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Symbolic Forms and Human Freedom
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My assertion is simply that when understood in its fullness and in all its complexity, Cassirer's Symbolic Forms offers a method for overcoming cultural divisions through a "middle way" advanced by and through symbolic forms. Human interpretations of perspective must evolve. *Connection* to others (as opposed to separation from others) is the basis for genuinely ethical attitudes and actions. Ethical precepts of the past are becoming the imperatives for survival in the future. We must now choose conscious ethical evolution. The principles that we learn from symbolic forms can be used as guides to overcoming separation, reconciling difference, and giving meaning to everyday experience. These principles can assist us in navigating the complexities of ethical decision making, and can point us toward moral action, transforming stagnant mores of today into living, dynamic, cultural expressions tomorrow. Each self-identity becomes enriched and expanded through interaction with different belief systems, cultures, faiths, norms, and values. As people open themselves to multifarious experiences, their own center becomes more secure, while their outward expression becomes more multi-dimensional and diverse. Ethics becomes a project of breaking down internal and external boundaries which prevent people from perceiving from a variety of perspectives. Self-knowledge becomes a means for responsible action in collaboration, not opposition, with others. This is the outcome of the use of symbolic forms. Each

aspect in the design of Cassirer's symbolic forms speaks to a new evolution of our interpretation of our perceptions which we can apply to people, situations and relationships, and cultural forms.

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With this fulfillment, I find new vision, new paths, and new opportunities. May I serve all and continue the legacy of scholarship and integrity that has been laid before me.

Abbreviations

Works by Cassirer

EM

An Essay on Man. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972

ICRP

The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963

DIMP

Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics

KLT

Kant's Life and Thought. New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 1981

LM

Language and Myth. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1946.

LCS

The Logic of the Cultural Sciences. New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 2000.

MS

The Myth of the State. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946

PE

The Philosophy of the Enlightenment. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951

PSF I

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1, *Language*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955.

PSF II

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955

PSF III

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955.

PSF IV

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955

PK

The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science and History Since Hegel. New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 1978

QJJR

The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Bloomington, In: Indiana University Press, 1967

RKG

Rousseau, Kant, Goethe. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963.

SF

Substance and Function and Einstein's theory of Relativity

SMC

Symbol, Myth and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, ed., Donald Phillip
Verene New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979

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Introduction

Introduction

Ethics demands that human actions are to be capable of and accessible to a double judgment; they are to be determined as events in time, but their content and meaning is not to be exhausted by this determinism. The insight into the course of these actions, no matter how strictly these may be determined, should not blind us to the other yardstick with which we have to measure them—to the question of their quid juris, their ethical value and dignity. This requirement of evaluation can never be grasped and justified in a merely negative way; it must be secured positively. We are not dealing here with an attempt to discover some exceptions to certain general rules; we are dealing with the far more serious and difficult problem of discovering a new rule, a new type of conformity to law, which is to underlie all action that we designate as moral action.¹

~Ernst Cassirer

History shows us that comity and conflict play out between individuals as well as between groups within society. Much fundamental conflict is that between mythic modes of interpretation over against the non-mythic. Human social expression follows a similar path and human cultural history can be interpreted either universally or pluralistically. The *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* embodies these two opposite movements of culture throughout history, but instead of opposing mythical or non-mythical, universal or plurality against the other, in which a dynamic, interaction between the two becomes lost, symbolic forms presents a third way of interpreting human culture. Cassirer's symbolic forms offer a middle course that, instead of pitting binary categories against each other, there is the recognition that both are necessary to an understanding of the entire worldview. Between set dichotomized systems, Cassirer's third path contravenes and inverts traditional dualistic categories. Applied to history, symbolic forms becomes a tool

¹ Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics. P. 198

to reassess man's relationship to himself and to the world. It becomes a framework for building a future based on knowledge and self-reflection with concepts of symbolic forms as a vehicle for the evolution of man toward freedom.

Today's political and cultural landscape increasingly uses symbols to mediate resistance against state and financial powers, coming to the fore as "postmodern politics"² and using symbolic affinities constructed around one or more heterogeneous identity, designed to challenge dominant political paradigms. These political sieges utilize tactics (mass media) that reach to the masses, but in so doing simplify as much as possible the message and flatten relationships. On the one hand, these divisions and categorizations of identity offer people more-detailed understanding of the world, like placing an object under a magnifying lens to see greater detail. But on the other hand, they continually set up binary opposites, which may have no relevance beyond the instrumental ends of a campaign. The wide-spread distinction of red and blue states gives one example. Montana, a red state overall, has a strong advocacy for the use of medical marijuana, which is typically an issue supported by Democrats. Even though the overarching political identity is one of conservatives, the line gets blurred in this issue.

Identity politics provide a political voice for marginalized groups and create social change³ but at the expense of meaning. Postmodern representations reject the idea that language can represent reality, and embrace the idea that knowledge of the world arises only out of experience with the world. In this way of thinking, language merely distorts the world and experiences. While this has lead to meaningful discourse on identity and power, at the same time it has produced equally meaningless signs and

² Jones, Jones, Woods. P. 152.

³ Noteworthy political change is Defense of Marriage Act at the Federal Level being found unconstitutional, and the passing of gay marriage laws in Massachusetts, Vermont and New York.

discourses. It has been unable to view itself from a critical perspective, to overcome its own limitations and to re-invigorate culture and politics. Félix Guattari in *Flash Art*, in an essay entitled *The Postmodern Dead End* begins to pose the question of the future of postmodern thinking; he states:

A certain idea of progress and modernity has gone bankrupt, and in its fall it has dragged along all confidence in the notion of emancipation through social action. At the same time social relations have entered an ice age: hierarchy and segregation have solidified, poverty and unemployment tend now to be accepted as inevitable evils, the workers' unions cling to the last branches of the institutions they still have at their command and limit themselves to the sort of corporate practice that leads them to adopt a conservative position very close to that of reactionary groups...So indeed it is not surprising that the ideologies that used to pretend to be guides in an effort toward the reconstruction of a more equitable society have lost all credibility.

If one goal of postmodern thought is to discredit metatheories and universals and to refine knowledge of humans down to exact and precise experiences, then it is achieving its goal—but at what expense? All knowledge in this sense presupposes dualistic comparison, which ultimately is just measurement. But each measurement must presuppose not just similar qualities, but exact qualities—pure homogeneity. Yet no comparison between human experiences will give us this, and so all comparison becomes inadequate, *ad infinitum*, despite our best efforts. Reduced to the idea that no human relations can be compared, post-modern thought has found its impasse in relativism. “Must [we] remain passive in the face of a rising wave of cruelty and cynicism...that would seem to be the deplorable conclusion to which many intellectual and artistic groups have come, especially those who claim the banner of postmodernism?” Guattari asks.

At the time of his death in 1945, Ernst Cassirer represented the last of a dying breed. The excitement of the “new” philosophy introduced in 1927 with Heidegger’s publication of *Being and Time* quickly replaced the neo-Kantian engagement with theory of knowledge and philosophy of values. The liberal humanism of Germany’s cultural and intellectual past, so thoroughly replaced by totalitarianism, became a relic. Cassirer, although a leading representative of these now outdated orientations, was virtually forgotten; because of his association with Kantian thought, Enlightenment ideals, liberalism and an intellectual tradition that was simply out of fashion, Cassirer’s own systematic philosophy went out of vogue, in favor of the more modern thinking represented by Heidegger.⁴ Yet Cassirer’s philosophy addresses the cultural relativism, before the development of postmodernism. Symbolic forms link the multiplicity of human expression with the totality of culture, in a “unified humanity”.

Cassirer, insists that symbolic forms, the fundamental modes of human expression, cannot be disentangled from what it means to *be* human. Each form brings with it a unique perspective, a contribution in the way to understand meaning that no other form can offer. The fullness of human experience lies in the overlapping, the interaction, and the expression—and ultimately the unifying—of these disparate parts. Only humans, through this symbolic activity have the ability to choose between perspectives, to alternate between forms and see—or really, to imagine—various angles.

⁴ Gordon, Peter Eli “... most participants regarded the Heidegger-Cassirer encounter as an event of immense historical and philosophical significance. And it was generally agreed that Heidegger was the decisive victor. He embodied the ‘new time’ and the ‘new pathos of thought.’ Even Cassirer’s students conceded their teacher’s defeat, but rather than praising Heidegger, they regarded him a prophet of the ‘mood philosophy’ now bewitching the academic scene. Beside him, the once grand figure of Cassirer seemed bathed in twilight: Levinas saw in him ‘the end of a particular kind of humanism.’ Whatever their perspective, participants saw the dispute as “the encounter between representatives of two ages.” P. 279

Only humans have the ability to combine concepts in ways that bring about new meanings, making the space for new understanding. This is not “prescribed once and for all by the objective nature of things; rather it belongs to the freedom proper of the mind.”⁵ It is in the very entanglement of perspectives and expressions that the human potential for freedom lays.

Cassirer’s concept of symbolic forms ultimately aims at the education of humans toward the freedom that only comes through informed action based in enlightened self-reflection. Human expression as it arises in human culture embodies the inter-relating of symbolic forms. With each human expression of a symbolic form—religion, language, art, myth, science—a world comes into being. The world of religion contains prayers and artifacts; that of language is represented through letters and sounds; that of art contains personal expression and subjective interpretation; that of myth embodies chaos and mystery; that of science contains categorizations and predictable chains of cause and effect. Each form, separate from the others in its distinct qualities, barricades itself from the others by identifying with itself only things *like* itself. Artistic expression cannot cross into the scientific, nor can rigid linguistic systems enter into the disorganized chaos of myth. This is how human expression is understood, with each form adhering to its own laws, its own determining qualities.

Every human has within him or herself all of the qualities of each symbolic form, as well as the potential for those forms to engage with all others in complex relationships. Humans though, unaccustomed to the inter-mingling and interaction of symbolic forms

⁵ ICRP. P. 177

within, and comfortable in their self-incurred immaturity,⁶ attempt to maintain, even cultivate, simplistic divisions between disparate forms of expression whether those be in symbolic formation, or within their own identities, or within their interactions with others. Cassirer's symbolic forms are a tool for self-reflection, which then can be turned outward for critique of the human experience of culture and through this exchange, to then change the interpretation and experience of culture.

In the remainder of this introduction, I address the political, cultural and intellectual forces that were at play during Cassirer's life that both influenced his theory of symbolic forms, but also moved him off the center stage and into the wings of the academy. Chapter one then addresses the complex question of "what exactly is a symbolic form?" To understand their complexity as well as their application to the impasse of postmodernism, a firm grounding in Cassirer's own conception of symbolic forms is necessary.

In the second chapter, I lay out Cassirer's early influences that he incorporates into symbolic forms and which can be used as tool for re-imagining culture through a broad, pluralistic lens. The first of these is *mythical consciousness*; the second is *functional relationships*, the third is Cassirer's own Kant Scholarship. Mythical consciousness is that part of the mind that brings pre-logical understanding to experience. It is the active mind in children prior to learning to speak; it is that part of the "primitive" mind that sees unity and universals. Functional relationship refers to the dependence of an object or relationship on all other objects and relationships. In other words, an object is only what it is because of the relationship it has with other objects. We cannot see

⁶ "The inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another" (Kant. *Was ist Erklärung* in Reiss. P. 54)

anything apart from its connection with all else. Finally, Cassirer looks to Kant's basic premise which asserts that scientific concepts are not obtained by the human mind through abstraction, but rather through an integrating, synthetic mental process. Cassirer takes this one step further through symbolic forms, to say that this integrative mental process for all humans is not only a process of symbolization, but also permeates all types of knowledge. Cassirer turns again and again to Kant's schema as for furthering the possibilities of a new concept of form, of developing a concrete relationship between form and matter. I explicate this direct relationship, which becomes essential to understanding symbolic forms as the first step toward a solution to a new theory of culture.

Universals and essential qualities can no longer be trusted, yet solace is unfound in the chaotic spiraling of the drive to quantify across all human categories. Cassirer's early ideas, at the core of symbolic forms, drive these influences beyond their own limits, and if we allow, imprint experience with a different emphasis that encompasses both the universal as well as the individual experience. Simply by shifting the accent to a perspective that allows the mythical consciousness to be heard and seen equally with the logical ordering of life, to experience relationships as *functional*—as related to others and not existing in a void of meaninglessness. The opposition that is experienced between pre-logical thought and logical thought, between the relationship of subject and object are not necessarily opposed to each other, not mutually negating, not polar antitheses. The perception and attention brought to experience is the source of the opposition. Cassirer's early philosophic explorations were later applied to the term symbolic form and this formulation must be brought to bear on all interpretations of symbolic forms. Ultimately,

I argue that mythical consciousness and functional relationships provide us with concepts to be used for understand the complex relationships and their implications in today's society.

In the third chapter I discuss the work of Nicholas Cusanus as interpreted by Cassirer, and demonstrate how Cassirer incorporated the intellectual development of Cusanus, who represents the bridge between this ancient philosophical dialogue and a reinterpretation of culture in symbolic forms. Through concepts that Cusanus utilized such as *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance), *complicatio* and *explicatio* (unfolding and enfolding) and *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites) that can be used to invert traditional categories upon which dualistic perceptions have been based, and can now be advanced and corrected. This chapter contextualizes Cassirer's thought within the ongoing conversation surrounding being and becoming, unity and multiplicity and the other in the one: symbolic forms represent an example of a "third path" that offers one way to unite the dualisms into a comprehensive system of being. I then integrate them into Cassirer's symbolic forms, and demonstrate how Cassirer utilizes these ancient and Renaissance ideas to underpin the transformative ideals of the "third path" inherent within symbolic forms.

Finally, I demonstrate how Cassirer molds and adapts idealism and the humanistic value of self-knowledge as a subjective idealism which presents self-reflection as ultimately action-oriented. Here, we follow Cassirer's conception of philosophy and its role in self-knowledge as it is informed by humanism. The building blocks of self-knowledge, truth and humanism form the foundation on which Cassirer builds his critical idealism. Cassirer's philosophy entails bringing both philosophy and idealism into the

realm of culture through symbolic forms, where they can be noted, observed, critiqued—and ultimately changed, in the service of an ethical ideal which places human freedom and dignity at its center.

Awareness of concepts allows us to make choices about what we bring to relationships. Learning new concepts, or transforming old ones to be utilized in new ways presents an opportunity to change the nature of those relationships. Suzanne K. Langer notes that in *denotation* there are four inter-acting essential terms: subject-symbol-concept-object, as contrasted with typical signals, in which there are only three essential terms: subject-sign-object. It is within *denotation* that humans have the opportunity and ability to change their experience of experience, by choosing what they will have for a *concept*. For example, I have a concept of water. That concept is “drinking”. In having this concept, I establish a particular relationship to water. But if I change the concept to “swimming” then I have both a completely different conception as well as a different relationship to water. With each inter-personal relationship we bring such concepts, but they are more complex, more laden with history, social mores, or personal values. Thus, if I interact with an older man, my concept may be laden with “father-image” or “authority” figure—whatever I bring to the relationship. The concept then has the potential to become the mediating factor between the logical and the pre-logical, reducing or eliminating the binaries and false dichotomies that are inherent in a simple subject-sign-object relationship.

