

THE IMMANENCE OF CRITICISM¹

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ABSTRACT

The article examines various forms of immanent critique. Following forms of critique in Kant and Hegel, it highlights how contemporary approaches to immanent critique within the tradition of critical theory fail. Idealistic residuals regularly prevent critical thinking from holding on to immanence. Historico-philosophical, but also anthropological assumptions are particularly relevant here. Finally, an alternative to the existing forms of critique is outlined, which strengthens pluralistic concepts, and detaches the idea of immanence from an in itself homogeneous internal perspective of critique.

Keywords: Critique; Critical theory; Philosophical idealism; Immanence; History; Anthropology.

Philosophically speaking, to criticise something generally means to reject an assertion as unjustified. Such repudiation implies that it is itself justified, and can be verified as such. Rather than justification, it would, perhaps, be more prudent to echo John Dewey, and speak of ‘warranted assertibility’. There are, no doubt, countless benign, random instances in which criticism has been voiced in that very form. One example might be a falsification in the context of commonly held assumptions about scientific findings. However, difficulties arise when principles and major convictions are criticised, rather than arbitrary phrases. In this case, criticism requires theoretical language that, in the presence of doubt, cannot be the same as that which is being criticised. And if we are actually dealing with another form of language here, how can it possibly be used to justify the criticism expressed or warrant its plausibility?

At this juncture, it makes sense to go into history a little. One major implication of the contemporary use of the concept of criticism is a certain theoretical tradition that has been seen as critical since Kant. *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1998) drew the defining distinction between dogmatism and criticism. That is, «the presumption of getting on solely with pure cognition from (philosophical) concepts according to principles which reason has been using for a long time without first inquiring in what way and by what right it has obtained them» (Kant, 1998, B XXXV). The process of reason, «without an antecedent critique of its own capacity» (Kant, 1998, B XXXV, B 9) creates a speculative edifice, as it were, that is only examined upon completion to determine whether the ground has been properly laid for that purpose. Kant famously opts for the other path, by conceiving critically of the idea of a philosophy as science comprising the principles of human cognition a priori. (Kant, 1998, B27)

According to this understanding, critique constitutes vital preparatory work because and insofar as it has not yet been built upon a solid foundation. It is often said that Kant was compelled to formulate his critique due to empiricist scepticism about the metaphysical principles of rationalism. (Kant, 2002) The prerequisite for this is the singular continuum of a strain of reason that examines itself critically and is able to arrive at exactly the same point through any inquiry, no matter how sceptical: «in a word, if only they [such inquiries] exhibit reason, then reason always wins». (Kant, 1998, A 746, B 774) The notion of rational homogeneity is also intertwined with the idea of a fundamental philosophy, and it is hard to imagine how it could possibly be otherwise.

From today’s perspective, it could at least be said that the task of translation is always involved in critique. To ascertain the extent to which rationalistic or empiricist theories are problematic according to Kant, they have to be translated into a medium of rationality that goes beyond them. Only then can they be critically assessed for their strengths and weaknesses. Whether this critique can be applied immanently or not depends on whether the critically differentiated methodical approach is successful in working out the implicit premises of the way of thinking that is the subject of the critique. This implicit element is its potential. If, within the framework of transcendental analytics, it can be made clear that

experience must presuppose sensual forms of intuition on the one hand, and conceptual structures on the other, then neither the classic empiricist nor the classic rationalistic basic assumptions are tenable.

This sounds very simple (and familiar), yet doubts nevertheless arise. Ultimately, modern forms of empiricism and ontology have emerged in spite of all criticism. As I see it, this is an indication that there may always be plenty of opportunities for translating older philosophical theories into newer ones. That is not to say, however, that reason automatically proliferates, and certainly not in a comparably meaningful way. One might well imagine that critique could altogether be justified, even if it is by no means so in actual fact. In both cases, it would be possible for it to arise in the name of reason, or if not, in the name of something else.

