

Extended abstract for PhD-thesis: Ejvind Hansen: *Embedded Critique in a Tensed World*.

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In this thesis I contemplate the conditions for critique. I hereby inscribe myself into a philosophical tradition that has endured for at least 200 years. These contemplations are still important because the foundations of critique are continuously challenged by insights into how human practices and understandings are embedded into certain factors that on the one hand are inescapable – on the other hand they are (in a certain sense) contingent. Examples of these factors are the configuration of our languages, our ideological embeddedness, our pragmatic orientations, our bodily constitution, etc. These insights open for a relativization of the validity of our approaches: since any approach is embedded in such contingent factors, it becomes impossible to claim that one approach is absolutely *better* than other approaches.

If the relativism is carried to its extreme, it would make critique impossible because it would make it impossible to maintain improvement-claims across varying outlooks. On the other hand, however, the insights into the relative validity of any outlook, accentuate that any approach is open to critique: it is possible to criticize the limitations upon which the criticized approach rests.

The insights into the relative validity of any outlook has led to what I call the descriptivist approach: if no approach can claim to present insights of a privileged kind, then it is not possible from within one outlook to assess (criticize) what happens inside other outlooks – at least not in a manner that can have validity for others than those who subscribe to the outlook from which the assessment is carried out. In other words: critique is only valid for the critic – and not for the addressee. This has led to a strain within philosophical and scientific works leaving out the critical assessments. The works are said to carry no critical assessments at all – they are only *describing* certain states of affairs.

The aim with the thesis is to demonstrate that the descriptivist reaction is neither necessary, possible nor desirable. It is not *necessary* because the embeddedness-insights do not lead to an absolute relativity. Even though it is not possible once and for all to say how far the relativizations go, there is nevertheless a hold against relativity: any outlook is incited by and

directed towards reality. And even though it is true that reality varies with the outlook, this does not mean that reality is *insignificant* in relation to the possible relativizations. Our notions of reality vary with the normative outlooks – but they are not *exhausted* by this variation: having subscribed to a particular outlook, reality constrains what it is possible to argue reasonably. In the thesis I thus distinguish between an *infinite* relativity as opposed to an *indefinite* relativity – and I argue that it is the latter notion of relativity that is the sound consequence of the embeddedness-insights.

The descriptivist approach is furthermore not *possible*. This point I also carry through in relation to certain realist points: in order to establish a certain normative outlook, it is necessary to introduce a focus in relation to reality. This focus is established through norms of relevance. Any approach is therefore shaped by these norms of relevance. These norms are, however, fallible in relation to reality: they can be shown to be either wrong or inadequate. The foundation upon norms of relevance means that differing descriptions also carry critical implications. Any description claims in some sense to be right. A humble descriptor can certainly downgrade this aspect by saying that alternative descriptions could have been right too – only in a different way. But at the very least the descriptor has to imply that the present description is the most *relevant* description in the prevailing situation – as *opposed* to other descriptions. In that sense descriptions always carry critical implications.

Neither is the descriptivist approach *desirable*, because it entails an isolationist understanding of the relationship between varying outlooks in which there could and should be no mutual influence. In the thesis I argue that this is a reductionist understanding of the relationship between varying outlooks. Even though the accounts of reality may differ between varying outlooks, they all imply to be able to relate to reality in a systematic and adequate way – because reality is what they are incited by and directed towards. The aims towards internal systematicity and external adequacy do not necessarily harmonize, because the systematicity aims towards simplicity and unity, whereas adequacy aims towards grasping reality in its diversity. I argue that it is possible in a mutual critical discussion to articulate the tensions that are carried by other outlooks in relation to these two aims – and that the success of such an articulation *will* be considered to have critical implications by the addressee.

The challenge of critical theory is, in the wake of the embeddedness insights, to demonstrate in what sense it *is* possible to maintain improvement-claims across varying, contingently valid, outlooks. I argue that a focus on how critique is a pointing out of tensions between normativity and reality can serve as a key to see how we are not left in an infinite relativism. I argue that linguistic practices are characterized by reaching beyond their validity. It is therefore not *possible* to avoid putting forward claims that exceed their foundations. Ultimately this leads to universal claims. However, the embeddedness-insights accentuate that

universal claims are *fallible*. I argue that we should think of universal claims in a paradoxical way: they are on the one hand unavoidable (because this is how linguistic practices actually function), but they are on the other hand not possible (because they are never absolutely valid). This is the field in which critique navigates.