Each aspect of symbolic form so far discussed—the symbolic forms’ resonance with the work of Cusanus, its inheritance of the Kantian schema and ideals, and the adherence to idealism through German humanism and self-responsibility—contributes

not only to a fuller understanding of the complexity of symbolic forms, but also to a new interpretation of Cassirer's symbolic forms to be used as an ethical solution to cultural issues of pluralism and as a new method for approaching ethical action.

Cassirer viewed symbolic forms as cultural expression as a step toward humanity's education toward freedom. He sought to demonstrate how the use of the mind and the intentional direction of thought not only mediates experience, but also informs decision and action. The casual reader of Cassirer will not easily see this; the path it traverses to arrive at this ideal spans the 30-year process of Cassirer's own intellectual development, in addition to the intricate nuances involved in symbolic forms. Whether it be Plato's forms or Kant's kingdom of ends, political theory seeks the social expression of an ideal: the *possibility* of realizing the good or the just. Symbolic forms embody philosophy by defining man through his symbolic nature, an unchanging characteristic. Symbolic forms also claim that this nature is the very vehicle through which man has the power to redefine his own experience, thus creating for himself a new experience, a new world.⁷ In this endeavor, symbolic forms offer a new tool for political theory to re-envision traditional categories in the service of realizing social and cultural relations based in mutual respect and understanding.

Biography

Ernst Cassirer was born in 1874 to a prospering merchant family with strong family ties and social connections. With five uncles successful in the timber industry⁸ the

⁷ Hannah Pitkin distinguishes philosophy from political theory by noting that philosophy "investigates those aspects of the human condition that could not be otherwise" and political theory investigates "matters that might well be other than what they are".

⁸ <http://genealogy.metastudies.net/ZDocs/Stories/stories02.html>

family cooperated in daily meetings over coffee, planning their financial future. The combination of social status, economic success and familial cooperation contributed to Ernst's potential for his own success. The family was situated to provide for itself and to increase their own social capital. While only one of Ernst's uncles went to University, Ernst, his brother Richard, and two cousins Kurt Goldstein and Kurt Cassirer all became prominent intellectuals in their respective fields of philosophy, neurobiology and art history.⁹

The Cassirer family line can be traced to the early 16th century to Rabbi Moses Isserles, in the town of Krakow, Poland, where he founded a Yeshiva and became a prominent authority among the Ashkenazim. The modern Cassirers, to whom Ernst would have been tied by family, proximity, business and religion, were located in Breslau, Germany—what is now Wroclaw, Poland. Breslau is situated in a region of Central Europe known as having a cosmopolitan concentration of “mixed populations, mixed cultures”¹⁰ from the late 19th century to the first decade of the 20th century. Ethnically, this region consisted of Poles, Czechs, Germans, Lithuanians and Hungarians, among others. Religiously, these ethnicities were united in Judaism. “Central Europe became the great haven for European Jewry. In the centuries when Jews were deported from England, persecuted in Germany and excluded from Russia, they naturally congregated in 'The Lands Between'. One rather tenuous movement saw Jews of Chazar origin move into Central Europe from the south and east. A second, more substantial movement, which reached its peak during persecutions resulting from the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, saw Ashkenazi Jews fleeing from the West to seek refuge in

⁹ http://genealogy.metastudies.net/ZDocs/Stories/stories02_1a.html#

¹⁰ Roger Moorhouse. *The End of German Breslau*. Lecture delivered to the History Faculty, Oxford University, October, 2001.

Bohemia, Hungary and especially Poland-Lithuania...In all the countries to which they moved they formed a highly assimilated commercial elite and intelligentsia.”¹¹

It was this atmosphere of multi-cultural assemblage and Judaic community identity united in an unfortunate history of persecution in which Ernst’s father, uncles and aunts would have been raised. Ernst himself would have experienced this culture first hand during his formative years, as it was not until the First World War that changes came to this region. With the shifting and changing political borders, the various ethnic groups and the multiple identities that Cassirer experienced as he was growing up, there can be no doubt that the interplay of multiculturalism and community influenced him early and played a role in his continuing philosophic pursuits, because for Ernst Cassirer, all interpretation and understanding of meaning is highly personal and complex. Experiences are not merely passively apprehended, but formed and shaped through interactions and relationships Relationships are modified and evolved through exchange with the external world. Despite the multitude of ethnic identities, the undercurrent of recognition of unity existed between people, and was carried out in peaceful, mutual existence, making the later Nazi aggression incomprehensible, and in need of philosophic explanation and understanding.

Although Ernst first studied jurisprudence, he became interested in philosophy, taking his first course on Kant with Georg Simmel, the man whose cultural theories Cassirer would later critique, in 1894. Simmel, though brilliant, admitted to his class that the “best books on Kant are by Hermann Cohen...but I confess I do not understand

¹¹ Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse, *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City*. Jonathan Cape, London, 2002, pp. 8-9

them.”¹² This became Cassirer’s call to the Marburg school to study neo-Kantianism under Cohen. At this time, Cohen was working through the problem of freeing “Kant’s philosophy from inner contradiction and emphasizing its fundamental methods and ideas.”¹³ To Cohen, social and political concerns lay always on the perimeter of consciousness. Far from limiting Kant’s work to “mere” philosophy, Cohen believed that Kant had great political significance and that the formulation of the second categorical imperative¹⁴ “could only lead to socialism.”¹⁵

With Paul Natorp, Hermann Cohen founded the Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, known for its adherence to and reliance on epistemology and the philosophy of science. This school contrasted with the Baden School of Kantianism, with Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband as representatives, focused on the more normative aspects of Kantianism, applying it to culture and values. Yet even at the Marburg school’s inception, Paul Natorp admonished against adhering to an orthodox Kantianism, and instead advocated the use of Kant to move philosophy forward and to “pursue the eternal problems of philosophy in the direction of the fundamental insights which philosophy has ineradicably won through [Kant], and consequently increase in depth achieved through him.”¹⁶ Cassirer, perhaps due to his own advancement past the neo-Kantianism of his friend and mentor, remarks specifically on this point in the preface to *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics*, noting that his own ties to the

12 Gawronsky, Dimitri. Cassirer: His Life and work. In *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*. P. 5

13 Gawronsky, Dimitri. Cassirer: His Life and work. In *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*. P. 9

14 “Act so as to treat a man, in your own person as well as in that of anyone else, always as an end and never as a means”

15 Gay, Peter. *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx*. Columbia University Press, 1952. P. 143. Professor Gay also notes, however, that Kant was not prescient nor intentional in an position on a preliminary socialism. The statement is made purely with the value of hindsight.

16 Natorp, Paul. Kant and the Marburg school. Quoted in *DIMP* P. xxiii

founders of the Marburg school and his advancements in Kantian philosophy are not unlike the ties of an Einstein or a Bohr to those of Galileo or Newton.

Following the publication of *Leibniz' System in Seinen Wissenschaftlichen* in 1902, which contained a section on Descartes' mathematics that was his doctoral dissertation, Cassirer published several articles¹⁷ and contributed to two other compiled volumes¹⁸ while also writing and preparing the first two volumes on the problem of knowledge, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, which were published in 1906 and 1907.

By 1917, Cassirer had been *privatdozent* at Berlin University for less than ten years, and had already published extensively. In 1910, with Cassirer's publication of *Substance and Function*, he moved away from the direction of his mentor. As we know, Hermann Cohen emphasized the logical reasoning aspect of Kant—reducing, analyzing, through a series of definite steps and operations the empirical measuring and knowing of an entity. Cassirer did not question this method or logic per se, but rather, questioned its universal applicability. For, he reasoned, when asking questions about the infinite and the absolute or even questions regarding culture, this logic of individual experience must fall short. In the precision of the symbols and language of mathematics, Cassirer finds his reasoning. In a mathematical expression between infinity and a finite variable, the relationship always remains the same—that is, infinite. No matter what position a

17 In *Philosophische Arbeiten* Cassirer contributed an article critiquing a Leonard Nelson article *Die Kritische Methode und das Verhältnis der Psychologie zure Philosophie*; In *Kant Studien*, he contributed an article on Kant and Modern Mathematics in addition to a review of Richard Höningwald's work on epistemology and methods, and in *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie und Soziologie* he published a response to the question of the methods of the critique of knowledge ("Zur Frage der Methode der Erkenntniskritik: Eine Entgegnung")

18 In two Volumes on the *Grundlegung of Leibniz' philosophy* by A. Buchena, 1904 and 1906, Cassirer contributed an introduction and two chapters each. For further articles and contributions that Cassirer wrote prior to 1917, see the Bibliography in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassier*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp.

quantity occupies, even if other variables or quantities are added, the relationship to the infinite never changes.

In this sense, Cassirer's own thought reflects Nicholas Cusanus' *De Docta Ignorantia* "[Cusanus' theology] abandons Scholastic logic, the logic of generic concepts, dominated by the principle of contradiction and of the excluded middle; but it demands in its place a new type of mathematical logic, one that does not exclude but, in fact, requires the possibility of the coincidence of opposites, and requires the convergence of the Absolute-Greatest with the Absolute-Smallest as the firm principle and the necessary vehicle of progressing knowledge."¹⁹ It was this movement that began Cassirer's own unique expression, his own progression of knowledge first recorded in *Substance and Function*. Referring to Cusanus, Cassirer says of this, "The only relationship that exists between the conditioned, endlessly conditionable world and the world of the unconditioned is that of complete mutual exclusion. The only valid predications of the unconditioned arise out of the negation of all empirical predicates."²⁰

Cohen insisted that epistemology begin all philosophical discussion, and viewed this idea as a complete departure from the Marburg tradition: Cohen had attempted to prove that infinitesimal numbers exist as absolutes; Cassirer's *Substance and Function* argues the opposite, that mathematical categories cannot be ascribed an absolute value, since each value is determined not by the number itself, but by its position in relation to other numbers. The *function* of a number thus becomes the absolute, while the number itself always remains relative. The philosophical dispute created such a rift between the

19 ICPR. P. 14

20 ICPR. P.21

Cohen and Cassirer that Cassirer eventually wrote of the incident, acknowledging great respect and admiration for Cohen, but also simple disagreement.

Between 1910 and 1917, a relatively inactive publishing period, Cassirer published nine articles, predominantly on Kant and Leibniz, in addition to several contributions to larger volumes; only one book, *Freiheit und Form*, Cassirer's response to World War I that extolled the virtues of the great German Idealists Lessing, Schiller, Kant and Goethe, was published in 1916. Yet, this reminiscing about Germany's ideal past lay as a weak and desolate response to the Anti-Semitism building in Germany at the time. After all, Weimar, and its spirit found in Goethe, was the first city to embrace Nazism. The Liberal Cassirer turned a blind eye. But why? The traditional German Liberals believed in a unified Germany, believed in the promise of German idealism, such that such evil as Hitler and the eradication of the Jewish population was an aberration. Once he had immigrated to New York and Nazi Dominance was a fact, Cassirer expressed these sentiments to his chess partner Henry Pachter in these words: "You know, Mr. Pachter, this Hitler is an error (*Erratum*) of History; he does not belong in German history at all. And therefore he will perish."²¹ As an error, as an aberration, Hitler and the political milieu of the time was not something to act against: it would simply resolve itself, because it did not *belong* in German history.

However, it was also during this time that Cassirer was intently acquiring the background and knowledge that would lead him to write the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Dimitry Gawronsky tells the story that Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* did not evolve through a matter of conscious reasoning, but rather was born of a vision in a sudden moment of insight in 1917. Much like Cassirer's intellectual progenitors—Jean

²¹ Pachter. P. 316

Jacques Rousseau and Nicolas Cusanus, who both received “visions” –for the *Social Contract* while sitting under the tree, and *De Docta Ignorantia* while on a return voyage from Greece, respectively—as Cassirer entered a street car to ride home, the full vision of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* overwhelmed him.²² The entire system “flashed in his mind”, and was worked out in nearly its finished form by the time he reached home just a few minutes later.²³

Yet, this vision, as we understand now, encompassed “merely” the first three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, published between 1923-1929. The fourth volume came into being only after Cassirer’s death, with the publication of the manuscripts which were discovered in the Yale University Library. While Cassirer had intended to include a final section in the third volume, *Leben und Geist zur Kritik der Philosophie der Gegenwart (Life and Spirit –Toward a Critique of Contemporary Philosophy*²⁴) he omitted it finally claiming that the length of the volume already was sufficient, and that the subject matter departed from that volume too radically to be contained in the same work. Nonetheless, Cassirer does indicate in these manuscripts that this *Leben und Geist* offers the “basic attitude of the Philosophy of Symbolic forms toward present day philosophy as a whole.”²⁵ Cassirer, in the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, alludes to the underlying precepts of symbolic forms’ metaphysics; however, the fourth volume, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* (Published in 1996), would not be conceived until after Cassirer had emigrated,

22 Gawronsky, Dimitry. Ernst Cassirer: His Life and Work in The Library of Living Philosophers. Paul Arthur Schlipp, ed. P. 25

23 Gawronsky. P. 25

24 This was eventually published posthumously instead of the Author’s response in The Library of Living Philosophers. Paul Arthur Schlipp, ed.

25 PSF III. P xvi.

particularly during his time in Sweden. Toni Cassirer describes this in a passage from her book *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer* when, in the late spring of 1940 on a vacation in the country outside of Göteborg, she was out for a morning walk with Ernst and he told her he had begun the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene believe that the manuscript Cassirer is referring to became what has been labeled “MS 184c” and was titled *Basisphänomene*. This Manuscript became a substantial portion of Part II of the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*.²⁶

Shortly after Hitler’s ascension to power on January 30, 1933, he enacted the Enabling Law (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*), which transferred power over to the chancellor’s office to empower the Chancellor alone without reference to the parliament. This law allowed the government to pass budgets and laws that permitted the alteration of the German constitution. Then, on April 7, 1933, the Reich instated the Law for restoration of the professional civil service (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*). This law provided for the retirement of civil servants who were not of Aryan descent, solidifying the Nazi threat on a national level. Less than a month later, on May 2, 1933, Cassirer resigned his position at Hamburg University, where he had been fourteen years and moved to Oxford.

This same year, for the same reasons, the Warburg Library of Cultural Sciences (*Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*) was also moved out of Hamburg University to London. Since this library’s inception at Hamburg University in 1926, Cassirer recognized a kindred philosophical spirit in it, through its founder Aby Warburg. Aby was a descendent of the well-known Warburg family: the Hamburg banker Moritz

²⁶PSF IV. P. xx.-xxi.