Hegel offers us an interesting perspective against this backdrop, explicating the critical relationships between theories as historical transitions. In this sense, history is used to underpin the translating effect of criticism within a homogeneous medium. At the same time, critically deciphered history converges with historically deciphered critique. Hegel's systematic philosophy thus merges with the reading of the history of philosophy that it proposes. This is encapsulated most concisely in the *Vorbegriff* [preliminary conception] of the *Encyclopedia Logic*, where Hegel sets out three ways of thinking about objectivity. Not only can these be assigned to historically determinable schools of thought, but they also serve as a kind of introduction that bears out the logical standpoint advocated by Hegel (2010, §25).

Without going into the details of the *Vorbegriff*, my purpose here is merely to understand the «resolve to engage in pure thinking» and how it is achieved «through the freedom», through the interweaving of logical reasoning and historical concretion. (Hegel, 2010, §78) Hegel explains the three positions by addressing firstly rationalist metaphysics and secondly empiricism and critical philosophy, and finally the position of «immediate knowing», which is presented on the basis of Jacobi's observations. (Hegel, 2010, §61 ff) He is essentially concerned with rediscovering metaphysics on a new plane, through criticism. His approach differs from Kant's critical process primarily in the sense that he perceives the contrast between the subjective determinations of thought and being in itself (of the world, soul and God) to be resolvable.² Yet this resolution can only succeed if a new bond is forged between truth and reality by going back to experience.³ The empiricists largely agree with Kant on this point about the primacy of experience.⁴ Although Kant, as I have mentioned, holds firm to the (unresolvable) opposition, his critical reflections, according to Hegel's interpretation, are based on an «ideal of reason». (Hegel, 2010, §49, §51) In the *Critique of Judgement*, in particular, Hegel sees the articulation of «the representation, indeed, the thought, of the idea». (Hegel, 2010, §55) Kantian philosophy becomes «speculative» when it comes to representations such as «fine art» and «being alive» insofar as «in the conception of the realization of the ultimate purpose of the world, Kant puts forth the idea that is all-encompassing in terms of content as

2 "It is therefore the greatest inconsistency to admit, on the one hand, that the understanding acquires knowledge of appearances only, while maintaining, on the other, that this kind of knowledge is something absolute by saying that knowing cannot go further, that this is the natural, absolute barrier [Schranke] for human knowledge [Wissen]. [...] Something can be known [gewusst], even felt to be a barrier, a lack only insofar as one has at the same time gone beyond it." (Hegel, 2010, §60).

3 «There lies in empiricism this great principle that what is true exist in actuality and be there for perception.» (Hegel, 2010, §38).

4 "Critical philosophy shares with empiricism the supposition that experience is the sole basis of knowledge [...]." (Hegel, 2010, §40)

well». (Hegel, 2010, §55) Hegel also makes his key point quite openly in the middle of the *Vorbegriff* and in a separate paragraph:

In keeping with this principle [ultimate purposiveness; MR] the idea in its utter unlimitedness would be that the universality determined by reason, the absolute, ultimate purpose, the good, would be realized in the world and, indeed, through a third factor, the power positing this ultimate purpose and realizing it, namely God, in whom (as the absolute truth) those oppositions of universality and individuality, subjectivity and objectivity are resolved and declared to be not self-standing and to be untrue. (Hegel, 2010, §59)

It is no longer a matter of shortly setting aside the opposition, but rather of finding its ontological basis in the concept itself, in its «immediate relation to itself». (Hegel, 2010, §51)⁵ This also explains how to deal with the first, metaphysical position, provided that «this kind of thinking (is) both genuine speculative philosophizing in terms of its content», while also dwelling «in finite thought-determinations, i.e. the as yet unresolved opposition». (Hegel, 2010, §27) In other words, a «perspective of the understanding alone on the objects of reason dwells within it.» (Hegel, 2010, §27) This is «the metaphysics of the past, the way it was constituted prior to the Kantian philosophy,» but it can be said to belong to the past «only in relation to the history of philosophy: of itself it is always on hand, as the perspective of the understanding alone on the objects of reason» – as thought bound up in logic itself. (Hegel, 2010, §27)

