

**PROGRESS AND CRITICISM OF PROGRESS AS A CHARACTERISTIC
OF MODERN CIVILIZATIONS IN THE WORK OF FRIEDRICH
NIETZSCHE AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN¹**

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Abstract

Superficially, the proximity of Wittgenstein's work and its undisputed influence by Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas and concepts suggests that there are also overlaps in the large and in Nietzsche's work decisive field of progress and criticism of progress. The article tries to show that this is not the case. Despite all the overlaps that may exist between Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein, these do not come to light in the concept of progress and the critique of progress. Both thinkers pursue a very different movement of thought; Wittgenstein sees Nietzsche's focus on the "idea of great progress" as a "delusion", which he does not consider to be expedient. Ludwig Wittgenstein explicitly distances himself here from the spirit that defined the prevailing European and American civilization in the 1930s. He does not succumb to the delusions of grandeur of new, higher-level civilization, but leaves progress as the constantly progressing background noise of any civilization.

Keywords: Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, progress, criticism of progress, civilization.

1. The term "progress" and progress as a concept

When thinking about progress and criticism of progress in Ludwig Wittgenstein's work, the possible influence of Friedrich Nietzsche is not far away. Nietzsche was a major influence on Wittgenstein, and there is no question that his ideas also influenced parts of Wittgenstein's work (cf. Brusotti 2009; Arnswald 2024). However, a valuable nuance is lost in this tow, because while Nietzsche is characterized above all by a fundamental, almost radical critique of progress and civilization, this

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would be a far too one-sided view of Wittgenstein's thinking, which always stands out through a "both and" (cf. Arnswald 2001) and always through processes of weighing up that almost tormented the thinker himself.

This article focuses on a comparison of the concept of progress in Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The term progress is derived from the Greek *επίδοσις* for addition, increase or achievement or *προκοπή* for advancement, diligence (cf. Zachriat 2001, 28). No matter how you look at it, progress always focuses on future improvements through change.

The term "progress" is not an unproblematic one. Reinhart Koselleck differentiates the term based on three phases: In phase 1 the subject is universalized, in phase 2 subject and object swap roles, whereby progress mutates into a historical driving wave and establishes itself as the driving force in relation to history, and in phase 3 it then becomes a standing concept, insofar as the concept becomes independent and talk of progress as such takes place without its content being reflected upon (cf. 1979, 388f.).

The concept of progress is always linked to an objective or direction, but this should not be confused with a teleological end goal (cf. Zachriat 2001, 24). There can be no final goal for the concept of progress, as it does not end with the achievement of a certain goal. Rather, it remains unlimited in every respect – both in terms of content and time. At the same time, however, it points to something new to strive for. The finalistic therefore refers to the desirable, which is in the future.

The concept of progress is often equated with improvement, i.e. a development that corresponds to a form of movement towards a higher and more qualitative form. This uniform further development of evolution is an illusion that hardly corresponds to reality. Progress is neither uniform nor conflict-free.

Friction and rejection are part of the concept of progress. Behind this criticism, an aspect inevitably emerges that raises the question of whether progress does not also include a negative element. On the other hand, progress must always include something worth striving for, otherwise it would hardly seem worth preserving.

This raises the broader question of what constitutes the defining characteristic of progress. It is precisely this fault line that can also be found in the comparison of Nietzsche's and Wittgenstein's concepts of progress, which will be the subject of closer examination here.

2. Nietzsche's concept of progress

Nietzsche's understanding of progress in the general sense is negative, as it represents "a false idea" and not a "development towards the better or stronger or higher". At this point, it is not possible to speak of criticism, because "a false idea" is such a damning judgment that there is hardly any room for maneuver. Hardly anything good can come from a false idea, and in this respect, one cannot speak of Nietzsche's pessimistic attitude alone. This would be too euphemistic. Nietzsche's devastating credo in *The Antichrist* is unmistakable:

Humanity does *not* represent a development for the better, does not represent something stronger or higher the way people these days think it does. 'Progress' is just a modern idea, which is to say a false idea. Today's European is still worth considerably less than the Renaissance European; development is *not* linked to elevation, increase, or strengthening in any necessary way. (Nietzsche 2005, 5)

Nietzsche's equation of "modern idea" with "false idea" is particularly striking. If modern is always wrong, progress in the sense of evolution can hardly be justified. The term "progress" does signal a movement "away" from something, but it is unclear where this movement is supposed to go. While the "progress" of "progress" represents an evolutionary development for most people, Nietzsche sees in this only a behavior that *prima facie* looks like progress. On the other hand, he irrevocably demands radical and epochal change as progress: "Let us only *go forward*, let us only make a move! Perhaps what we do will present the aspect of *progress*." (Nietzsche 1996, 118)

With his reference to the Renaissance European, Nietzsche makes it clear that he is talking about epochal change, epochal upheaval. In *Antichrist* (1888/89), Nietzsche is concerned with an even more radical progress, with a complete break with the past and thus the setting of a completely new departure, so that "no progress will be made against it by denouncing it as merely immoral" (Mencken 1931, 21).