Warburg was the father both of Max Warburg, who continued the family business but refused all invitations to hold political office, and of Aby, the art historian and founder of the Warburg Library, later the Warburg Institute, which was transferred from Hamburg to London in 1933. Cassirer says, in his letter honoring Warburg on his 60th birthday, “In its organization and in its intellectual structure, the library embodies the idea of the methodological unity of all fields and all currents of intellectual history.”²⁷ For Warburg, a Classics and Renaissance scholar, the same tension moved between the “primordial mythic symbolism” (to use Cassirer’s imagery) and “rational conceptions of symbolism” as represented in the extremes between which culture, as seen through art history, moved. Cassirer’s conception of the basic tension in culture derives from this association.²⁸

Cassirer follows Warburg in many ways. As John Michael Krois states:

Cassirer’s philosophy is oriented on one side to the Modern Age, which began in the Renaissance; on the other side, it is oriented to the first beginning of culture. Here again, his conception is atypical of historians of philosophy, for whom Greek philosophy is always the beginning; rather for Cassirer, it is imperative to start with what comes “before philosophy”: myth. This is the tension between the ancients and the moderns in Cassirer’s philosophy: myth and the Renaissance, not Greek philosophy versus seventeenth-century philosophy. The ancient and seventeenth-century systems of philosophy exhibit a greater degree of stability and rational organization than do mythic and Renaissance thought.²⁹

Perhaps the need to emigrate was the catalyst that propelled Cassirer toward a personal understanding of the ethical implications of his own work. It is shortly hereafter that Cassirer begins publicly to connect his work with normative values and ethical ideals. In 1935 in his inaugural lecture at the University of Göteborg, Cassirer reminds his audience of Albert Schweitzer’s reproach in 1922, between the two world wars,

²⁷ ICRP. P. xv

²⁸ Krois p. 423 (2002)

²⁹ Krois. P. 1. (1994)

admonishing people about their deterioration of ethical ideals. Cassirer notes that it is the duty of philosophy, as the embodiment of reason, to call us to these ideals, to hold humanity up to its highest standards and to recognize and sound the alarm, when humanity treads perilously on the edge of its own dehumanization. The choice is between dignity and dehumanization; with every cultural expression humanity moves toward one or the other. “Culture is made by us as a struggle for the form of our own humanity.”³⁰ In 1936, Cassirer furthers his public recognition of both the responsibility of philosophy to stay the ethical course, as well as his own connection to an ethical ideal in his symbolic forms. The end toward which the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* moves is freedom. This is a freedom both of human expression and cultural construction. He says, “This aim is a moral one: and it is therefore, in morality, it is in the system of ethics that we have to seek the true principles of philosophy of history and a philosophy of civilization”³¹

Philosophic Influence

Of all modern philosophers, only Ernst Cassirer follows in the line—with Leibniz and Hegel—of those whose philosophy represents a systematic unity that revolves around one main focal point. For Cassirer, that focal point is the symbolic form. Most interpretations of Cassirer’s work limit their analysis either to his *magnum opus*, the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, or to any single-one of his numerous other works. Contrary to this, the present work provides a systematic overview of the origins and applications of several core-concepts within the *Philosophy of Symbolic forms* that are found only at the intersection of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and Cassirer’s philosophic and historical texts. Cassirer’s erudition extended from science and math to

30 Bayer. Socratic Self-Knowledge and the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. P. 91

31 SMC. P. 85

art, philosophy and history. He influenced such scholars as Erwin Panofsky and Joan Kelly in the area of art history; philosopher, Suzanne K. Langer; and Renaissance scholars Paul Oskar Kristeller and F. Edward Cranz. In the spirit of Cassirer himself – through Nicholas Cusanus and the Renaissance, through his work on *Substance and Function*, *Language and Myth*, as well as his alignment with Enlightenment ideals and the idealism of Kant—this work provides an overview of the core concepts that underlie the structure of *Symbolic Forms* with an eye toward Cassirer’s philosophical development of his unique interest in the progress of human freedom.

Much of what is written about Cassirer analyzes only one certain aspect of his thought. Indeed, as John Michael Krois notes, “There exists primarily work that was written regarding Cassirer during the decade following his arrival to the United States 1941-1956. These include translations of Cassirer’s *Language and Myth* as well as *Substance and Function* and *Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* as well as his books for his “American audience,” *The Myth of the State* and *An Essay on Man*. Until December 2008, the collection of essays for the *Living Philosophers*, published in 1949, was—and remains—the most complete collection of essays regarding the myriad topics on which Cassirer wrote. However, even within this collection, there was little exposition or interpretation, but rather summary of the work with its application to such topics as math, science or physics. Very few works attempt to synthesize Cassirer’s thought into one comprehensive unity.³² This dissection of Cassirer’s thought leaves inaccurate assessments of his definitions, of his intentions and of his own systematic philosophy, allowing an author such as Bottici to incorrectly call language, myth and science

³² One exception to this is John Michael Krois’ *Symbolic Forms and History*.

“symbolic functions” and to mistakenly define Cassirer’s political myth as “collective desire personified;”³³ allowing an author like Reinbold to claim that “Cassirer’s answers are driven by an historicization of his original ‘myth versus reason’ dichotomy;” and an author like Wallace to claim that Cassirer “followed most of his preceptors, since the 17th century in assuming that the appearance of rationality in the form of philosophy and science removed any need for myth.”³⁴

From 1956 to the 21st century, little was done with Cassirer’s work directly—little engagement with the texts, few references and certainly no analysis or deconstruction.³⁵ Cassirer was virtually forgotten with the predominance of Anglo-American Social Science which emphasized the relationship of natural science with social science and viewed society as an object of scientific inquiry. There are however, four clear paths of influence that have branched off from the works of Ernst Cassirer during this time.

The first path follows the early Cassirer, who was influenced by Hermann Cohen of the Marburg school, and interprets his work through the tendency toward the dominance of the intellect and its observable effects in mathematics and natural science. Followers of this path interpret Cassirer primarily through his early works, *Substance and Function* and *Einstein’s Theory of Relativity*. It is within these two works that Cassirer’s Marburg influence is greatest, demonstrating a framework that relies on the rational power of the intellect and stressing the structure of concepts as they are used in the various fields of mathematics, physics, biology and chemistry. This influence can be seen in such works as Carl Hamburg’s *Symbol and Reality* and Seymour Itzkoff’s *Ernst*

³³ Bottici. Pgs 4 and 13 respectively

³⁴ Wallace, Robert M. in Blumenberg, Hans *Work on Myth, introduction*. xxvii

³⁵ Although, according to S.G. Lofts, Cassirer’s thought can be identified in such thinkers as Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Bataille, Levi-Strauss and Blumenberg. (A repetition of Modernity, p. 1)

Cassirer: Scientific Knowledge and the Concept of Man. It is through works such as these that Cassirer continues to be labeled a “Neo-Kantian,” or as a “rationalist positivist” (Macintosh)³⁶.

The second path utilizes Cassirer’s unique ideas as foundations for understanding new dimensions in a variety of other scientific and philosophical thought. From this group, Cassirer has been used in the areas of, Biology (Goldstein, original publication in 1934) and Symbolic Logic (Beck, 1975), Literary theory (Burke, 1941; Fulweiler, 1993), Anthropology (Geertz, 1973) and History (Thompson, 1985). This group of authors (with Goldstein as the exception), utilizing only particular dimensions of Cassirer’s thought, does not take into account the entire meaning of Cassirer’s symbolic forms, but rather attaches itself to Cassirer’s categorization of man as a symbolic animal—a new thought in the 1930’s which is now glanced over and used as mere cliché by most. Through these limited interpretations, there leaves no room for Cassirer as either a unique philosopher in his own right, or a philosopher with ethical intent.³⁷

It was with Michael Friedman’s *A Parting of the ways: Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger* in 2000 that fueled the most recent intellectual rush for mining the nuggets of

³⁶ Macintosh presents a one-sided view of Cassirer as a rationalist positivist, and further states that in *Substance and Function* the line between fact and hypothesis is illusory. “We would maintain, however, that the appearance of realism -- or the actual realism of an abstract sort -- is simply due to the abstract character of the idealism. Reality is interpreted as a rationally organized totality of experience -- the world of science viewed as the product of *a priori* thought -- a total world of experience, however, which needs not to be consciously experienced in order to exist. This is not realism, however closely it may resemble it in certain of its doctrines; it is abstract idealism. We are asked to believe in a world which is, in its entirety and everywhere, product of thought in general, and which may nevertheless exist apart from the thought or experience of any particular thinker. Natorp interprets a concrete realistic view such as would regard objects as existing independently of “the subjectivity of knowledge,” as due to a false but necessary abstraction.” We can furthermore reject this reading outright, simply by noting that for Cassirer, the symbolic function of humans is “directly grounded in the functioning of consciousness” (PSF vol. 3. P. 200). As such, the interpretation of any object begins prior to its perception, in the form of the understanding.

³⁷ If Cassirer is interpreted through an ethical lens, he is seen as a relativist

Cassirer's thought for ideas pertinent to the philosophical questions of the 20th Century. This is the third venue for re-invigorated work on Cassirer. In 1929 in Davos, Switzerland, Cassirer famously debated with Martin Heidegger. These two men were widely thought to be quite opposite in personality and philosophy—Cassirer representing the pre-Weimar liberal tradition, Heidegger, with his recent publication of *Being and Time*, representing a modern philosophy grounding being in the being of experience. Topics discussed in this debate were neo-Kantianism, man's finitude and his relation to the infinite, the significance of anxiety and death, and the task of philosophy.³⁸ It was in this debate that Cassirer acknowledges his debt to his mentor Hermann Cohen, but also identifies his movement away from Cohen's adherence to mathematics and natural science. He says, "Kant did not limit the question [to mathematics and natural science]. I ask about the possibility of the fact of language. How does it come about? How is it thinkable that we are able to communicate from one being to another [through language]? How is it possible that we can see a work of art as something objective and definite, as an objective being, as something meaningful in its wholeness?"³⁹ It was precisely this aspect of Heidegger that Cassirer again controverts in the fourth volume of the philosophy of symbolic forms, pointing out the nature of isolation in Heidegger's *Dasein*, as opposed to Cassirer's own relational and inter-connected being.

Using the Davos Disputation as its center, Friedman sets Cassirer as a middle-ground between the two extremes of Carnap's logical positivism and Heidegger's "arational sphere of human finitude."⁴⁰ As the impetus to Cassirer Studies in the 21st

³⁸ Krois, John Michael. "Cassirer's Unpublished Critique of Heidegger". *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16. (1983): 147

³⁹ Heidegger. Kant. Davos Disputation. Quoted in Krois, 1983. P. 43.

⁴⁰ Friedman. P. 2

century, not just Cassirer, but the Davos disputation has become the icon central to the “Cassirer dialogue.” The debate now, revolves around the questions of whether the Davos Disputation is of *cultural* importance, with *cultural* implications (including political implications), or is it of *philosophic* import, representing the split in Kantianism over the demise of Kant’s theory of pure intuition. *Contra* Freidman, in Skidelsky we find in Cassirer a framework for the cultural-political milieu of the pre-war years and war years, blended with a melancholy of reluctance toward Cassirer’s limits and Cassirer’s own with-holding of a potentially transformational politics, steeped in the ancients, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. Although these debates and discussions that pertain to the Davos disputation have brought new interest to Cassirer and his thought, the scope of debate remains limited.

Finally, over the past two decades, the work on Cassirer has been lead by Hamlin, Krois, Verene,⁴¹ who have analyzed Cassirer’s symbolic forms and their relation to culture and history. These were then followed by Bayer, Lofts, who have produced new readings and interpretations of Cassirer’s Philosophy based on the 1998 publication of the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*.⁴² It is through these authors that Cassirer’s unique philosophy and contribution are being most earnestly sought and elaborated. Through these philosophers, pre-conceptions regarding Cassirer’s philosophy are being challenged and Cassirer is emerging as a systematic philosopher who seeks a inter-relational unity

⁴¹ I would also add Susanne K. Langer to this group; however her published works pre-date the most recent insights and writings on Cassirer.

⁴² Bayer’s book is a commentary on Cassirer’s *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, and while it does offer a detailed outline of Cassirer’s fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I found that it was simply a repetition of Cassirer’s own words, without any depth of analysis of the work itself. So, when I have addressed Cassirer’s metaphysics, such as how they relate to Cusanus, I have primarily used Cassirer’s own words and work as the primary source.

not only throughout his own works, but also between his own theory of consciousness, idealism, history and ethics.

The second barrier, which is linked to the first, is the extensive and diverse, philosophical references which render the work dense and complicated. To undertake the task of understanding any single work, one must have minimum knowledge of such thinkers as Hegel, Darwin, Descartes, Kant, Uexküll, Schelling, Kant or Herder, to name a few. The task of contextualizing Cassirer's own thought becomes mired in wading through fields of study that one may not be familiar with in the context that Cassirer uses it—like utilizing myth to explain language or modern political states, or using science to elucidate the concept of functionality. According to Skidelsky, Cassirer was the “last great European philosopher to straddle [the exact sciences on the one hand and the arts and humanities on the other] with equal assurance”.⁴³ Many scholars coming to Cassirer today possess singular erudition, but to embrace Cassirer is to be willing to embrace a wide range of backgrounds and scholarship.

Finally, in Cassirer there is, as in Hegel or Kant, a specific vocabulary that must be dissected and understood as it relates to the Cassirer's own usage, and can also cause confusion for English readers. Unfortunately he does not actually create new terms, but uses common words with new meanings. Thus, for example, Cassirer will use such terms as “funktionsbegriff”, translated most often as “function” actually pertains to shifting one's concept of substance to one of functionality, or how a substance *relates* to other substances. Thus, “relationship” is closer to Cassirer's meaning of “funktionsbegriff”.⁴⁴

⁴³ Skidelsky. P. 4

⁴⁴ Habermas, in his *Liberating Power of Symbols* offers an example of an analysis of Cassirer's symbolizing nature of reality that relies too-heavily on the idea of symbols representing a substance-based reality, rather than a function-based reality. Cassirer insists on the “functional-unity” of symbols and that it is the

Furthermore, in this idea of “relationship” there inheres the idea of a dynamic relationship between discrete substances, but also the relationship of those substances with “the whole”. Similarly, there exists a problem in translation, with the German word *Prägnanz*. In German, *Prägnanz* maintains a two-fold meaning: both to imprint or to stamp upon a material to make an impression, as well as to come to fullness, to bear fruit. Cassirer means both of these in this sense, when referring to perception and its stamp upon reality. Thus, symbolic “pregnance” is the relation between the soul and its impression, its imprint through symbols in the world. But complex, dense writing and broad philosophical underpinnings have not before hindered the study of a great mind. One need only desire to read Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* to be willing to endure the language, the vocabulary, the density.

Chapter One: What is a Symbolic Form?

Introduction to Symbolic Forms

Through symbolic forms, Cassirer enters into the stream of dialogue that for centuries has addressed the problem of dualism and the binary thinking that divides and separates so many fields of study, both how they intra-relate and how they interact. This problem can be simplified to its origins in the problem of the finite versus the infinite. The finite represents that which is rational, logical, that which can be neatly categorized, divided, and refined. The infinite represents that which is mysterious, irrational, illogical, indefinable, unsubstantial, and illusory. This dualism plays out historically: for example, in mathematics as rational numbers and irrational numbers, in philosophy as the *one* and the *many* versus *unity* and *multiplicity*, and in religion where the infinite is understood as god, the finite as man. We see the same opposition played out in the cultural and political oppositions of art and science, determinism and indeterminism, the subject-object schism, in the deep-seated dualism of racism, and ultimately any system that pits an inferior “other” against a superior “one”. The finite has come to represent that which is defined as knowable, and, being “knowable” it becomes established as dominant. The infinite, the “unknowable”, failing the test of penetrability, relinquishes any possibility of equality with that which is known. Each aspect of this binary system remains in its own realm, apart and separate from the other, and ne’er the twain shall meet.

What is the unifying concept behind the term symbolic form that makes it such a revolutionary concept, one that addresses the issues that separate people, divide nations, and allows categories that systematically deem some superior and others inferior?