I carry out these points in the following way:

In the introduction (chapter I) I situate myself in the philosophical landscape and introduce the main arguments of the thesis. I furthermore introduce the key-concepts of the thesis.

In chapter (II) I give an account of the present situation. In section (1) I briefly sketch out some of the insights into embeddedness that I think are difficult to reject. I furthermore discuss the descriptivist approach. I argue that the descriptivist reaction upon the embeddedness-insights is an unnecessary reaction. It does furthermore not actually save us from the worry that it is the reason for the reaction. And finally it represents a reductive understanding of linguistic practices. In section (2) I present some methodological reflections. I make a brief sketch of possible ways to handle the insights into embeddedness, and how to understand philosophical investigations in this situation.

Since I analyse critique as being a linguistic practice, chapter (III) presents some contemplations of how we can think of linguistic practices in the light of the embeddedness insights. In section (1) I argue that it is possible to understand linguistic practices as a meeting between normativity and reality. I argue that this meeting on the one hand can be mutually illuminating; on the other hand it can be a tensed relation. I emphasize that normativity and reality can only be separated analytically. In actual practices one can never have the one without the other. Even though it is possible to distinguish between normativity and reality as two aspects of linguistic practices it is important to be aware that they are also mutually defining. Nevertheless it is, in relation to critique, significant that they cannot be conflated either. I argue that normativity can be seen as the aim to systematize and that the systematization is instigated through norms of relevance. At the same time, though, normativity also aims beyond the mere normative – it aims towards reality. Reality is what the linguistic practices are incited by, directed towards, and fallible in relation to. In section (2) I contemplate the notion of universality. I argue that we cannot avoid universality. At the same time the validity of universal claims cannot be absolute – due to the embeddedness-insights. I therefore argue that we should think of universality as fallible: some aspects are *actually* considered to be universally valid – but the validity is continuously challenged in the local contexts. And at some point universal claims may show to be unfruitful (in holding together the aims toward systematicity and adequacy) and they will in that case be given up.

In chapter (IV) I begin my actual contemplations of critique. In section (1) I present my account of critique. I mainly focus upon the linguistically shaped critique. I argue that critique

is a pointing out of tensions between an avowed normativity and reality. I subscribe to the view that we should think of critique as a *problematization* rather than as a *rejection*. Finally, I situate my approach to critique in the current landscape of critical theory. In section (2) I return to the notion of tension. I demonstrate how it makes sense to talk about normativity and reality as tensed in relation to each other – even though they are mutually defining. In this I focus upon the dual aims of linguistic practices (the aims of systematicity and adequacy). In section (3) I argue that a current dividing line inside critical theory can be explained by a difference in focus on two aspects of critique: the reflective and receptive aspects. On the one hand critique can be a reflection upon our spontaneous, systematizing doings. On the other hand critique can be a receptivity as to what our doings are incited by and directed towards. I argue that Habermas is a strong representative of the former approach, whereas Foucault represents the latter approach. They both, however, demonstrate a lack of awareness towards the other side – something that points back on limitations in their own view. Finally, in section (4) I contemplate the notion of improvement in critique. I argue that it will always be an improvement to solve tensions between normativity and reality – but that it cannot be argued that there is not something that would be more important. It is not possible to establish robust notions of improvement in a traditional sense. Instead we should realize that our universal reference points in critique are fallible. This has the advantage that the universal claims are not *immunizations* against critique. They *are* potentially open to critique; only they are not *actually* questioned – for the time being. In section (5) I summarize the results of the analyses in this chapter.

In chapter (V) I delineate some of the perspectives of the presented view. In section (1) I relate the gained insights to the philosophers that I have been using in the thesis. In section (2) I demonstrate how the views presented can be of value in relation to certain problems in the borderland of critique. I argue that the case of Bjørn Lomborg demonstrates a case where something that is presented as a critique is not actually so – at least not in the sense that he believes it to be. I furthermore contemplate whether the problem of Jerusalem is a possible object of critique in the light of the relativizations that I have accepted. I claim that it *may be* possible to have critique even in conflicts where there are attempts of religious immunizations. Religious claims are not in themselves determining whether critique is possible – more important is the willingness to listen to the others.

In chapter (VI) I conclude the thesis. It is my unargued hope that if the views defended in the thesis are acknowledged, it will lead to a more forgiving coexistence between people of differing outlooks.