

Universal Injuries Need Not Wound Internal Values A Response to Wysman

Jordan Bartol

In his recent article, *Internal Injuries: Some Further Concerns with Intercultural and Transhistorical Critique*, Colin Wysman provides a response to my (2008) article, *Is Internal Critique Possible?*. In his article, Wysman offers a very complex and robust account of the failure of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. Wysman ultimately supports my assertion – that Honneth's theory fails to provide a universal ground for moral criticism – while arguing that the route by which I arrived at my conclusion was unnecessarily complicated. In what follows, I will provide a brief recapitulation of my argument and expand on how I take my position to be situated relative to Wysman's argument. Doing so will necessarily require an explication of the difference between my assertion that Honneth must provide a universal ground for criticism – as opposed to a culturally relative ground – and Wysman's insistence that Honneth provide an internal form of critique rather than an external one. I will conclude with what I believe to be a very dense philosophical and meta-ethical question raised by this exchange about the relationship between internal moral critique and the universal grounds for moral critique.

In my original piece (Bartol, 2008), I explained that Honneth was forced to rely on a theory of moral progress when attempting to adjudicate between competing tokens of recognitive norms.¹ In these instances, Honneth (2002) asserts, we must rely on the presumption of moral progress to determine which of a set of competing and conflicting moral norms are antecedent and which are the latter. It is Wysman's contention that by appealing to

¹ Though Wysman did not draw attention to the differences between our two accounts of moral progress, I should acknowledge here that Wysman's account is perhaps more faithful to Honneth's intentions than mine – though a full exploration of this claim is not possible here. That Wysman's account *is* more faithful can only be confirmed by a more rich explanation of what Honneth calls the 'surplus of validity.'

Universal Injuries Need Not Wound Internal Values

diachronically prior norms, Honneth's theory necessarily fails. Wysman is correct in noting that this is an important departure from my critique of Honneth. In my 2008 article, I asserted that we must illustrate the problems with the *application* of Honneth's notion of moral progress before concluding that the theory fails. For Wysman, however, the fact that Honneth appeals to moral progress *at all* is grounds for dismissal because the historically prior norms to which we appeal when using a theory of moral progress are external to the lifeworld in question.²

Wysman was able to arrive at the conclusion that my approach to finding flaw with Honneth's theory was redundant precisely because his criteria for the success of a moral theory are different from mine. This difference is present implicitly in Wysman's article but I will here attempt to make it somewhat more clear.

In the section of his paper entitled, "Forms of Social Critique", Wysman provides the reader with a brief explanation of internal critique. In one of many points of convergence between our two positions, Wysman's explanation of internal critique is roughly congruent with what I referred to as the efficacy of Recognition Theory in the section of my paper entitled, "The Intersubjective Construction of Norms". This does not mean, however, that Wysman and I hold Recognition Theory to the same yardstick. Though he has not stated this explicitly, I take Wysman to be asserting that Honneth's theory – and perhaps *any* moral framework – will be deemed a successful universal and universally efficacious theory if and only if it can meet the criterion of both strong internal/reconstructive critique *and* provide a universal ground for moral criticism. It is at this point where the interstice between my position and Wysman's position begins to become visible.

As Wysman rightly surmises, internal critique is extremely valuable. Internal critiques lay bare the implicit and explicit norms of a given lifeworld and demonstrate incongruence between these norms and the action, decision, or

² For an explanation of the concept of a 'lifeworld' see (Bartol, 2008, pp. 58) or (Honneth, 2002, pp. 508).

LYCEUM

belief being criticised. This process lends a degree of rhetorical power lost when we attempt to affect change using norms external to the lifeworld within which we are working. This distinction between internal and external critique is often used interchangeably with the distinction between universal and contingent (or culturally relative) grounds for criticism. It is my contention that the universal/contingent distinction is *not* the same as the internal/external distinction. Becoming more clear on this difference will shed some light on the reason for the differences between Wysman's approach and my own.

When we are attempting an internal critique, we begin by identifying values (either implicitly or explicitly held) within a given lifeworld. We then utilize those values in our critique by demonstrating the way(s) in which they are being violated. Now we must concede that it is at least logically possible to identify a value that is held – either implicitly or explicitly – in *all* lifeworlds; this would be a universal value and thus a universal ground for critique.³ Attempts to locate such universal values often begin by looking into values inherent in human life as these are necessarily universally held by all human beings. Regardless, any value that is identified and proclaimed as a universal value must also be valued at least implicitly in *every extant lifeworld*. For such a value would hardly be universal were it not valued universally.