Symbolic form manifests a reconciliation of the ancient philosophic problems of the *one*

and the *many*, *unity* and *plurality*, and *the one in the other/ the other in the one*, and presents these in unified ways for today's culture.

In such fields as philosophy, art, culture, science, an opposition lies between metaphysics and/or theology and empirical sciences. Each strives by separate means to clarify what is thought to be the First Cause, or the "ultimate", which is often conceived as an absolute "One", over and against the multiplicity of things as they exist in space and over time. But in attempts to solve this puzzle, there arises a seemingly insoluble antinomy and contradiction. If the "One" is considered to embrace and embody "all" then its very nature embraces multiplicity, plurality and the "other". Cassirer notes:

Instead of the intended reconciliation of opposites, on closer analysis one term of the opposition seems to disappear, and thus the whole problem appears to evaporate. If the "First Cause" is really to be conceived as such, i.e., if it is to mean not only the temporal origin of being, but also its persisting and enduring principle, if it is to be that on which all continuance of reality depends and that which it requires every moment for its existence and character; this means that we cannot effect any real detachment of the Many from the One.¹

The Many and the one remain dependent upon each other, but what is more, they must include the other in their very definitions. First Cause, the eternal One, exists in and through its variety; all multiplicities simply culminate in the One. "Any being different from itself, anything that is not itself, would mean a limitation; and this can and must not take place in the absolute and unconditional being".² This passes into the idea of symbolic forms: for Many to be derived from, and to proceed back into the One, they must be conceived in a way that surpass or extends rational terms. If this conception were maintained logically, the result would be either to diminish the One or to multiply it—yet

¹ Cassirer, Ernst. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A study in the history of Renaissance Ideas. In Renaissance Essay from the Journal of the History of Ideas.p. 19-20

² Cassirer, Ernst. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A study in the history of Renaissance Ideas. In Renaissance Essay from the Journal of the History of Ideas.p. 19-20

the multiplication of One, a self-contained unity, remains impossible. "... none of the attempts at mediation between the opposite poles of unity and plurality of being and becoming can resolve the contradiction."³

The primary problem with the evolution of this understanding of dualistic thinking can be understood as an epistemological question—*does rational knowing constitute the sum of what it means to know*. As rational animals, humans naturally discern and separate objects and experiences to gain nuances of understanding. The root of judgment lies in this ability to separate and distinguish, and to know these objects logically. The definition of *knowing* in a rationally-dominated culture is limited to this experiential, logical method, and any other ways of knowing are suspect, unreliable, and invalid. *Knowing* has come to be aligned with the rational, yet this overlooks that humans retain a connection to pre-logical knowing, which is the understanding that develops prior to the use of language. Pre-logical knowing is a creative, imaginative force that calls forth human potential and human possibility beyond the rational.

Neither the rational nor the irrational represents an absolute knowing; each offers its own contribution to the equation of the whole—both contribute to the entire human being. Yet, the value judgment of rational as right has entered the somatic mind of humanity. Through symbolic forms, Cassirer brings forth the power and importance of the "irrational" in finding a solution to the One and the Many, and reminds us of the inspiration which feeds our rational mind. It is only through the interplay of rational with irrational, as we see in symbolic forms, that we can come to know more fully our human consciousness and to express that fullness in our social, political and economic structures.

3 Cassirer, Ernst. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A study in the history of Renaissance Ideas. In Renaissance Essay from the Journal of the History of Ideas.p. 19-20

The symbolic form derives from Cassirer's initial attempt to apply traditional epistemology to cultural sciences.⁴ When attempting to apply the categories of cognition found in mathematical and scientific thought to culture and its expression, he found the methodological basis inadequate to encompass the "spiritual" form of culture.⁵ The expression of culture contains more than *mere* cognition; it contains a thoroughly subjective element that both constitutes and asserts man's own understanding of meaning. It's a purely psychological function, a dual layering of culture: first the (subjective) meaning that inheres a culture, then its (objective) expression. However, this dual layering may be reduced further, as culture is constituted through every individual expression; there is a psychological/subjective constructing principle to every human endeavor that contributes to the whole of human culture.

This subjectivity does not consist solely in the cognition of nature and reality, but is everywhere at work where the phenomenal world as a whole is placed under a specific spiritual perspective, which determines its configuration. It seemed necessary to show how each of these configurations fulfills its own function in the growth of the human spirit and how each one is subject to a particular law."⁶

It is the unification of the psychological understanding with its objective expression in a cultural form that Cassirer understands as the "morphology" of methodological approaches, bringing about an expanded epistemology that is able to encompass the diversity of cultural forms.

These problems of duality arise historically because there is no merging, no overlap between what is rational and what is irrational. The two remain in their own discrete circles. The key to the symbolic form is the incorporation of the one and the

4 PSF I. P.69

5 Cassirer often uses the term "spirit" and "spiritual" to mean not a relationship with religion or a god, but rather to convey, in the Hegelian sense, *geist* or *zeitgeist*.

6 PSF I. P.69

many, the one into the other, the other into the one, without losing the rational basis for the construction and ultimate expression of the idea. Cassirer sees this as “an energy of the mind by which a mental content of the meaning is tied to concrete sensible sign and is internally incorporated into it.”⁷ In this sense it relates to Kant and the question, “what does it mean ‘to know’”? There is on the one hand objective knowledge, but this gives us just a specific piece of the picture. On the other hand, there is subjective knowledge, but again this gives only a piece. *To know* really is to know *the whole*, which from a purely subjective or purely objective perspective is impossible. All we can do from either subjective or objective standpoint is accumulate pieces and see how they fit together, yet this is *not* knowing. In a sense, this is like approaching an asymptote defined by the limits of information—but there is infinite, endless information, and we never will *know*⁸ all of it in its totality.

Symbolic forms are both symbolic expression defined in a systematic way *and* the life that underlies that expression. Yet, it is tempting to define symbolic forms in such a way that overlooks these two sources. The two words “symbolic form” engage the mind through automatic association, just as the human mind can understand a “chimera” depicted with the head and body of a lion, with a tail as a snake, and the head of a goat rising out of the back. Each word is understood independently—“lion”, “snake”, “goat”—and so they can be combined to formulate a picture of a mythical creature:

7 *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs*. P. 175, quoted in *Kant’s Life and Thought*. P. xiv

8 In this regard, Cassirer would place “knowing” in the same category as Tolstoy’s “chance” or “genius” and agree with: “The words chance and genius do not denote any really existing thing and therefore cannot be defined. Those words only denote a certain stage of understanding of phenomena. I do not know why a certain event occurs; I think that I cannot know it; so I do not try to know it and I talk about chance. I see a force producing effects beyond the scope of ordinary human agencies; I do not understand why this occurs and I talk of genius. Tolstoy. *War and Peace*. P. 1212



Figure 1: Chimera

Similarly, humans understand “symbolic” and “form” independently of each other and formulate a concept that simply merges the two words while maintaining their unique identities—much like we see above with the lion, the goat and the dragon each remaining distinct, but unified in one animal. This simple addition of concepts does not however, result in an accurate meaning for the term symbolic form, as Cassirer formulated it; we see repeatedly throughout Cassirer’s work that symbolic form defies such simple explanation. Such simplistic understanding of Cassirer led such great scholars as Clifford Geertz to the conclusion that a symbolic form as a cultural pattern is simply a system of symbols with “generic traits” that can be used for “extrinsic sources of information”, and that Cassirer makes the mistake of taking “the symbol to be identical with, or ‘constitutive of’ the referent.”⁹ This present study corrects such mistakes and misinterpretations by considering symbolic forms in the context of Cassirer’s metaphysics, philosophy and history and demonstrates their broader implications throughout Cassirer’s larger body of work.

A second example of this type of error can be found in *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* by Dena Goodman. Quoting from the *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (272-73), she states,

⁹ Geertz. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. P. 92.

“Cassirer's 'man,' like Rousseau's, is implicitly male: he fears the power of women as the object of his own appetites and passions. Only when he has freed himself from the confines of a female-directed social world can he forge his own direction. He will begin by finding a 'firm law within himself, before he seeks the laws of external objects.' Only after he has achieved true freedom in this way can he 'with confidence devote himself to the freedom of intellectual inquiry.' Only then will knowledge avoid becoming 'a victim of mere 'hair-splitting,'" he wrote, "nor will it render man effeminate and indolent".

Goodman here, attributes these attributes of man to “Cassirer’s ‘man’” when in fact, Cassirer has taken on the attitude and mental outlook of Rousseau, when describing Rousseau, lending strength of description to the reader’s understanding of how Rousseau saw himself. In no way was Cassirer speaking of himself in this.

If symbolic forms are not simply forms of symbols—as we would see in religious symbolism such as crosses or stars, or in national symbols of flags, eagles or pyramids, just what are symbolic forms? The complexity of the concept of symbolic forms represents one of the underlying currents throughout the totality of this work; however, before moving into the nuances of this concept, I offer here a brief discussion that encapsulates the characteristics which animate (the spirit) symbolic forms. There are a minimum of four criteria which symbolic forms must achieve. They are:

- Its movement as a dynamic process
- Its use as within a functional relationship
- Its use as an element of human expression.
- Its use as a form of consciousness

The complexity of Cassirer’s understanding of his own term is exemplified as the interplay of an underlying reality, as expressed in manifold experience, as well as in the “cloaking and revealing” of that reality. There are two parts to understanding this. First, this means that things of themselves cannot be understood in and for themselves—there

is always an “underlying reality,” which is always “cloaked.” This reality is brought forth through individual expression, through the vehicle of experience. The paradox remains though, that it is glimpsed in the expression but cloaked immediately and simultaneously by the very expression which reveals it.

‘Symbolic forms...’ are all modes of spiritual formation, going back to an ultimate primal stratum of reality which is perceived in them only as through a foreign medium. It would seem as though we could apprehend reality only in the particularity of these forms, whence it follows that in these forms reality is cloaked as well as revealed.”¹⁰

“Symbolic form” requires the particular, unique representation of the manifold to stand simultaneously both *as* (i.e. as a representation of) and *within* the unified essence of the whole. It is only within this place of *both/and* that the term “symbolic forms” is correctly understood.

The second element here is that nothing stands isolated apart from every relationship which comprises it. This for Cassirer comprises what he calls *functional relationships*. Cassirer looks to Kant’s laws of cognition and questions the constitutive principles that allow humans to know objects. Beginning from the inner constructs, rather than presuming an object as given Cassirer takes this one step further, and gives primacy not to the object, but to its function--to its relational values to other known objects. Each group of objects or ideas maintain a logic, but that logic is in its pattern of relationships, not through one object’s similarity (or dissimilarity) to another object. In spite of strong claims that link functionality of concepts merely to science or symbolism,¹¹ there is greater evidence that demonstrates that function is a core concept upon which the greater schematic of symbolic forms is constructed.

10 PSF III. P. 1

11 See: later discussion on Carl Hamburg in addition to Seymour Itzkoff.

The current work uses symbolic form in this sense, as Cassirer set it forth. For Cassirer, symbolic forms unfold reality and present us with various modes to experience and interpret an underlying “primal stratum” of life. The usage of the term *symbolic forms* represents cultural expressions and systems of symbol-creation; however, only in the networking of concepts that surround the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* does Cassirer’s meaning gain full significance.

Problems with previous interpretations of Cassirer’s Symbolic Forms

Many reasons may contribute to a misunderstanding of the term symbolic forms, as noted above; however, there are certain consistencies throughout Cassirer’s work, such that we might gain a full picture of this term, as Cassirer intended. By reevaluating past uses, judgments and definitions of symbolic forms toward a more precise interpretation this work, demonstrates an understanding of symbolic forms that utilizes Cassirer’s thought process, interrelated and unified. It is necessary to understand and utilize the term symbolic form consistently with Cassirer’s own application, use and understanding of the term. Isolating his thoughts through various lenses may be useful in particular contexts, but the understanding gained must then be returned to its relationship to Cassirer’s thought as a whole, and we must always return to a critical questioning of whether or not the ideas presented represent Cassirer’s own ideas regarding his philosophy.

I credit Carl Hamburg’s 1956 discussion¹²—the only work until now that was dedicated solely to a study of Symbolic Forms— as one of the major contributors to the predominant misinterpretation of the term. Hamburg follows a trajectory that leads from historical contextualization through definition of symbol-concept, and ends with a semiotic range of implications of Symbolic Forms. Throughout his study, Hamburg

12 Hamburg. *Symbol and Reality*.

presents Cassirer as representative of the Marburg school,¹³ but his interpretation offered a skewed version of the concept of symbolic forms. It does not consider either Cassirer's metaphysics, published in 1996—which brings to light a deeper and more complex understanding of Symbolic Forms—or any of his historical or philosophical writings.

There are three primary problems with previous interpretations of Cassirer's Symbolic Forms: they are introduced here briefly and are further explicated during the actual study. First, many of the interpretations regarding Symbolic Forms were written prior to 1996, when the *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* was published, thereby precluding any and all references to a Cassirerian metaphysic. Second, there has been a tendency to simplify and flatten the term symbolic forms, despite Cassirer's own reiteration of its depth and complexity. Finally, several of Cassirer's literary and historical works have not yet been examined for their related contributions to symbolic forms.

Since the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* presented itself to Cassirer in 1917, he thereafter injected threads of the fabric of symbolic forms into his writings, working out different dimensions of his thought around other philosophical problems. We must now begin to understand symbolic forms taking into consideration these previous problems. It is Cassirer's surrounding works that provide an enriched understanding of symbolic forms and a complex synthesis of meaning that brings us to a new cultural ideal of ethical freedom.

Initially Cassirer introduced the concept of symbolic forms as exemplified in the constitutive law of knowledge expressing itself universally through fields of mathematics and the exact sciences. He then found that this law was transferable to the realm of

13 John Michael Krois Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. P. 3

human culture; the forms human beings use to express themselves individually, in which the *same* expression is utilized. Further, symbolic form entails the *process* by which something *becomes* a symbolic form (and this in turn entails the *telos* of that process); it addresses the *relationship* between the individual and the culture *through* the symbolic form (which itself expresses the relationship of Spirit and Life through the activity of work). Finally, it addresses the ethical implications of the conscious understanding and use of the process and relationships of symbolic forms as methods of attaining enlightenment through human dignity and individual responsibility.

As needed and fruitful as this perspective—this clear and conscious concentration on the pure ‘telos’ of theoretical knowledge—proves to be, the ‘philosophy of symbolic forms’ cannot stop here. Its concern is not merely to take stock of forms, to assess them, so to speak, for what they are as static magnitudes. It is concerned, rather, with the dynamics of the giving of meaning, in and through which the growth and delimitation of specific spheres of being and meaning occur in the first place. It seeks to understand and illuminate the riddle of the becoming of form as such—not so much as a finished determination but rather with determination as a process. This process does not follow a single, predefined course leading from a specific beginning to an equally fixed end, with what has been determined in advance... This movement of thought searching for itself is not limited at the outset to a single, particular direction. Instead, distinctly different approaches emerge in it, different centers of power and different tendencies... But now, the need for synthesis [of the basic forms of linguistic, mythic and scientific thought] seems to exert its demand on us all the more urgently and insistently.¹⁴

Much like the movement from becoming toward being, symbolic forms embody a process, a “movement of thought searching for itself.”¹⁵ While there may be an initial direction of thought, at any point a new choice can be made, a new direction taken. With each new experience and perspective there emerges the possibility for a different approach to a situation. The symbolic forms act concordantly to enhance and bring out various aspects of the other symbolic forms. In combination, they become fulfilled in

14 PSF IV. P. 4-5

15 PSF IV, P. 4

more elaborate ways than they do alone. Pachelbel's *Cannon* unites artistic expression with mathematical complexity; the Parthenon links geometrical accuracy with aesthetic beauty; poetry utilizes language in new ways to expression passion and, emotion. Each symbolic form moves on a "different plane"¹⁶ than the others, thus enhancing it through its very difference.