I believe it is now clearer how Hegel understood the older philosophical theories as part of a reconstruction of the development of a philosophical science. It refers to a spirit that has always been active and proceeds by correcting historically verifiable results in a manner that is historically verifiable, and thus continues to pass them on in progressive complications. This activity is, not least, a critical one that is immanent, though it must postulate itself in the sense of a single activity that can be consistently identified as such. ‘The dialectic is, by contrast, this *immanent* process of going beyond [such determinacy] wherein the one-sided and limited character of the determinations of the understanding presents itself as what it is, namely as their negation. Everything finite is this, the sublating of itself. Thus, the dialectical moment constitutes the moving soul of the scientific progression and is the principle through which alone an *immanent connection and necessity* enters into the content of science [...]». (Hegel, 2010, §81) By putting ‘immanent’ in italics twice, Hegel underscores the inherent process of negation that comes into play here.

A philosophy that Hegel assigns a place in history inevitably denotes a process of becoming and ebbing away. It can be teased out as something critical within the framework of the subjectification of the substantial. To do this, it is necessary to assess its respective stage of development as it manifests itself. But how does it come about that nothing is lost; everything is gathered up in the course of scientific progress? How can the objective spirit of history and the absolute spirit of

5 “One might say that it would have to be very strange, if the innermost core of the spirit (the concept) [...] were not even so rich as to contain within itself so impoverished a determination as being [...].” (Hegel, 2010, §51)

philosophy be reconciled? Are historical contingencies sensibly organised merely because they are integrated into a comprehensive perspective that determines their meaning? And does Hegel's approach not reveal clearly how logical and historical truths are mutually related and interdependent? Is Hegel not, therefore, a *systematic* philosopher of history, as it were, who constructs history as a *model* of the absolute, which is able to justify the logical course of development through its fitting into and duplication within the given historical process?

I am asking these questions to make it clear that at this point conditions come into play that cannot be fully dealt with in a left-Hegelian-post-Marxist framework; a framework, in which the concept of 'immanent criticism' tends to reside. Within this framework, there does not tend to be a general assumption that the problem with the absolute endangers the integrity of the objective spirit at the same time. (Moreover, it obscures the fact that the objective spirit transforms when it sheds its totalisation in the absolute.)⁶ My question is therefore neither whether Hegel is right about Kant – and whether immanent criticism is superior to criticism that stems from a different (e.g. constructivist) manner; nor it is to what extent one should distinguish between a normative claim that has already been realised in the past and one that has not yet been realised and that looks to the future in a utopian fashion. (Cf. Romero, 2014) It may be that the idea of freedom as autonomy presupposes normativity, insofar as «human history as a whole can be spoken of as a process of the realisation of reason.» (Honneth, 2007, p. 57) And it may be that the reconstructive process draws on an 'ideological' one, even if Adorno's pledge, which refers to the unredeemed potential of normative ideals, remains tied to precisely those normative ideals and their historicity. The strict separation of concepts of progress in Amy Allen's (into fact and imperative) is much less to be trusted than their pluralisation and situation (as also addressed by Allen, 2016).

So what comes next? Or, to put it another way, what does a post-metaphysical philosophy of history look like if it can no longer count upon the integrative achievements of an absolute spirit or a differently constituted continuum of rationality? My conjecture would be that it is not enough for critique to proceed immanently; it is much more important for it to base itself in immanence, as only then can it succeed in being immanent.

It would be easy to bring Foucault into play here, and to introduce critique into the balance of power (in the sense of immanence). The genealogist would be a good candidate for an immanent critic. (Cf. Sarr, 2007, p. 318) However, I want to introduce my concept of criticism in a different way. In my view, a profound change occurs in the structures of knowledge in the second half of the 18th century, which are in turn directly related to changes in social life. Odo Marquard suggested the notion of 'lifeworld philosophies' as a way of articulating this innovation in the field of philosophy. The term is rather awkward, but it winnows out a few key points related to the growing importance of history, culture, society, language, work, the economy, and a great deal more. Husserl's concept

⁶ Marx certainly distances himself from Hegel when he resolves to begin with "real premises", i.e. with "material conditions under which they live" that can be verified "in a purely empirical way". (Cf. Marx and Engels, [s/d]). Here, historical materialism does not leave the (dialectical) model of history (in the sense of the progress of humanity) on which empirical events are based as a seemingly unprecedented unity in which everything that is in any way relevant occurs.

of the lifeworld is a complex one, but it highlights one important aspect – the specific irreducibility of a given or empirical positivity that cannot be rationally obtained, at least initially (via traditional notions of rationality).