The studious reader might have noticed, however, that earlier I referred only to the universal *grounds* for a critique, not a universal *value*. Such grounds might be a universal value – as Honneth asserts recognition to be – but need not take the form of a value at all. A universal ground for criticism might be in a universal human action or a universally articulated feature of human social organization. Although, as stated earlier, an appeal to implicit values is necessary for a maximally effectual criticism, I would like to assert that it need not be those internal values that are the universal element of the critique.

³ That this will ever actually be accomplished is another story entirely. Axel Honneth certainly purports to have done so with the universal value of recognition. All I wish to assert here is that it is theoretically possible to identify a universal value.

Universal Injuries Need Not Wound Internal Values

I thus disagree with Wysman's reasons for rejecting Honneth's theory. For Wysman, the appearance of external values in Honneth's method of critique was sufficient grounds for repudiation since no value can be both external and universal. While it is certainly true that no external *value* can be grounds for universal critique, it might still be the case that a universal critique might have a valid (non-value based) ground while relying on both internal *and* external values. This assertion is not something I have here the space to explore fully, but it is an assertion the validity of which I do not believe either Wysman or I have sufficiently ruled out. In an attempt to make this assertion somewhat clearer, I will conclude with a brief and preliminary sketch of what I believe a universally grounded critique relying on values both internal *and* external may look like.

In the section of his paper entitled, "Historical Moral Progress as an External Evaluative Principle", Wysman commented on Honneth's reliance on the concept of a 'surplus of value'. According to this concept, all lifeworlds contain the implicit conviction that, "no matter how closely ... a [lifeworld] conforms to its implicit norms, it always ought to be presupposed that a higher moral reality is achievable" (Wysman, 2009). Wysman rejects Honneth's reliance on this concept, asserting that by "using a non-existent and hypothetical future reality as the yardstick for normative judgement ... Honneth would appear to be appealing to external values." (Wysman, 2009). While Wysman is correct in his assertion that said values would be external and thus non-universal values, he might be wrong to conclude that this prevents Honneth's (or any) moral theory from being universalizable. While I still assert that Honneth's theory is *not*, as formulated, grounds for universal moral criticism, the concept of the 'surplus of value' might provide for us a model of a universal criticism that relies on both internal and external values.

If we accept provisionally Honneth's assertion that the surplus of value is present in all lifeworlds, we can begin to see a possible formulation of the type of universal moral theory I have in mind. The values to which such a surplus of value might point are certainly external to the lifeworld in which the

LYCEUM

surplus is to be found. I believe Wysman provides sufficient proof of this claim. Nonetheless, a critique based on the surplus of value claim would involve appeals to values both internal and external while being grounded in a universally articulated characteristic of human social organization (the surplus of value). First, such a critique would maintain the rhetorical efficacy of an internal critique by exposing the implicit norms of the lifeworld. Second, the critique would involve an articulation of the external norms of the previous or future lifeworld in order to expose the current norms as either primary or secondary (depending on the purpose of the critique) to the external norms. Finally, said critique could be grounded universally in the universal experience of the surplus of value.

As a matter of clarification, I do not necessarily endorse the aforementioned framework for moral criticism. Rather, I am using it to explore the possibility of a theory that is universally applicable while still using external values. As it stands, the above theory is too underdeveloped to either endorse or reject. What I hope to have provided is the beginnings of an investigation into the problem of universal moral criticism and its relation to internal and external values. I am thrilled that Wysman's response has afforded me the opportunity to bring some of these important issues to the surface. As expected, I leave this exchange with more questions than I when I entered – but I relish the opportunity to address more fully some of the questions that I have today left unanswered.

University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario, Canada

Universal Injuries Need Not Wound Internal Values

Bibliography

- Bartol, Jordan. (2008) Is Intercultural Critique Possible? An Examination of Recognition Theory. *Lyceum*, 10(1), 55-67.
- Honneth, A. (2002) Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions *Inquiry*, 45, 499-519.
- Wysman, Colin (2009) Internal Injuries: Some Further Concerns with Intercultural and Transhistorical Critique. *Lyceum*, 10(2).