The second problem is the frequent flattening, over-simplification and misuse of the term *symbolic form*. We know through Cassirer himself that the refractions of culture represented in language, myth, art and science are symbolic forms; while these are forms that Cassirer specifically discusses, he also notes that these do not exhaust all possible symbolic forms—but he leaves us with no indication what those others might be, nor has anyone since Cassirer attempted an exposition of symbolic form beyond these. Yet, we see the term *symbolic form* utilized in myriad ways (and attributed to Cassirer), with no grounding for or explanation of the terms. To assume that *symbolic form* is a transparent concept, to be utilized to mean any *form* that contains, expresses, or can be represented through *symbols*, neglects the intricately woven set of ideas which comprise Cassirer's symbolic form. To even approach Cassirer's use of the term, at the very least one must demonstrate how it acts in a functional relationship with other terms of its set. One must demonstrate how the symbolic form in question acts as a form of consciousness, and how the form is utilized in humanity as an expression of that humanity. If an author does not do these things (again—this is the minimum requirement), then their use of the term symbolic form attributed to Cassirer must be called into question.

Further, we know definitively from Cassirer that language, myth, religion and science are all symbolic forms, but that philosophy is not. While Cassirer does not

16 EM. P. 170

intimate what other symbolic forms might be, he does indicate that he has not exhausted the possibilities. To claim that new terms are symbolic forms in the Cassirerian sense, one must show connections to the attributes and functions of symbolic forms within Cassirer's parameters; however, these attributes and parameters exist within Cassirer in an amorphous, disconnected form, with no clear absolute definition of what entails a symbolic form. Therefore this present work serves to bring together the primary aspects for use in determining future symbolic forms through demonstrating the components that comprise them.¹⁷

Let me give a general example: If I say the words, "you woke me from my slumber," there is at first, a quite simple meaning—that I was asleep and you woke me—"—good morning!" On the other hand, the context of the comment, as well as our mutual historical understanding, may give the simple statement a more complicated interpretation. If we understand both that Hume "awoke Kant from his slumber" and inspired Kant to write the *Critique of Pure Reason*, then my initial statement could imply that you proposed an argument that inspired me. But we can take this one step further. Kant was inspired and awoke from his slumber not because he agreed or embraced Hume, but rather because he disagreed and intended to controvert Hume's thoughts. So perhaps in awaking from my slumber I heard something contrary that I wanted to oppose, not something that inspired me because I agreed with it. Similarly, the addition of a surrounding philosophical, historical and metaphysical concepts to an understanding of symbolic forms through brings a layer of specificity to the definition and usage of the

¹⁷ The work of Deniz Coskun, *Law as symbolic form: Ernst Cassirer and the anthropocentric view of law* is an excellent example of this.

term symbolic form. Without this understanding and historical context, we cannot have full understanding of a seemingly simple phrase.

A specific example of the evolution in Cassirer's writings regarding symbolic forms illustrates this point. In 1910, Cassirer was still very close to Hermann Cohen and the Marburg School. From this background, he wrote *Substance and Function*, published in 1910. Here we find the beginning of the evolution of his thought toward a mature development of the concept of symbolic forms, as he states, "For [chemistry] is only the symbol of a certain form of connection, that has more and more lost all material content; it only signifies a type of possible arrangement, not the 'what' of the elements arranged. Are we here concerned with a gap that is to be filled out by new determinations belonging to the same logical direction of thought or must we recognize and introduce at this point a form of knowledge different in principle?"¹⁸ Here we see Cassirer beginning to recognize that a direction of thought, logical when applied in one instance, does not necessarily maintain its significance when applied to other scenarios. The symbolic function of terms changes. He seems here to begin to ask, "If this is true in chemistry, in physics, in the sciences, would it not be much more the truth in culture, where meanings shift and change with time?" Indeed, in 1927, he makes this connection while working through the *Individual and the Cosmos*, where we find this connection: "And just as the basic forms of intuition—space and time—are in this sense 'implied' by the mind, so too are the concepts of number and size, *as well as all logical and mathematical categories*. In the development of these categories the mind creates arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy."¹⁹ The changeable nature of the meaning of concepts that he uncovers for

18 SF. P. 204.

19 ICRP. P. 41

chemistry in *Substance and Function* becomes the basis for his development of symbolic forms.

Conclusion: Cassirer's limits and contributions

At the heart of symbolic forms lies a tension between the universal aspect of mythic consciousness and the polarizing characteristic of symbols and rational, logical thought. Mythic thought becomes subsumed by its object, overwhelmed with images, emotions, yet fully connected through these means to a more expansive understanding of oneself and humanity. On the other hand, logic, through symbols, allows humans greater cognizance of nuances of difference, greater specificity and distinction between categories. This tension parallels the antithesis of form and content seen in art history, as mentioned above in association with the Warburg institute, and plays out today in a postmodern culture, which abhors all-things associated with a “universal” identity, but embraces the “explosion” of subjectivity.

Post-modern culture thrives on identity politics that mimics the scientific quest for refining definitions, categories and labels, such that every nuance of difference might be accounted for when claiming an identity. The origins of identity politics can be traced to the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Rights movement and the Gay and Lesbian movement.²⁰ During all of these movements, one or more subsets of the primary group felt un-represented, or misrepresented, such that that group had to break away to form its own “voice”—its own identity. One could no longer claim that color-gender-orientation similarities beget common interests. Political power—the thought-process went—must organize itself on interests, not on physical similarities. Thus feminists became liberal-feminists, radical-feminists, black-feminists, Marxist-feminists, lesbian-feminists,

²⁰ Di Leonardo, “White Ethnicities,” 166.

Marxist-radical-lesbian feminists, and on and on. This carving out of identity was seen in the Gay and Lesbian movement with lesbians first separating themselves from the predominantly male movement, with similar subdivisions as we see above with the women's movement; then bisexual people, transgendered people, queer and questioning people all revealed themselves as a group that requires recognition. All traits, characteristics, quirks or ticks all are equally considered as subjective expressions and valid for the claiming of a public voice.

As a reparative to combat the sin of “essentialism”, the introduction of identity politics offered great strength and esteem to disenfranchised groups and people, but not without the repercussion of severe relativism. At the time of Cassirer's writing, the post-modern dominance of identity politics had not yet entered the scholarly or cultural stream. But, as we saw with Cassirer's own upbringing, cultural diversity has existed well before post-modern cultural claims. Cassirer's own experience in a culturally cosmopolitan yet religiously unified setting may well have influenced his work on symbolic forms. For Cassirer, it is through the underlying unifying factors of language, myth, religion that human culture moves forward in pluralistic, diverse forms. These two—the underlying unity and the multifarious expressions—express one and the same progression of human culture.

The *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* embodies these two opposite movements of culture throughout history. Human cultural history can be interpreted both universally and pluralistically—with each of these contributing equally to the progress of human expression. This is the nature of Cassirer's use of the term “harmony in contrariety, like the bow and the lyre”. The symbolic forms of religion, myth, language progress culture

through mimetic and analogical phases into ultimately a purely symbolic phase.

Paralleling these symbolic forms, social expression follows a similar path of comity and conflict throughout history. John Michael Krois notes that “the most fundamental of these conflicts is the antithesis between mythic and non-mythic ways of conceiving the world.”²¹ This contrairity and concord play itself out between individuals with each other as well as between larger groups within society. Yet, much like Kant’s role of antagonism in the process of history, cultural conflict serves to determine the progress of culture as a whole. “All symbolic forms are social forces acting to unite and to divide people.”²² We can therefore view the history of culture and art from one of three perspectives: First, if we reflect on the nature of cultural history and art from a purely formal stance, and if we treat the various areas of cultural or aesthetic expression as parallel, this perspective fails to take into account a developmental, inter-relation between them. Without this interplay between symbolic forms (cultural expressions) or differences in art, the dynamic, interaction between them becomes lost. Secondly, we can address these ideas from an aesthetic viewpoint, which aims to express pure subjectivity, yet this results in an abstraction which has no counterpart in reality; “for every act of seeing is conditioned by our circumstances, so that what might be postulated conceptually as the ‘purely visual’ can never be completely isolated from the context of the experience in which it occurs.”²³ Finally, the approach of both Cassirer and Warburg was that of a middle course. Instead of pitting content against form, subject against object, duality against multiplicity, there is the recognition that both are necessary to an understanding of the entire worldview. Each concrete object, is conditioned by the relationships it is built within, as well as the forms

21 Krois. *Symbolic Forms and History*. P. 172.

22 Krois. P. 173

23 Wind. P. 24

that are used in its construction. No object resides in a vacuum, no subject is devoid of its connection with multiple subjectivities.

Ernst Cassirer's symbolic forms represent a philosophical anthropology which provides us with an ontological foundation rooted in universalism which can be used to reassess man's relationship to himself and to the world. Between set binary systems, Cassirer's third path contravenes and inverts traditional dualistic categories. Cassirer advocates Enlightenment and Humanistic values, acceptance of the limits of knowledge and self-reflection as a vehicle for the evolution of man toward freedom. These three aspects of Cassirer's symbolic forms allow us today to address identity politics from a standpoint of universalism and self-responsibility as a third path giving us a way to reinterpret gender and race relationships. When understood in its fullness and in all its complexity, Cassirer's symbolic forms—his movement of a critique of reason to a critique of culture—offering an interpretation of human beings that can be used to counter the fragmentation found in post-modern culture.

Cassirer clearly indicates that his project situates the nature of humans away from that of a rational animal to an *animal symbolicum*. Above all creatures, humans form their worlds of perception through symbols, mediating experience and reality through the use of representations. Everything humans experience must be named, designating its special attributes, setting it apart from other things by emphasizing its position in space and time, and carving each thing out of its interconnected relationship with all else. What is thus named is accorded meaning which is established through the filters, experiences and expectations of the namer. In this way, symbols deceive the mind because they are associated with a primary meaning that stands alone, disconnected. Having thus

personalized the meaning of the symbolic representation, not only meaning, but value is given to representation. Consequently, each representation must be defended against any contrasting meaning and value. Any sense of unity, inter-connection or a vision that sees differently must be overcome. On the one hand, Cassirer acknowledges this as human nature, but he insists, on the other hand, that the battle over meaning and values need not dominate human nature. He says, “The problem is not how to break through or in any way lessen the force of strict laws of nature in the realm of empirical events. The problem is to discover and develop a new viewpoint, to set up a new standard which cannot be reduced to that of empirical causality but which on the other hand is in no sense in conflict with it.”²⁴ Thus, the lesson of symbolic forms is that new perceptions can be learned, and with it a change in meaning and values.

Take for example the picture on the following page: the same symbols—chess pieces—against different backdrops. Neither is neutral. Each backdrop “shades” (both literally and figuratively) the perception and influences the way the chess pieces are seen. What color are the chess pieces? How do we know? How can we be certain that what we see is correct, or if there is another possibility? What if we design our evaluations and judgments of situations and people based on these perceptions that may or may not be correct?

24 DIMP. P. 198

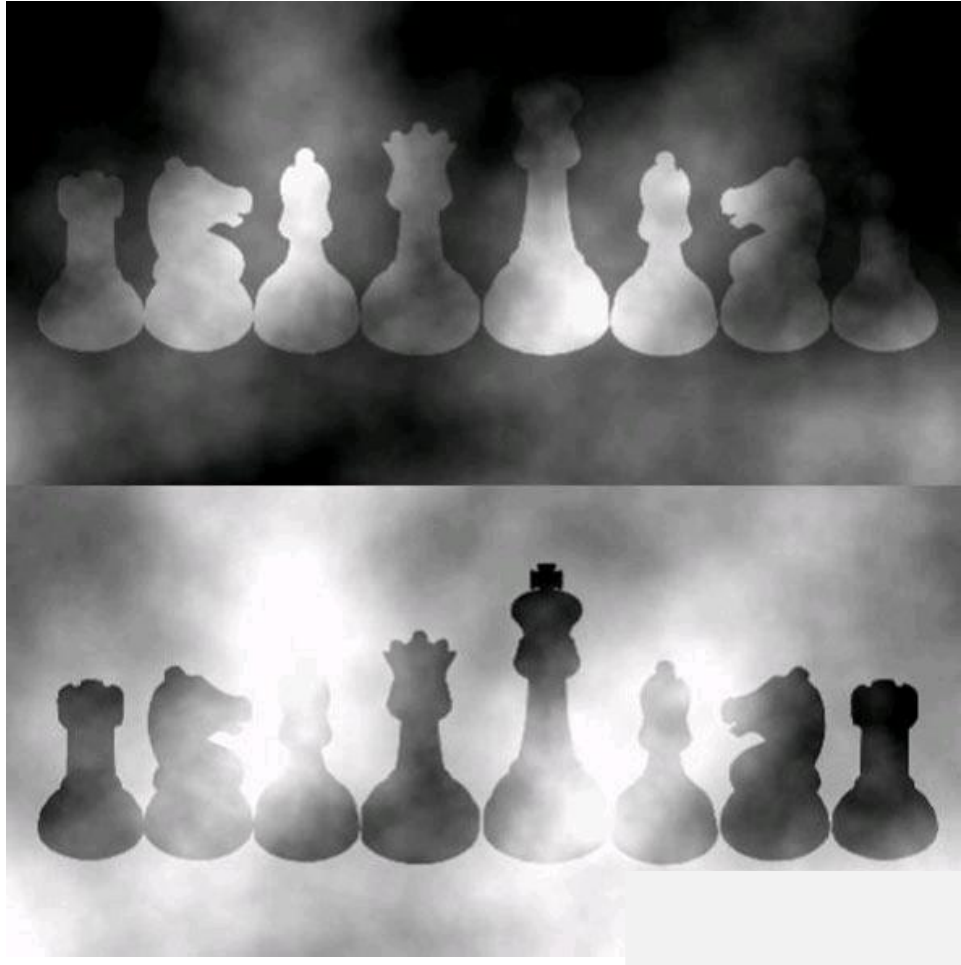


Figure 2: Dark and light chess pieces

See the next page for this same picture against a neutral backdrop.



Figure 3: Dark and light chess pieces, neutral background

Is it possible that this same “shading” happens when we encounter people, when we interact and relate with others? If so, then regardless of whether we “see” white or see black, each would be incorrect. Is it possible that all of our perceptions are *potentially* incorrect at all times, since we are often unaware of the influence of the backdrop? This issue is taken up in the discussion of Nicholas Cusanus, whose work on *Learned Ignorance* reminds us of this precise point: when confronted with any perspective or standpoint, a relationship, a situation or an object is necessarily defined by what it is as well as by what it is not. Thus, there is wisdom in acknowledging that the negative aspects (that which we do not know) is as influential as the positive aspects (that which we do know).