At this point there arises an ambivalence that Foucault alluded to in *Les mots et les choses*, and which is characteristic of modernism as a whole. This insight is not the sole preserve of Foucault, either; we find it clearly expressed in Nietzsche and in American Pragmatism. By this I mean that a new kind of finite existence is emerging, «within the positive content of language, work and life». (Foucault, 1989) This diagnostic analysis is associated with a theoretical alternative – and with it, in turn, a certain understanding of criticism. It thus seems possible to think through what is empirically given – the cultural and social conditions – and to stabilise it within the framework of an order of knowledge. Foucault speaks of the anthropological episteme, which reduplicates the empirical in the transcendental – and thus considers the human being as an empirical-transcendental doublet. This encompasses a post-Kantian metaphysics of nature, history and even life or *Erleben*. The critical alternative to this is a (structural) way of thinking that establishes itself in the bottomlessness of the empirical or can affirm the unstable epistemic structure. As Dewey puts it, the quest for certainty is not a philosophically rewarding venture. According to Nietzsche, the same is true of nihilistic endeavours. Analysis of nihilism, on the other hand, is certainly a critical undertaking (such as when it concerns morality, religion or metaphysics).

We might pose the question: How can I be what I am not? Is it possible for me to be ‘coeval’ (zeitgenössisch) with myself, or do I have to accept the rupture that separates me from who I am? It makes a difference whether the claim is upheld to convey being-in-itself with being-for-itself (Hegel), or to work through the unconscious within consciousness (Freud). Alternatively, it may be assumed that a positive being inscribes itself into the subject and at the same time fragments it or knocks it off-centre. Nevertheless, we must consider that even the philosophical interpretation of this ‘previousness’ of being in structures that precisely thwarts the appropriation strategies of subject-logical justification creates a new and perhaps problematic intelligibility in the otherwise unfathomable. This marked the inception of some post-structuralist criticism of structuralism. (Cf. Derrida, 1967)

Based on these considerations, in my *Kritik der anthropologischen Vernunft [Critique of Anthropological Reason]*, I made a plea for criticism to be situated in historical relationships that are no longer of the traditional historical-philosophical type. The fact is that philosophy has not waited for structuralism to address the issue of irrevocably empirical presuppositions of thought – its dark spots. As I see it, plenty of philosophical texts from the 18th and 19th centuries deal with the aforementioned lifeworld issues in an interesting way. Generally speaking, however, the predominant tendency is clearly to impose an order on these areas that is based on positing reason as rational homogeneity. This is apparent above all in anthropology and the philosophy of history and their onward passage in biologism and historicism.

7 I am not claiming that the juxtaposition of pragmatism and anthropology (that I have set up here) covers the entirety of relationships in modern philosophy, but I would assert that it is valuable in terms of elucidation here (Cf. Rölli, 2011).

If, therefore, philosophical anthropology represents a type of reason that recurs in one subject as the founding instance of knowledge, then its pragmatic counterpart represents another that translates reason into a multitude of language games. It is both things: a positive design of the relationships of immanence and a critique of anthropology. The two are inextricably linked: we are contemplating a form of reason that comes apart when another is criticised.⁷ The special thing about this proposed critical approach is that it does not depend on divisions based on historical epochs. History of being – even in its Foucaultian iteration – is irrelevant here. Instead, it becomes possible to advocate an epistemological pluralism that at the same time allows us to understand how critical relationships can be situated within history, and through which history multiplies, as it were, if it moves or is moved within them. In this sense, at least, criticism does not require thinking from outside. To criticize then means nothing else than to think immanently.

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