Nietzsche's progress is different from the progress of his time. This becomes clear in *Daybreak* (1881), where he casually comments on the general idea of progress by saying that, "[w]hen one lauds *progress*, one is lauding only the movement and those who refused to let us stand still" (Nietzsche 1997, 224), but at the same time heroically claims it for himself:

I prefer *going on ahead* and those who do so: those, that is to say, who again and again leave themselves behind and give no thought to whether

anyone else is following behind them. 'Wherever I stop I find myself alone: so why should I stop! The desert still stretches away!' (Nietzsche 1997, 224)

Nietzsche therefore does not lament the price of progress, but rather demands the willingness to pay an even higher price to ascend to the Olympus of true progress and not to speak out in favor of a brittle evolution of progress. Just over a year earlier, his judgment on progress was a little more open, albeit similarly radical. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) he states:

To speak plainly: even the partial *reduction in usefulness*, decay and degeneration, loss of meaning [*Sinn*] and functional purpose, in short death, make up the conditions of true *progressus*: always appearing, as it does, in the form of the will and way to *greater power* and always emerging victorious at the cost of countless smaller forces. The amount of 'progress' can actually be *measured* according to how much has had to be sacrificed to it. (Nietzsche 2007, 51-51)

Now the idea that something must be sacrificed for progress is a well-known one, to which Nietzsche obviously subscribes. So here we find the question of the price of progress, which must be bought by means of sacrifices. It undoubtedly represents part of the ambivalence of progress. This image is still relevant today and in this rudimentary form is in no way specific to Nietzsche. Progress as such is not called into question, but only its usefulness for individual measures if the magnitude of the progress does not outweigh its disadvantages.

This process makes progress morally questionable. The question arises as to whether all means of progress are justified. This end-means relationship is at the root of the criticism of progress. Because if all means were necessary for progress, the end would justify the means. Without this knowledge, the moral value of the means cannot be compared to the end. A uniform assessment of progress is therefore not possible. The dialectic of progress therefore always raises the question of the correct and justifiable relationship between ends and means. The question that then automatically arises is whether we can and must welcome progress in its entirety or not. If the goal of progress is to be welcomed, do we also have to approve of all the intermediate steps?

Surprisingly, Nietzsche recognizes a kind of goal of the critics of progress, namely in the form that at some point there should be nothing more to fear. Accordingly, the failure to provide a guarantee of non-fear is the causal flaw that critics of progress accuse progress of having:

Whoever tests the conscience of today's European will always have to draw out the same imperative from a thousand moral folds and hiding places, the imperative of herd timidity: 'our desire is for there to be *nothing more to fear* some time or other!' Some time or other – the will and the way *there* is called 'progress' everywhere in Europe today. (Nietzsche 2007, 150)

This wish that there would be nothing more to fear in the future is at the root of any widely known criticism of progress. But not for Nietzsche. Such progress is not radical enough for him, not willing to pay the high price, when the "amount of 'progress' can actually be *measured* according to how much has had to be sacrificed to it." (Nietzsche 2007, 52)

Nietzsche only wants progress if it is accompanied by radical change. His critique of progress is a critique of progress with the handbrake on, which does not radically reach for new possibilities and therefore does not lead humanity to higher things. For Nietzsche, true progress can only come about where there is the will and the path to greater power, regardless of the price that countless smaller forces must pay for it.

Progress therefore means placing humanity on a new cultural level, which is also a new culture. In *Human, All Too Human* (1878), he sums this up succinctly: "This new, conscious culture destroys the old, which viewed as a whole has led an unconscious animal- and plant-life; it also destroys mistrust of progress " (Nietzsche 1996, 25) and at the same time excludes progress in the evolutionary sense, because "progress in the sense and along the path of the old culture is not even thinkable." (Nietzsche 1996, 25)

Nietzsche's concept of progress is a Darwinian one that emphasizes the "struggle for existence" as a struggle for survival: "To this extent the celebrated struggle for existence does not seem to me to be the only theory by which the progress or strengthening of a man or a race can be explained." (Nietzsche 1996, 107) The selection of man and race is not an oversight or a kind of misinterpretation in view of Nietzsche's nuanced philosophy, but is the core of what he sees as the essence of man and the races in their daily struggle, especially when Nietzsche ultimately sees the "struggle for existence" as a "struggle for power" (cf. Nietzsche 1996, 107):