Our interpretations of perspective must evolve. *Connection* to others (as opposed to separation from others) is the basis for genuinely ethical attitudes and actions. Ethical precepts of the past are becoming the imperatives for survival in the future. We must now choose conscious ethical evolution. This evolution requires self-expression through meaningful work (I-action-work). The principles that we learn from symbolic forms can be used as guides to overcoming separation, reconciling difference, and giving meaning to everyday experience. These principles can assist us in navigating the complexities of ethical decision making, and can point us toward moral action, transforming stagnant mores of the 20th century into living, dynamic, cultural expressions in the 21st century. Each self-identity becomes enriched and expanded through interaction with different belief systems, cultures, faiths, norms, and values. As people open themselves to multifarious experiences, their own center becomes more secure, while their outward

expression becomes more multi-dimensional and diverse. Ethics becomes a project of breaking down internal and external boundaries which prevent people from perceiving from a variety of perspectives. Self-knowledge becomes a means for responsible action in collaboration, not opposition, with others. This is the outcome of the use of symbolic forms. Each aspect in the design of Cassirer's symbolic forms speaks to a new evolution of our interpretation of our perceptions which we can apply to people, situations and relationships, and cultural forms.

Chapter Two: Symbolic Forms: The Early Influences

Introduction

In the introduction, we have already discussed the unique tendency of humans to extract abstract meaning from symbols. We arrive and assign meaning through logic. Yet one of the messages of Cassirer's symbolic forms is that human understanding is not limited to the logical process that begets meaning. The human world, the world of culture and society, must be constructed—and it is through human expression, language, myth, religion, art and science, the symbolic forms that this occurs. “What we call human culture may be defined as the progressive objectification of our human experience—as the objectification of our feelings, our emotions, our desires, our impressions, our intuitions, our thoughts and ideas.”¹ Cassirer builds this aspect of symbolic forms through expanding traditional ontological definitions to incorporate this objectification of feeling and intuition. Cassirer's symbolic forms bring humans' pre-logical understanding and relational interaction to bear in explaining the task of constructing our human world. This chapter turns now to the foundational aspects of Cassirer's symbolic forms through an in depth view of mythical consciousness, functional relationships, and Kant's influence on Cassirer.

A symbolic form is not merely a form that unites symbols—although, in a sense, it is that as well, in the forms of language, art, religion. Often misunderstood as “sterile with regard to that dialectical movement,”² the symbolic form in Cassirer's philosophical system is both ends and means, both process and result, a *gestalt* that continues ad

1 SMC. P. 167.

2 Needleman, Jacob. *Being-in-the-World: Selected Papers of Ludwig Binswanger*. Basic Books, 1963. P. 313.

infinitum in the process of human development and of human *cultural* development, as the expression of the mythical consciousness united with reason. It is precisely the opposition of conflicting forces within culture—the conflicting viewpoints of art and science, science and religion, religion and technology—that Cassirer claims symbolic forms to be “a dialectical unity, a coexistence of contraries”,³ out of which new forms, relationships and cultures are formed. Unlike the Hegelian dialectic, in which opposites unite to culminate in a new phenomenon, for Cassirer, the dialectic occurs in the mutual coexistence of opposites. In the perception of opposites simultaneously, a new perspective is born, a new understanding of the relationship embodied in the existence of the possibility of paradox.

An example of this in consideration of Cassirer’s posited symbolic forms is language. In language, the body itself becomes animated with inflections, gestures, facial expressions, offering layers of expressive qualities through which the words can be understood (or, perhaps, misunderstood).⁴ The balance between gestures and words becomes indispensable to appropriate meaning and understanding—lacking either the gestures or the words, listeners hear only empty sounds.⁵ Cassirer therefore determines that this type of expressive relationship, which is required in all elementary verbal communications, is also required to understand the body-soul relationship. The relationships require intellectual “meaning” imposed upon that which is the immediate

3 EM. P. 223

4 As an example of the way that words and gestures work together: if one were to watch Martin Luther King’s I Have a Dream speech, without sound, the gestures (fist shaking) and the facial expressions (serious, frowning), indicate an expression of intense anger; yet, when the words are added, the tone is indeed intense, but the interpretation becomes positive, inspirational and motivating.

5 Instead of “sinnbeseelten sinndurchdrungenen Sprachleib” (a speech body animated and saturated with meaning) communications become mere “isolierter Wortkörper” (Isolated word objects). In *Body and Soul as a Philosophical Problem*. MS 132, Cassirer’s Paper Deposit. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University. In Krois, *Symbolic Forms and History*. P. 57

visible appearance, as with any sign and its designation. Yet, this type of communication and the subsequent understanding of meaning is primitive, mythical: “The problem is not how body and soul come together, but how we learn to distinguish them.”⁶

Herein lies Cassirer’s adaptation of Kant’s schema. Symbols straddle two worlds. They are both physical and spiritual. A symbol is a specific thing, leaves rustling in the wind, the crossing of a black cat, a mark made on a surface, but at the same time it means more than the thing that it is. Leaves rustling mean a storm is coming, a black cat means bad luck... Symbols represent ideas and the two are inseparable; just as fire cannot be separated from its property of heat, symbols cannot be separated from concepts or meanings, but neither is reducible to the other. Through symbols, the mind can imagine what the body’s eyes are blind to see. The perceptions made possible through sight makes material reality visible, yet that material reality is affected (and perhaps effected) by the mind’s eye that brings prior experiences and information to bear on the immediate material reality.

Symbol is stagnant; symbolic form is dynamic. Symbolic form follows a process—it is always incomplete on its way toward completion, and yet fulfilling itself in its entirety at every moment of expression. Kant reminds us that judgments without concepts are blind, and concepts without judgment are mute. In the same sense, in the perpetual division and sub-division within perceivable categories, humans gain in logical understanding, but if we do not bring attention back to the relationship of the subdivisions to the whole, our understanding becomes “blind and mute”.

The compartmentalization and ever-finer discernment of concepts through symbols is both the gift of our human-ness yet also the very thing that limits our own

6 Krois. *Symbolic Forms and History*. P. 57

connection to others, to *humanity*. When presented with a new symbol, one which carries with it a corresponding new abstract thought, humans must learn to assimilate that concept logically, in its totality with that symbol. Modern attempts to give primacy to judgment have failed and reverted to the primacy of concept, but, “the actual center of gravity of the system had not been changed, merely the external arrangement of its elements.”⁷ To change this “center of gravity” the focus must shift from attempting to make either judgment *or* concept primary to making the center, the *relationship between* them, primary, and seeing the movement from a point of holding fast. Cassirer states:

[The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms’] concern is not merely to take stock of forms, to assess them for what they are, as static magnitudes. It is concerned rather with the dynamics of the giving of meaning, in and through which the growth and delimitation of specific spheres of being and meaning occur in the first place. It seeks to understand and illuminate the riddle of the becoming of form as such—not so much as a finished determination but rather with determination as a process. This process does not follow a single, predefined course leading from a specific beginning to an equally fixed end, which has been determined in advance.⁸

Much like the movement of becoming toward being, symbolic forms embody a process, a “movement of thought searching for itself,”⁹ they are factors in the structure of consciousness itself, and therefore are as dynamic as a person’s interaction with the external world. While there may be an initial direction of thought, at any point a new choice can be made, a new expressive direction taken. With each new experience and perspective there emerges the possibility for a different approach to a situation. With this, Cassirer exhibits his alignment with the Enlightenment ideal of *progress*, a concept, “very simple, and very dramatic: transforming the invisible into the visible, the ineffable

7 SF. P. 4

8 PSF IV. P. 4

9 PSF IV, P. 4

into the discursive, and the unknown into the known.”¹⁰ Since symbolic forms are movements of consciousness, and perceptions arise within consciousness, coloring all interactions and decisions, for Cassirer, the notion of progress, linked with the idea of self-responsibility includes the ability to learn new perceptions and expressions, to move one’s consciousness in new ways, bringing about outcomes that have not before been experienced. He verifies this, at the end of *An Essay on Man*, as he affirms, “Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man’s progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power—the power to build up a world of his own, and ‘ideal’ world.”¹¹

According to Tucci, through symbols—images purposely invented to express efficacious meaning of the multifarious movements of the world—people can grasp the “unstable universe of powers which are both within him and without... With the symbol, he dominates it and dissolves it; through the symbol he gives form to the infinite possibilities lying in the depths of his subconscious, to unexpressed fears, to primordial impulses and to age old passions.”¹² Only by means of symbols can the mind focus and cognize impulses and passions. This means that “symbols must be taken not as objective realities, but as provisional figurations which have been formed by a reciprocal exchange between the Absolute Consciousness and the individual consciousness and suited to the latter... They indicate various stages of return but in order that they may play their proper part in this process which produces [regeneration], they must be interpreted.”¹³

10 Bronner. P. 19.

11 EM. P. 228

12 Tucci, p. 22

13 Tucci, p. 68

It is precisely in the question of interpretation that Cassirer begins his reasoning. Building on Hegel and Marx, Cassirer initiates his argument with understanding that symbols precede convention or social agreement, because meaning is present prior to the production or utilization of a symbol. “The force and effect of these mediating signs would remain a mystery were they not ultimately rooted in an original spiritual process which belongs to the very essence of consciousness.”¹⁴ More than standing alone as representations or signifiers, symbolic forms bridge logical and pre-logical forms of understanding, connecting the “essence of consciousness” with its outward expression. This attribute constitutes the basis of Cassirer’s *symbolic pregnance* which is associated with the idea of fabricating with the idea of fruition or birthing. “No content or consciousness is in itself merely present or in itself merely representative; rather, every actual experience indissolubly embraces both factors. Every present content functions in the sense of representing, just as all representation demands a link with something present in consciousness.”¹⁵ The method of interpretation between human beings is what connects all people with each other through the world of culture. Cassirer offers us this example:

When absorbed in the intuition of a great work of art, we do not feel a separation between the subjective and the objective worlds. We do not live in our plain commonplace reality of physical things, nor do we live wholly within an individual sphere. Beyond these two spheres we detect a new realm, the realm of plastic, musical, poetical forms; and these forms have a real universality...Aesthetic universality means that the predicate of beauty is not restricted to a special individual but extends over the whole field of judging subjects. If the work of art were nothing but this freak and frenzy of an individual artist it would not possess this universal communicability.¹⁶

14 PSF 1. P. 105-106

15 PSF 3. P. 199

16 EM. P. 145

An artwork may only be colors and lines, but within the context of a society, something new takes place. Interpretation is in order, perception of the art changes. The art itself has not changed, but the relationship has changed: it becomes a window into a new world, a human world, not merely a world defined by the creator nor its constitution. The new world is a world of symbols, which belongs to a human system. Through the mere shift in perception, in seeing the art differently, the work connects an individual human with an entire human world. In the same manner, symbolic forms embody expressions of humanity—that is, both an expression of the individual as he or she is speaking a language, creating art, worshiping in a religion, and also the collective expression of human beings participating in these singular acts *together*. They are original and generative acts which take on this dual natured characteristic as well: a symbolic form represents both individual expression and collective expression, both internal creation and external narrative.

Early in *An Essay on Man*, Cassirer describes his sense of man as a symbolic animal in this way:

Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves, man is, in a sense, constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms in artistic images, and mythical symbols or religious rights, that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium. He lives in the midst of imaginary emotions, in hopes and fears, in illusions and disillusion, in his fantasies and dreams.¹⁷

Strengthened with symbols, man re-creates his internal world in the context of his physical world. Indeed, throughout Cassirer's works, we see this point: it is only through man's consciousness of self, and his introspective examination of his interaction with the external world that he himself is creating, that man can reflect upon the world that he has

¹⁷ EM. P. 25

thus created and thereby take responsibility for it. In this sense, while symbols may be the mediating factor between man and the world, they are also the *essential* factor in that they are not objects in and of themselves with their own reality. They are in fact expressions of man himself, and the only possible way for man to gain understanding of who and what he is.

Symbols are not merely the results or the mechanisms of thought. Symbols embody and express the functioning of thought itself. Symbols are the vital and creative force by which activity comes into being in the world; they are the essence of how humans "make" reality and synthesize the world. It is therefore impossible for human creativity and imagination to separate itself from logical, or cognitive, acts of thinking.

This can be summed up as follows: *Life* expresses itself. Humans express the life that is within them. We can observe that life through symbolic forms; we can respond to it through an enlightened dialogue with it, and move it in a direction we ourselves decide, through self-conscious awareness of the common interplay of symbolic forms. This requires an ethical perspective in its usage. How can we value one instance of human expression when we are unable to take into account all of the relationships, all of the connections, which comprise the whole? Cassirer moves the relativism of the particular into a relational interaction between the relative and the absolute, such that in any ethical evaluation of action, that action must be placed in relation to the infinite network of all relationships and also to the unification of all of those particulars combined.

This implications of this interpretation of Cassirer's *animal symbolicum* is twofold. First we are asked to see each other, all humans, in the *context* of one and the other, and bring that viewpoint to each relationship. But to achieve this requires a new

interpretation of perspective, which decouples judgment through the active engagement of attention and choice. This new attitude toward people and situations will form a bridge between individual knowledge of the particular with the whole and place interpretation of meaning in its proper perspective.

Substance, Function and Symbolic Form

We now move forward to assess the contribution of Cassirer's primary philosophical insight regarding the concept of *substance*, as developed especially by Aristotle and then transformed by Cassirer into the concept of *function*. At the writing of *Substance and Function*, Cassirer was still closely connected to the Marburg school and its particular neo-Kantian nature, known for its epistemology of the natural sciences, and was “prompted by studies in the philosophy of mathematics.”¹⁸ *Substance and Function* studies the “fundamental conceptions of mathematics from the point of view of logic”¹⁹ and finds problematic traditional logic’s characterization of the concept for its use in not only the mathematical sciences but all fields of the exact sciences. This philosophical, historical inquiry begins with a complex of notions addressed in philosophical inquiries regarding the nature of being (*ousia*), but this ontological questioning becomes an epistemological concern for man’s modes of knowing objects.

As we know through the great debates about being (*ousia*), only to think of something gives it an existence --of a sort. The chasm between Aristotle’s and Plato's conception of knowledge can be characterized by the difference between the transcendent and the imminent. Knowledge for Plato resides strictly within a transcendent realm; it supersedes any and all sensual knowledge or information. Plato indicated in the *Sophist*

18 SF. P. iii

19 SF P. iii

that he recognized a need for distinction between the existential uses of the term *is*, but it was ultimately Aristotle who began the historical dialogue, which is not easy to grasp and continues to be debated. As long as there is a thought or an idea of something it exists in the sense of that thought or idea. In this way, we can see that *being* can take the form of either an abstract or a concrete noun, that it can denote a quality, or *having* a quality, that it can denote something real (actual) or unreal (imaginative), and that it can be used to show a class, or kind of being, or some individual being. For Cassirer, these classical ideas of *being* hinge on the substance of a thing and its existence—whether that existence resides in the world or in our minds. It is precisely this that Cassirer revolutionizes through his concept of *funktionsbegriff*. The English translation of this word has traditionally been simply, “function”—of or pertaining to an action or a role. But for Cassirer, this term has a more significant meaning: the influence and relationship of a factor, concept or substance related to and dependent upon other factors, influences and relationships. This thus shifts the traditional understanding of what it means to “be” from a substance-orientation to a relationship-orientation, that includes a variety of factors and relationships, which apply to but are not limited to substances.

