knowledge as a *reference point* for further discussion. The parties involved in a discussion may start out trying to articulate the similarities and differences between their norms of recognition and then from this point try to localize the fundamental differences that seem to prevent them from being able to meet. Having articulated these similarities and differences, they may subject their similarities and differences to further deliberation and discussion, possibly attempting to argue for or against the reasonableness of the differences. And *perhaps* a meeting will take place. Honneth is certainly right that lifeworld relativity opens up the possibility of not being able to meet. This cannot be avoided. But the turn towards notions of recognition can be a valuable tool if the discussing parties are willing to *try* to meet.

This approach differs from *robust universalism* in leaving the standards of recognition open to historical and cultural variation – the concrete actualisations of recognitive structures are open to critique. It differs from *absolute relativism* in indicating some weak issues universally at play (recognitive structures, including emotional devotion, respect, esteem¹¹) that we may expect to find in all cultures even though they vary. These weak issues are important because they make it possible to *locate* disagreement as to fundamental elements in differing cultures. This does not mean that we can reach a satisfactory *conclusion* when discrepancies appear; it only means that we have some tools to put to use. Recognition as a universal *reference point* (in a weak sense) serves as a tool for *locating* disagreement rather than a strong tool for *solving* it.

4. Critical philosophy with a less ambitious account of progress

My point is thus that Honneth does not succeed in establishing a robust alternative to Hegel's metaphysically based notion of macro-level progress. I have furthermore argued that he does not actually need it – if he is willing to revise his understanding of the progressive structure of critical arguments. We may still operate with notions of internal level progress – we just cannot take for granted that they always move in the same directions. This revised understanding actually finds support in the writings of Hegel:

If it was once the case that the bare possibility of thinking of something in some other fashion was sufficient to refute a given idea, and the same naked possibility, the general thought, possessed and passed for the entire positive worth of actual knowledge; then we find here all the value ascribed to the general idea in this unreal form [*Form der Unwirklichkeit*], and the resolving of the determinate and distinct; or, in other words, the speculative style of contemplation is being understood as the hurling down, that what has not been justified, into the abyss of vacuity. (Hegel 1807, p. 17)

The Hegelian point is that pure attribution does not in itself lead to dialectical development – but rather to mere repetition. Attributions are only fruitful if they are directed towards something that in a certain sense is out of the attributor's hands:

The determinateness appears at first to be so solely through its relation to something *else*; and its process [*Bewegung*] seems imposed and forced upon it due to an external power [*fremde Gewalt*]. But its having its own otherness within itself, and the fact of its being a self-initiated process – these are implied in the very simplicity of thought itself. (Hegel 1807, p. 40 –

¹¹In his paper in this anthology Henrik Jøker Bjerre indicates that this list of recognitive key issues should probably be extended.

Hegel's emphasis)

The reason why this is so is that there would be no inner tension or heterogeneity if the attributions were not directed towards something in relation to which they could be right or wrong (in a broad sense). The '*sich selbst bewegende und unterscheidende Gedanke*' (Hegel 1807, p. 40) is only self-moving because it consists of *both* attribution and response. Putting it trenchantly, one could say that *Aufhebung* consists in a reflection on and reaction to the *relationship* between attribution and response.

In this sense the immanent notion of progress in the Hegelian approach may still prove to be fruitful in relation to critical philosophy. Norms of progress are always at play internally in actual situations because situations always point beyond themselves and are not purely self-reliant (attributions and responses are mutually dependent). This is not to say that the notion of macro-level progress should (or could) be wholly abandoned: due to the embeddedness insights it is just not possible to establish a notion of macro-level progress in an absolute and one-dimensional sense.

This is, to my mind, the situation critical philosophy has to accept. It leads to a less ambitious notion of the relevance of recognition in relation to critique and progress than the one Honneth aims for. But it 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 which we can *localize* differences in outlook and thus make it easier to arrive at a mutual understanding of the norms of progress.

If we accept the insights into embeddedness, it follows that every approach is in some sense limited. Accordingly, several differing approaches may be equally fruitful in actual situations. This is one of the reasons why the differentiation strategy has a certain intuitive appeal: if there is not one (e.g., recognitive) approach or pattern that is the best (in an absolute sense), it is reasonable to say that the best approach is the approach that is open towards several (but not necessarily all) aspects of human life. And this is a very Hegelian thought: the best approach to the world is the approach that is able to understand how seemingly opposing or heterogeneous aspects can meaningfully co-exist. This is the Hegelian challenge to every succeeding philosophy. The quest for a *robust* notion of progress seems, however, to point in the opposite direction: toward unification and one-dimensionality (this is the reason why it is not sensible to label Hegel himself a critical philosopher). And, as demonstrated in this paper, this one-dimensionality is not necessary in order to escape absolute relativism.

Literature

Fraser, N. & A. Honneth 2003. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London, New York: Verso.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1980 (1807). *Phänomenologie des Geistes. Gesammelte Werke* 9. Hamburg: Felix Meiner.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1981 (1812-3/1816/1832). *Wissenschaft der Logik. Gesammelte Werke* 11+12+21. Hamburg: Felix Meiner.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1992 (1817/1827/1830). *Encyclopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Gesammelte Werke* 20. Hamburg: Felix Meiner.

Honneth, A. 1992. *Kampf um Anerkennung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Honneth, A. 2000. 'Objektbeziehungstheorie und postmoderne Identität'. In A. Honneth 2003. *Unsichtbarkeit. Stationen einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 138-61.

- Honneth, A. 2001. 'Unsichtbarkeit – Über die moralische Epistemologie von "Anerkennung"' . In A. Honneth 2003. *Unsichtbarkeit. Stationen einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 10-27.
- Honneth, A. 2002. 'Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions'. *Inquiry* 45, 499-519.
- Honneth, A. 2004. 'Anerkennung als Ideologie'. *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* Vol. 1, 51-70.
- Ikäheimo, H. 2002. 'On the Genus and Species of Recognition', *Inquiry* 45, 447-62.
- Klein, N. 2000. *No Logo*. London: Flamingo.
- Laitinen, A. 2002. 'Interpersonal Recognition: A Response to Value or a Precondition of Personhood?'. *Inquiry* 45, 463-78.
- Schneider, H.-J. 2001. 'Universale Sprachstrukturen? Zu R. Brandoms "expressiver Deduktion" der Gegenstand-Begriff-Struktur'. In Wingert/Günther (eds) 2001. *Die Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft und die Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 151-91.