Two things, rather, must come together: firstly, the augmentation of the stabilizing force through the union of minds in belief and communal feeling; secondly, the possibility of the attainment of higher goals through the occurrence of degenerate natures and, as a consequence of them, partial weakenings and injurings of the stabilizing force; it is precisely the weaker

nature, as the tenderer and more refined, that makes any progress possible at all. A people that becomes somewhere weak and fragile but is as a whole still strong and healthy is capable of absorbing the infection of the new and incorporating it to its own advantage. (Nietzsche 1996, 107-108)

It is no coincidence that Nietzsche was so well suited to the National Socialist movement, which wanted to create a new culture of National Socialism with the people's community as a community of convictions and the new man. One may give Nietzsche credit for writing this down at the beginning of his derangement, but these passages are not without problems, as this last quotation shows, whose ideas could of course be taken up by the National Socialists and incorporated into their attitude: "The problem I am posing is not what should replace humanity in the order of being (the human is an *endpoint*): but instead what type of human should be *bred*, should be *willed* as having greater value, as being more deserving of life, as being more certain of a future." (Nietzsche 2005, 4)

3. Wittgenstein's concept of progress

Wittgenstein's concept of progress is completely different from Nietzsche's. It is far less radical and therefore much more modest. It does not demand any upheavals, nor does it impose itself on other views. This view is already manifested in his *Philosophical Investigations*, whose preface begins with a quotation from Nestroy to dispel overly high expectations: "Überhaupt hat der Fortschritt das an sich, daß er viel größer ausschaut, als er wirklich ist." ["Progress has a way of looking much bigger than it really is." (Nestroy 1891, 123)

It is not clear why this motto from Johann Nepomuk Nestroy's 1847 appeared play *Der Schützling* [The Protégé], which precedes the book, was not translated in the English edition of *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, especially as it corresponds with some of the passages on civilization and progress that appear at the beginning of *Culture and Value*. In these passages, he also revisits the motif of progress, and it is hard to imagine that he was not aware of the Nestroy quote he chose as his motto of the *Philosophical Investigations*, especially when one considers that about half of the remarks of *Culture and Value* come from the period after the completion (in 1945) of Part One of the *Investigations* (cf. Stern 2002). At the beginning of *Culture and Value* it says:

This book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit in which it is written. This spirit is, I believe, different from that of the prevailing

European and American civilization. The spirit of this civilization the expression of which is the industry, architecture, music, of present day fascism & socialism, is a spirit that is alien & uncongenial to the author. (Wittgenstein 1998, 8)

The distancing that Ludwig Wittgenstein makes here dates from 1930, and even if one cannot claim that it is contrary to Nietzsche, who died in 1900 and did not live to see his ideas used by the National Socialists and was therefore unable to defend himself against them, nevertheless, Wittgenstein's opposite direction is so clearly shown here that it does not even begin to give rise to the suspicion that he could sympathize with the idea of progress of his time – regardless of the area of European or American civilization of his time. Inevitably, this also involves a distancing from Nietzsche's desire for progress as a radical, epoch-making upheaval.

At the same time, a certain contrast within Wittgenstein's works can be seen here. Wittgenstein apodictically adopts Nestroy's verdict "Progress has a way of looking much bigger than it really is." as the motto of the *Investigations*, but in *Culture and Value* he contrasts this with a spirit of the prevailing European and American civilization from which he believes his book differs.

So when Wittgenstein distances himself both from Nietzsche's ideas of progress and from the ideas of progress and civilization of his time, he has a completely different concept of progress in mind, one that neither rests on Nietzsche's influence nor bows to the prevailing spirit of European and American civilization. He himself says about the progress:

Our civilization is characterized by the word progress. Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress. Typically, it constructs. Its activity is to construct a more and more complicated structure. And even clarity is only a means to this end & not an end in itself. (Wittgenstein 1998, 9)

So, if progress characterizes civilization, it is also its signum. According to Wittgenstein, progress is the form of civilization that is constructive. In other words, it cannot be an epochal, radical, all-transforming progress, as Nietzsche virtually demanded, but rather a gradual, constructive process that brings us back to Nestroy. It can already be seen here that Ludwig Wittgenstein, despite all of Nietzsche's influence on his philosophy and thinking (the young Wittgenstein, like his siblings, was a heavy Nietzsche recipient), did not follow Nietzsche and instead freed himself from him regarding his concept of progress.