Although the idea of a functional relationship was originally conceived to address the problems in mathematics, especially as those mathematical problems are related to science, Cassirer asserts early that these very same problems must be addressed in a more general way through their philosophical implications. He says, “the problem receives new meaning when we advance from purely logical considerations to the concept of knowledge of reality.”²⁰ Further, he reiterates, “all consciousness demands some sort of connection and every form of connection presupposes a relation of the individual to an

20 SF. P. iv

inclusive whole, presupposes the insertion of individual content into some systematic totality."²¹

Following Hume and Kant, Cassirer also points us to the direction of questioning whether or not anything can truly be known in this Aristotelian sense. For he points out to us that man is a symbolizing animal: the natural tendency of the mind is to create symbols that mediate between the world and our understanding of it. However, the assumption underlying this point is that symbols are necessary and if symbols are necessary for man to explain and communicate the underlying abstracted concepts. In this sense, man *first* must have the ability to think in the abstract, to think in the imaginative, to draw intuitive conclusions. While we are indeed symbolic animals, the fact remains that if it were not for the abstractions first in man's mind, there would be nothing consequently to symbolize. Thus, at his core, man is an abstract animal, which uses symbols to interpret the abstraction and make sense of the world. So, while indeed we see and perceive the results of man being a symbolic animal, through the actions of symbol-creation, we do not see (perceive) the underlying need for symbols in the first place—we do not understand the symbol as a pre-logical concept. Without abstraction underlying symbols, there would be nothing to symbolize, no reason to express through representation. Specifics and particulars are made through our need for symbolizing, but it is the interplay of the particular (symbolic) with the universal (abstract) where we find truth, if not knowledge.²²

21 SF. P. 296-297

22 This is how we see wisdom, love and truth intertwined with philosophy in the writings of Plato--Diotima tells Socrates that love is both a philosopher and a lover of wisdom, where represents an abstract understanding of love wisdom and truth that corresponds with the union of trying to understand that which is trying to be known. It is the interplay of union and love to truth and wisdom.

In this sense, knowledge is attained through a system of relations that is both solely individual and personal (the abstraction) but also but can be shared by others, resulting in a system of relations and values that are recognizable and can be communicated between people (the symbolic).²³ This universality does not require agreement on the part of all components, but it does imply that all individuals possess the same faculties of judgment, even if those faculties judge differently. Similarly Cassirer demonstrates the universality of subjective sense perceptions and their objectification through their externalization and insertion into a comprehensive system of relations:

We finally call objective those elements of experience, which persist through all change in the here and now, and on which rests the unchangeable character of experience; while we ascribe to the sphere of subjectivity all that belongs to this change itself, and that now only expresses a determination of the particular, unique here and now. The result of thus deriving the distinction between the subjective and the objective is that it has merely *relative* significance. For there are no absolutely changeable elements of experience at any stage of knowledge we have reached, any more than there are absolutely constant elements. A content can only be known as changeable with reference to another with which it is compared, at which at first claims permanent existence for itself.²⁴

Although seemingly focused on a relatively diverse subjective experience, Cassirer's underlying notion of relationship expands the third critical Kantian unification between subject and object through the use of intuition and aesthetics. However here, instead of feeling, the unifying factor is the content of thought; the relations' function is the progressive unification of subjective thought between individuals through external experience.

23 In this sense, "the world" inverts our relationship to both the universal and the particular. It is the abstraction (the universal) that humans understand personally, yet when we express it, we do so in a language that we call "universal" because we can share it with others. We lose sight of the fact that the language IS the particular and the idea is the universal.

24 SF. P. 273

Discussing Symbolic Forms, Cassirer says, "What enables us to progress from the diversity and variability of impressions to the unity and constancy of the object is the function of judgment and 'unconscious inference' which is totally independent of the impressions."²⁵ Earlier he had pointed out, "And so we see that the very highest and purest spiritual activity known to consciousness is conditioned and mediated by certain modes of sensory activity. Here again the authentic and essential life of the pure idea comes to us only when phenomena 'stain the white radiance of eternity'. We can arrive at a system of the manifold manifestations of the mind only by pursuing the different directions taken by its original imaginative power. In them we see reflected the essential nature of the human spirit--for it can only disclose itself to us by shaping sensible matter."²⁶

Following Kant's transcendental method, Cassirer looks to the laws of cognition and questions the constitutive principles that allow humans to know objects, beginning from the inner constructs, rather than presuming knowledge of an object as given. However, Cassirer takes this one step further, and gives primacy not to the object, but to its function—its relationship to other known objects in the set. Each set maintains a logic, but that logic is in its pattern, seen through relationships, not through one object's similarity (or dissimilarity) to another object. In spite of strong claims that link functionality of concepts merely to science or symbolism²⁷, there is greater evidence that demonstrates that function is a core concept upon which the greater schematic of symbolic forms is constructed. Ultimately *functional relationships* must remain always at the core of symbolic forms.

25 PSF I. P. 104

26 PSF I. P. 88

27 see: discussion on Carl Hamburg in addition to Seymour Itzkoff in the introduction.

Mythical Consciousness and Symbolic Form

Now we turn to mythical consciousness, the pre-logical or pre-scientific component of symbolic forms. "Myth" in common parlance most often denotes a fictional *story*, usually a primitive explanation of natural occurrences, through which the unexplained and mysterious become palatable and less fearful. In this rational science-minded world, we do not need Gods and demons at war to explain or to understand the boom of thunder or the flash of lightening. Today, in practical use, the myths of heroic deeds and legends live on as quaint and historic reminders of times and people of the pre-scientific era. Yet over the past 75 years, understanding of primitive myth has taken new shape (Eliade). Rather than mere fiction or story, Myth has been uncovered as a sacred expression and communication of man with God(s), which bears power and demonstrates revelation, bringing "God's Truth" through to people who would otherwise find it inaccessible. Out of this view of myth have come such studies as Campbell's *Primitive Mythologies, the Masks of God*; Freidel, Schele and Parker's *Maya Cosmos, Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, and Avis' *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology*. In each of these examples, myth has been viewed as a form of understanding reserved for people and cultures with a cognitive capacity "less developed" than that of a scientific or reason-minded people. The support for this outlook is that children formulate myths because their brains are immature, unable to understand logic or cause and effect; primitive peoples must be like children, with undeveloped reasoning skills because they continue myths to explain natural phenomena.

These psychoanalytical aspects, do not however, encompass the reason for the myths in the first place. That people have myths, yes, how they believe them and why, yes, but what is the generation, the cause, the origin, and the implication for human expression as a symbolic form of a mythical consciousness? This is the question that Cassirer asks. His answer takes us toward a method of uniting the universal understanding that he finds inherent in the pre-logical mindset of “primitive” cultures which utilize myth as expression, with the logical mindset of the use of language.

The main problem that confronts humans in their mythical experience—whether that of primitive peoples, or that of a modern society in the throes of a master myth-maker such as Hitler—is that of the all-encompassing and overwhelming experience of the mythical thought. Mythic thought has no mechanism for recognition a difference between the subject and object; the subject simply becomes overwhelmed by the object such that all identity is absorbed within the myth. “All things are lost to a mind thus enthralled; all bridges between the concrete datum and the systematized totality of experience are broken; only the present reality, as mythic or linguistic conception stresses and shapes it, fills the entire subjective realm.”²⁸ In this, Cassirer criticizes such thinkers as Max Müller and Herbert Spencer, who both locate the origin of myth within language. To these thinkers, the efficacy of myth lies within the name as bearing the fundamental essence of that which the name denotes—that the “real thing is *contained* in the name”.²⁹ For both Spencer and Müller, this lead humans to become identified with the myth as a deception of the mind, a “great illusion”.³⁰ But for Müller, whose explanation of myth

28 LM. P. 58

29 LM. P. 3

30 MS. P. 21

relies only on the etymology of language,³¹ myth can be arises when the self-deception—rooted in language—is discovered.³² “If Max Müller’s and Herbert Spencer’s theories were right, we should have to conclude that, after all, the history of human civilization was due to a simple misunderstanding, to a misinterpretation of words and terms. It is not a very satisfactory and plausible hypothesis to think of human culture as the product of a mere illusion—as a juggling with words and childish play with names.”

Cassirer categorizes myth in a unique way. For Cassirer, these simplistic and unfounded understandings of the development of myth exactly invert the process of mythical development. Rather than language developing the myth, for Cassirer, myth precedes language as the generative force. “Only in the medium of language do the infinite diversity, the surging multiformity of expressive experiences begin to be fixated; only in language do they take on ‘name’ and ‘shape’.”³³

Symbolic form as myth develops something like this: Consciousness permeates the universe and all sentient being; it fine- tunes and expresses itself through particular individuals as *thought*. Thought, and the act of thinking, then expresses itself in the world as material reality through actions. In this way, the individual being takes on unique life patterns and experiences. In order to understand itself consciousness must recognize itself as it is externalized, and so it creates symbols that it then recognizes. Using these

31 Cassirer offers this example: “[Müller] cites the legend of Deucalion and Pyrrha, who, after Zeus had rescued them from the great flood which destroyed mankind, became the ancestors of a new race by taking up stones and casting them over their shoulders, whereupon the stones became men. This origin of human beings from stones is simply absurd and seems to defy all interpretation—but is it not immediately clarified as we recall the fact that in Greek men and Stones are denoted by identical or at least similar sounding names, that the words λαοί and λάαζ are assonant?” LM. P. 4 Italics original.

32 LM. P. 4-5

33 PSF III. P. 77

symbols as reflective tools, consciousness, through its own expression, evolves in the material reality of the individual. Cassirer says:

This consciousness rises to a new level once it ceases to content itself, like magic, with producing a particular effect; it orients itself toward being and becoming as whole and is more and more imbued with the intuition of this whole. Now it gradually frees itself from immediate confinement in sense impression and momentary sensory emotion. Instead of living in the present as an isolated point—or in a series of such points, a simple sequence of separate phases of action—it turns more and more to the contemplation of the eternal cycle of events. This cycle is still immediately felt more than thought; but even in this feeling the certainty of a universal world order dawn upon the mythical consciousness. No longer, as in the mythical animation of nature, is a particular thing, a particular physical substance filled with specific psychic contents, with personal, individual forces; now, an everywhere recurring measure is felt in the world process as a whole. The more this feeling gains in strength, the more it awakens mythical thought, which it confronts with a new problem. For now, contemplation is directed not toward the mere content of change but toward its pure form.³⁴

The communication between consciousness-as-thought and consciousness-as-reality often is disrupted in the interpretation, through the mediation of the symbols. Thus, as consciousness is expressed, it often becomes separated in the mind, and then unrecognized, and takes on a life and meaning that was not originally intended or that is not a true meaning of the original intention of the expression. Understanding of material reality becomes distorted because these symbols of consciousness have been misinterpreted, redefined then re-expressed with a new meaning. This unity however, cannot be discovered except as it reveals itself in outward form by virtue of the concrete structures of language and myth, in which it is embodied and from which it is afterward regained by the process of logical reflection. Skidelsky explains mythical consciousness in this way: “Cassirer’s concept of the symbol as a liberating power suggests the possibility of ranking different forms of symbolism according to their ability to realize

34 PSF II.P. 111

this power... Here myth is presented as the first stage of humanity's symbolic self-liberation... In myth, however, this active element is not yet raised to the level of consciousness."³⁵

Cassirer famously recognizes that mythical consciousness resides innately within humans, as a form of human cognition and expression. With this idea at the root of his great theory of knowledge, he controverts previous theories that set myth and truth, religion and science against each other, offering a philosophy of mind that incorporates pre-logical understanding and expression into a theory of reason and knowledge. Yet, despite this propitious development of mythical consciousness into his theory of symbolic forms, Cassirer none the less also recognizes the darker-side of myth and its use as a political tool for the manipulation of people. It is easy to read the *Myth of the State* and conclude that all myth is susceptible to misuse by ill-intentioned leaders. But Cassirer does not claim that all myth promotes its own misuse or malificence. Quite the contrary. In the *Myth of the State* Cassirer criticizes the purely technical and instrumental use of politics by Hitler in Nazi Germany through mythic thought to control not just how people behaved, but how they believed. While Cassirer holds a unique place for mythical thought, and advocates for its conscious use, he repudiates its use as a technique for political or social control. Indeed, the place for mythical thought lies precisely in its ability to connect people with their expressions of creativity and imagination, which is personal and internally validating, and contrary to, even mitigating, the "barbarism of

35 Skidelsky. p. 104. Skidelsky here notes that Cassirer turns to religion, the final step in this symbolic process, "as the bulwark against the new myths of totalitarian politics". Contra Skidelsky, I argue that Cassirer's vision of the liberating power of the symbolic form, in collaboration with the process of self-consciousness combine in Cassirer's Critical Idealism, as the "bulwark" against not only totalitarian politics, but against any underlying mythical consciousness that would seek expression in any harming or de-humanizing of another human being.

reflection”³⁶ which exhausts the creative power in preference for a mechanistic formulas of thought and emotions.

An example of this difference can be seen in the two different film versions of the *Jud Süß*, written about the historical figure of Joseph Süß-Oppenheimer. Süß-Oppenheimer, a Jewish banker and financier born in 1692 became “court Jew”³⁷ in 1733 to Duke Alexander of Württemberg at a time when court bankers were of integral importance to the government’s income in subsidizing tax revenues.³⁸ Süß-Oppenheimer served the Duke of Württemberg loyally and lucratively, but in doing so, made many enemies within the Württemberg Council. He was hanged after Duke Alexander died for crimes against the state (treason).

The first version of the film, a 1934 production based on the 1925 novel by Leon Feuchtwanger, portrays the story with reasonable historical accuracy and depicts Süß-Oppenheimer as a talented Jewish financier who discovers that he is in fact the illegitimate son of a gentile nobleman. Despite these connections, he continues to live as a Jew and remains proud of his heritage and religion, serving the Duke and holding to his religious tradition even to his death.

36 Thus no matter how great the throng and press of their bodies, they live like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each follows his own pleasure or caprice. By reason of all this, providence decrees that, through obstinate factions and desperate civil wars, they shall turn their cities into forests and the forests into dens and lairs of men. In this way, through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense. . . . Hence peoples who have reached this point of premeditated malice, when they receive this last remedy of providence and are thereby stunned and brutalized, are sensible no longer of comforts, delicacies, pleasures, and pomp, but only of the sheer necessities of life. (The New Science of Giambattista Vico, revised translations of the third edition of 1744 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948))

³⁷ “*Hof Jude*”. “At this time, German Jews had increased their capital by the purchases of loot during the Thirty Years' War, and a certain number of them had been found useful by the smaller German courts for making purchases or obtaining loans. There thus arose the practice of appointing the chief Jew in a residential city as a court-Jew.” (Jacobs. P. 225)

³⁸ Gagliardo. P. 148.