The fact that Wittgenstein distinguishes between great, epochal progress and slowly advancing progress, which the later in his view amounts to a kind of background noise of every civilization, is not speculative, but can be substantiated by a passage in the text where he explicitly speaks of the "idea of great progress" as a "delusion": "It is not e.g. absurd to believe that the scientific & technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity, that the idea of Great Progress is a bedazzlement, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known." (Wittgenstein 1998, 64)

Wittgenstein further emphasizes this constructive aspect when he says that it could be "that science & industry, & their progress, are the most enduring thing in the world today." (Wittgenstein 1998, 72) He thus refers to the construction of ever more complex and larger entities and structures within a civilization or society, which predominantly demand and at the same time determine the actions of individuals (cf. Münnich 2023, 132). So this most lasting thing is the slow, constructive progress that moves forward like a snail.

But Wittgenstein would not be Wittgenstein if he did not create a new image of his own. If the reader is led to associate the motto of the *Philosophical Investigations* with the slow progress of the snail, the thinker challenges us to connect this with an image that at first glance appears dynamic and moving. It is the image of the clipping of a hair clipper, whose cut also only progresses little by little, although the clipper clops more often than he make cuts: "Only every so often does one of the sentences I am writing here make a step forward; the rest are like the snipping of the barber's scissors, which he has to keep in motion so as to be able to make a cut with them at the right moment." (Wittgenstein 1998, 76)

Progress is always continuous, but not revolutionary and epochal. Whenever the right moment comes, progress is gradual. Nevertheless, the machine of progress always remains in motion, like the "snipping of the barber's scissors", which explains why Ludwig Wittgenstein believes this to be the sign of civilization.

Wittgenstein's statement that "[o]ur civilization is characterized by the word progress," and "[p]rogress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress." (Wittgenstein 1998, 7-8), of which he claims that its activity is typically constructive, ends in Wittgenstein's desire for clarity, transparency, as an end. He states: "For me on the contrary clarity, transparence, is an end in itself. I am not interested in erecting a building but in having the foundations of possible buildings transparently before me." (Ibid.)

Clarity and understanding are ends in themselves because they are not a means of progress (cf. Richter 2018). But it is precisely clarity and comprehensibility that philosophy strives for, solving only apparent problems by eliminating difficulties, e.g. by dissolving "knots in our thinking" (Wittgenstein 1967,452). The reason for this approach to philosophy is that problems are solved "not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known", because "philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." (Wittgenstein 1997, 47)

So, while it unravels the knots that have formed in our thinking, its results are simple and modest. They have nothing of the complex and ever larger structures that the progress of civilizations produces. They are not constructive but resolve difficulties. They are not progressive, but regressive. It is not truth-seeking for Wittgenstein, but rather unraveling. The aim is to treat our confused understanding, which is not a statement about the subject matter of philosophy.

At the same time, progress is a truism for Wittgenstein, because it is always already there, it does not have to be conjured up as in Nietzsche's case. It arises of its own accord, because it is the characteristic of our civilization *par excellence*: "Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress." (Wittgenstein 1998, 9)

It may of course be criticized, but it cannot be prevented, as it always progresses. Wittgenstein's negative remarks on the civilization of his time or on the past do not cover up or prevent the steady progress of progress. Even if "the snipping of the barber's scissors" comes to nothing in the short term, this does not change the fact that the "cut" of progress will take place at the right moment.

Wittgenstein knows exactly about this background noise of progress in every civilization, which is always running in the background and represents its character. Nietzsche has no such understanding. Even when Wittgenstein criticizes progress, it always continues, and Wittgenstein accepts this, not out of an unreflective belief in science and progress, but quite the opposite: out of a deeply reflective belief.

He can criticize or condemn the progress and belief in progress of his generation and his civilization as harshly as he likes, but he cannot change it, because "you may say what you like, it gets you no further." (Wittgenstein 1998, 11) All he can do is address his criticism to a small circle of like-minded people: "If I say that my book is meant for only a small circle of people (if that can be called a circle) I do not mean to say that this circle is in my view the élite of mankind but it is the

circle to which I turn (not because they are better or worse than others but) because they form my cultural circle, as it were my fellow countrymen in contrast to the others who are *foreign* to me." (Wittgenstein 1998, 12-13)

4. Two thinkers – two completely different concepts of progress

Superficially, the proximity of Wittgenstein's work and its undisputed influence by Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas and concepts suggests that there are also overlaps in the large and in Nietzsche's work decisive field of progress. The article has tried to show that this is not the case. Here, Wittgenstein's proximity to Nietzsche leads us on the wrong track, because the two great thinkers' concepts of progress have nothing in common.

And the approach to criticizing progress is also fundamentally different: While Nietzsche attempts to force progress by means of radicalization and epochal upheaval through criticism of progress, as if humanity should catapult itself to a new level, Wittgenstein's approach is much more down-to-earth and modest: Wittgenstein knows that progress cannot be prevented, that it represents the constant background noise of civilization, which is characterized by continuous progress but not by revolutionary or epochal upheaval.

According to Wittgenstein, for every civilization, "progress is its form; it is not one of its characteristics that it makes progress." In contrast, he considers the "idea of great progress" to be a "delusion", without Wittgenstein mentioning Nietzsche here, although he must certainly have had him in mind due to his extensive reading of Nietzsche.

When it comes to the critique of progress, it looks superficially as if the two thinkers are converging to a certain extent, but this would ultimately be a false perception, because the decisive course is set in the question of what this critique should achieve: While Nietzsche's critique of progress addresses the necessity of radicalization and the need for epochal progress in the struggle for human existence, progress appears "in the form of the will and way to *greater power* and always emerging victorious at the cost of countless smaller forces" ((Nietzsche 2007, 52), Wittgenstein's critique of progress only addresses the small circle, "if that can be called a circle" (Wittgenstein 1998, 12e) as the philosopher even qualifies, of like-minded people who form his cultural environment and think similarly to him.

These fundamental differences in the field of progress and the critique of progress are also reflected in the perception of the two thinkers: While Nietzsche is regarded as "a thinker of the greatness and misery of man" (Caysa/Schwarzwald 2012, viii; transl. by the author), Ludwig Wittgenstein is understood as a thinker of the "as well as" (cf. Arnswald 2001), who weighs things up precisely and very carefully, and considers progress to be an overestimated movement, "Progress has a way of looking much bigger than it really is." (Nestroy), but which always and constantly progresses on a small scale, like the "snipping of the barber's scissors, which he has to keep in motion so as to be able to make a cut with them at the right moment." (Wittgenstein 1998, 76e)

The two thinkers could hardly be more fundamentally different, and this difference becomes even more significant because, as is well known, the usurpation of Nietzsche's philosophy by the National Socialists was also based on them. Nietzsche, who emulates the new and the new man in his philosophy, full of meaning, spirited, exuberant, often philosophically unbridled, albeit stimulating, is a completely different thinker to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is cautious, deliberate and prefers to remain soberly grounded in everyday practice in his philosophy. In contrast to Nietzsche, the revaluation of all values and the grand formulas are completely alien to Ludwig Wittgenstein (cf. Stegmaier 2017, 193).

Even though Wittgenstein never negated the inspirational potential of Nietzsche's philosophy, which is also manifestly reflected in his oeuvre, the idiosyncratic philosopher of language Wittgenstein never blindly followed Nietzsche, but rather freed himself from his path in his own thinking, without avoiding his suggestions, but at the same time without following him.

The solitary Wittgenstein stands on an equal footing with the solitary Nietzsche.

5. Conclusion

Despite all the overlaps that may exist between Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein in terms of the ideas and concepts of their philosophy, these do not come to light in the concept of progress and the critique of progress. Both think-

ers pursue a very different movement of thought; Wittgenstein sees Nietzsche's focus on the "idea of great progress" as a "delusion", which he does not consider to be expedient.

In a way, Nietzsche is a child of his experimental time in his concept of progress and his criticism of progress. He sets out to redefine what it means to be human through will and power, which was then taken up by the National Socialists in such an unspeakable way that it ended in inevitable catastrophe in the century that began with Nietzsche's death.

It is part of Nietzsche's tragedy that his philosophy, of all things, was made acceptable to the National Socialists by his sister and sole executor of his estate, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. This shadow of the National Socialist reception of Nietzsche, which can be seen in the powerful themes such as the compulsion to progress and epochal upheaval, still saddens his work until today.

Interestingly, however, Wittgenstein is not a child of his time in this matter, because while his contemporaries still believed in the human struggle for existence, which is measured by who is able to raise humanity to a new level of civilization, which in his time was ideologically called "fascism & socialism", this was "alien & uncongenial" to him, the author Wittgenstein, as a spirit. Ludwig Wittgenstein explicitly distances himself here from the spirit that defined the prevailing European and American civilization in the 1930s. He does not succumb to the delusions of grandeur of new, higher-level civilization, but leaves progress as the constantly progressing background noise of any civilization.

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