The Nazi-propaganda film of the same name, directed by Viet Harlan and released in 1940 inverted the basic plot, yet claimed historical facticity. The opening of the film invites viewers to see the film as both historically accurate, and also as derived from universal truths:

Jud Süß represents a piece of German and European history. In it lives our knowledge of our historical heritage. It is sure that all other European nations, who want to live under their own national laws must look into their own history and it is likewise sure that they will pay urgent attention to the existence of Judaism in their individual nations. The film takes an educational, practical world view. It refers to our current situation, but it is also timeless.³⁹

In 1940, the Nazi rendition of this film reversed the plot and the outcome to portray Süß-Oppenheimer as a stereo-typical Jew, highlighting the negative traits of being a usurer, a sexual predator, a schemer, and a Jew who disguises himself to fool gentiles and to exploit his power to the benefit of his race; he is ultimately executed for the “blood crime” of defiling a Christian woman.

This film subverted the historical truth through the invention of false “facts” and the inversion of the truth. Süß-Oppenheimer purportedly creates a tax (which all population’s despise) which exploits the Germans and gives power to Jewish merchants, when in fact he did no such thing; he is portrayed as raping the councilor’s daughter, who then commits suicide, when in fact, it is Süß-Oppenheimer’s own daughter who is raped by the Duke and who kills herself; he is shown to have high tastes and to indulge in Dionysian excesses (and thus requiring financial shrewdness to maintain his indulgences).

This propagandistic film distorted not only the historical Süß-Oppenheimer, but also poignantly represented the Third Reich’s political agenda as well. The final scene

³⁹ Fox. P. 154

shows the hanged Süß-Oppenheimer's legs slowly dangling under the floor of the scaffold while the councilor whose daughter was raped addresses the crowd, conveying the status of *persona non grata* to all Jews by saying:

The State Council announces the wish of the Württemberg people that all Jews should leave within the next three days. Given in Stuttgart February 1738. May our descendants hold on to this law so that they may be spared the suffering and harm to their lives and property, and to the blood of their children and their children's children.⁴⁰

This example can be used to show Cassirer's analysis of the crisis in twentieth-century political life in *The Myth of the State*, which illuminates the logical end of the barbarism of reflection, where people attend to rise of technical organization in society, culminating in the totalitarian "technology of myth" and allowing themselves to be manipulated by such techniques. Cassirer exposes such techniques in the hands of National Socialists as means to manipulate Gentile minds of an entire nation. Cassirer's fear is that any totalitarian regime, using such techniques might be able to likewise manipulate people's fears and hopes, in any given historical circumstance.

As noted above, Cassirer follows Kant in laying out categories of cognition as the primary vehicle for knowledge about the world. Cassirer retains the same structure when investigating the forms of knowledge that are pre-logical. Existing autonomously, these forms order the data of perceptual experience in all its aspects. As mythical consciousness invites unity within a totality, the categories of cognition are less easily defined; they only become visible when there are clearer symbolic categories at work, such as in the sciences.

⁴⁰ Welch. P. 244

In looking to questions of knowing, even in the pre-logical, we find common ground with traditional philosophic questions on *being* and *becoming*. In the study of myths and their explanations of god and creation, we find that no myth or story suffices to answer these questions of what it means to *be* when confronted with a deity: god is always *beyond* both being and becoming, and yet we seek to know and to understand that which is beyond. In seeking such answers, we find a much broader understanding, relevant to all people and all times, than from questions raised previously. Man understands himself through the medium of myth, of narrative, of stories, of existence, for the self exists concretely: I exist; no further explanation is necessary. That self is understood as it externalizes experience via narrative. “Neither disembodied minds nor mindless activity can appear in stories.”⁴¹ Thus within these stories, myths, narratives, the self becomes whole, through proclaiming its existence through the narrative of experience.

These comparisons between the becoming of humans and the beingness of god provide Cassirer with a basis by which to introduce the beneficial aspect of mythical consciousness. Mythical consciousness provides humans with a connection to an overarching universality that they can access by means of their own consciousness. Cassirer says, “Before man thinks in terms of logical concepts, he holds this by means of clear, separate, mythical images. And here, too, the development of language appears to be the counterpart of the development which mythical intuition and thought undergo.” By integrating a mythical consciousness into the logical structure of human symbolic construction, Cassirer introduced an idea to mediate between irrationalism and reasoning.

⁴¹ Crites, Stephen. “The Narrative Quality of Experience.” P. 309

Any prior attempt to resolve this contradiction had resulted in ceding to the irrational. During the quattrocento, revelation, as a source of truth—but without substance, without explanation, without even proper words for its description—embodied the irrational. The philosophic tradition vehemently rejected this position for its anti-rational stance, falling into “oblivion” and becoming eradicated through the period of the Enlightenment. According to Adorno the backlash of this oblivion became central to the irrationality of Hitler and World War two, and became another reason to vanquish irrationality back to the realm of oblivion:

What the mind once boasted of defining or construing as its like moves in the direction of what is unlike the mind, in the direction of that which eludes the rule of the mind and yet manifests that rule as absolute evil. The somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life is the stage of suffering, of the suffering which in the camps, without any consolation, burned every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind's objectification. The point of no return has been reached in the process which irresistibly forced metaphysics to join what it was once conceived against.⁴²

Although Cassirer recognizes the malicious outcomes of the irrational mind gone untempered and unrecognized,⁴³ he views the irrational mind as simply an aspect of the pre-logical mind, which develops out of a consciousness of universality into a consciousness of the specific or the logical. This argument continues in the tradition of solving the problem of the *unity* and *multiplicity*, for it “requires a synthesis of rational thought with an irrational knowing or understanding.”⁴⁴ He develops this thesis in *Language and Myth*, wherein he shows that language, centered in the reasoning, rational parts of the brain, has its origins in the primitive mythical mind.

⁴² Adorno, Theodore. *Meditations on Metaphysics*. In Mendieta, 2004

⁴³ This one of the main points of the *Myth of the State*

⁴⁴ LM. P. 20

Rather than separate and uncontrollable, the “irrational aspect” of man can now be seized upon, understood, and evolved through its symbiotic relationship with the reasoning mind. “the content of revelation is not derived from reason, but on the other hand, it can and must not be impenetrable to reason”⁴⁵ Cassirer neither advocates the abdication of reason, nor the suppression of the irrational. Rather, he advocates a symbiotic relationship between the two wherein the irrational provides a backdrop of unity against the myriad points of expression. Much like the night sky behind the billions of stars, we barely perceive its importance, and do not conceive of it as “something”, but without the night sky, the stars would not shine.

Symbolic mediation however, in no way resolves dualism—“none of the attempts at mediation between the opposite poles of unity and plurality, being and becoming, can resolve the contradiction.”⁴⁶ It does, however provide a means by which to observe and critique particular standpoints.

Instead of barring irrationality on the basis of it being irrational, Cassirer enfolds this aspect of humans into that part of our being which is ultimately connected through universality. The abstract nature of our minds, that imagine and conceptualize and create embody this human characteristic. This mythical consciousness remains a part of the human experience and contributes to the creation of the “human world”. It is precisely in the balance between mythical thought and linguistic expression that humans hold tenuously to their infinite nature, their connection with the whole, while at the same time maintaining a particular perspective. These two methods of conception—the linguistic and the mythical—unite to reveal a unified version of the sensory and intuitive

45 LM.P. 21

46 LM P. 20

experiences. In the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer elaborates on this, calling it “the expressive function”. The interpretation of perceptions—the myriad sensual experiences that humans filter through every moment—bombard the intellect at every turn, begging the subject to turn in on itself, to maintain a view of the world that puts its own experiences foremost. The intellect must decide what is real, what is unreal, what is important to give attention, and what is important to push aside, making minute and multiple judgments at every moment, regarding every perception. But mythical consciousness tethers this, balances the deluge of sensory input, does not sort and categorize and determine, but rather possesses and expresses the *essence* of the appearances. “The essence does not recede behind the appearance, but is manifested in it; it does not cloak itself in the appearance, but in the appearance is given to itself.”⁴⁷

Cassirer describes this relationship as a balance between expansion and compression, between centripetal and centrifugal force. The logical interpretation of sensory impulses constitutes a constant need for ever-greater expansion, with the seeking of greater and greater divisions and sections, while the mythical consciousness, the center of the ego, remains poised on itself alone remaining “at rest” within the immediate experience:

...when on the one hand, the entire self is given up to a single impression, is “possessed” by it and, on the other hand, there is the utmost tension between the subject and its object, the outer world; when external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated, but overcomes a man in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, terror or wish fulfillment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified...⁴⁸

47 PSF III. P. 68.

48 LM. P. 33

Cassirer sees in Rousseau, more than any other thinker, this mythical thought, this mythical consciousness, and the functional process of that consciousness transforming itself through self-awareness. Cassirer recognizes the expression of mythical consciousness, its taming, its transfiguration, and its maturity. But, more than this, Cassirer sees in Rousseau fledgling ideas that he himself took up in his assessment of the development of language out of mythical consciousness. In his short essay, *On the Origins of Language*, Rousseau asserts that speech arose out of metaphors presented through gestures “One does not only transpose words; one also transposes ideas. Otherwise figurative language would signify nothing...”⁴⁹ In this instance, Rousseau understands gestures as a universal (and unifying) principle to create language. Cassirer, however, looks deeper toward the “primitive” mind and etymology of words to discover that the words themselves are the universalizing factor, as they reflect and *become* the object at hand in mythical consciousness. Cassirer states:

Now it is here, in this intuitive creative form of myth and not in the formation of our discursive theoretical concepts, that we must look for the key which may unlock for us the secrets of the original conceptions of language. The formulation of language too should not be traced back to any sort of reflective contemplation, to the calm and clearheaded comparison of given sense impressions and the abstraction of definite attributes; but here again we must abandon this static point of view for the comprehension of the dynamic process which produces the verbal sound out of its own inner drive. To be sure, this retrospect in itself is not enough; for through it we are merely brought to the further more difficult question, how it is possible for anything permanent to result from such a dynamism, and why the vague billowing and surging of sensory impressions and feelings should give rise to an objective verbal ‘structure.’”

Furthermore, Rousseau argues that gestures arose out of passions, not out of logic-- “One does not begin by reasoning, but by feeling...”⁵⁰ --and therefore are by their very nature more expressive than language. In a short span, Rousseau iterates ideas eventually to

49 Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *On the Origin of Language*. P. 13

50 Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *On the Origin of Language*. P. 11

become one of the leading principles of symbolic forms as well as Cassirer's own eventual improvement of these ideas in *Language and Myth*. Rousseau unites passion with language, as Cassirer aims to do in linking mythical consciousness with language, when he writes, in a letter to a friend, "Learn my vocabulary better, my good friend, for you will find that my meaning is rarely common. It is my heart that speaks to you." For Rousseau himself understood that the only method of expressing his (mythical) consciousness was through the medium of a vocabulary, and the process of linking these was one of learning and understanding.

For Rousseau, often the answers were not found in the empirical study and observation of things and events, nor were the boundaries between self and world strictly marked. Rather, Rousseau found his "richest and most real moments"⁵¹ in the hours he spent in the world of his own mind, in his feelings and imagination, his desires and fantasies. This is the mythical quality which allows Rousseau to unite the mythical with the logical; the essence with the symbol, the feeling with the reason, the mind with the heart. Cassirer sees Rousseau bringing these two together in his social writings. To unite the mythical with the logical, Cassirer wants to know both mythically and symbolically--with mind and heart. Cassirer quotes Rousseau at length, betraying the full impact of Rousseau's vision under the tree to Cassirer's understanding of the emotional impact of the idea:

If anything ever resembled a sudden inspiration, it was the emotion that worked in me as I read [the question set by the Academy of Dijon, "Has the restoration of the sciences and the arts helped to purify morals"]. Of a sudden I felt my spirit dazzled by a thousand lights; swarms of [lively] ideas presented themselves to me at once, with a force [and confusion] that threw me into an inexpressible turmoil; I felt my head seized with a dizziness like that of inebriation. A violent palpitation oppressed me and made my chest heave. Since I could no longer breathe [while walking] I let myself drop under one of the

51 QJR P. 41

trees [by the wayside], and there I spent half an hour in such excitement that as I rose I noticed that [the whole front of] my jacket was wet with my [own] tears which I had shed without noticing it. Oh, if I could ever have written one fourth of what I had seen and felt under that tree, with what clarity I should have revealed all the contradictions of the social system. With what force I should have exposed all the abuses of our institutions! With what ease I should have shown that man is naturally good, and that it is through these institutions alone that men become bad.⁵²

This passion becomes expressed through Rousseau's main discourses. Every expression of writing conveys the authentic expression of the emotional understanding that Rousseau received under that tree. It is this synthesis in Rousseau that captures Cassirer—how this man was swept away in currents of irrational understanding, and yet maintained the wherewithal (albeit, in his own words, only one fourth of the meaning) to verbalize in logical sequence this new understanding. Cassirer says, "...the truthfulness of Rousseau's inner sentiment impresses itself upon us in every sentence of the *Discourse*. In every word lives the urge to be rid of all oppressive learning, to shake off all the burden and splendor of knowledge in order to find the way back to the natural and simple forms of existence: 'O, Virtue! Sublime science of simple soul; are such labor and preparation necessary before we can know you? Are not your principles engraved on every heart? *To learn your laws, is it not enough to return to ourselves and to listen to the voice of our conscience in the silence of the passions?*'"⁵³

Always fascinated with Rousseau and the idea of "going back to nature," Cassirer recognizes that Rousseau never wished to actually "go back."⁵⁴ There is no backward,

52 QJR P. 46-47

53 QJR. P. 48-49. My emphasis.

54 Cassirer notes this in *An Essay on Man* with, "In his first political writings Rousseau seems to speak as a determined naturalist. He wishes to restore the natural rights of man and to bring him back to his original state, to the state of nature. The natural man is to replace the conventional, social man. But if we pursue the further development of Rousseau's thought it becomes clear that even this "natural man" is far from a physical concept, that it is in fact a symbolic concept." (Italics added. EM. P. 61)

there is only forward; nonetheless, moving forward may mean recapturing the essence of an idea of the past and reconfiguring it for the present. It is this in Rousseau that Cassirer clings to. For Rousseau the "past" that must inform the future is that of the state of natural man (and all this entails). For Cassirer what must be recaptured is the pre-symbolic state of understanding, as original and generative expression. Rousseau had his 'man in the state of nature', Cassirer his 'man before reason' in which he recognizes purity and truth. Here in the child-like state of pre-language, in the pre-religious state of mythical thinking, there is an understanding and knowledge that is pre-symbolic, which is inherently more universal because it lacks the division, separation, and categorization of ideas to fit a specific formula.

The *Discours sur l'inégalité* was Rousseau's attempt to raise man from his depraved condition in order to start "social existence all over again," but only through knowledge of life as it pertains to the social order. Should man not "succumb to the power of his appetites and passions but he shall himself choose and direct. He shall grasp the helm himself and determine both his course and his destination"⁵⁵ lest society destroy itself. "Rousseau's tremendous achievement, according to Cassirer, was to save the Enlightenment from itself and aid it in expressing its essential meaning, providing an "ethical force and a new ethical will,"⁵⁶ precisely through the passion and "sensibility" for which Rousseau was derided. "Rousseau is a true son of the Enlightenment, even when he attacks it and triumphs over it".⁵⁷

Matching up the sensational appearance of objects with concepts that organize those appearances into intelligible objects is what the functional unity of symbolic forms

⁵⁵ *Discours sur l'inégalité*

⁵⁶ PE. P. 273

⁵⁷ PE. P. 273

achieves. While rational thought remains man's ultimate achievement and goal, it does not—and cannot—encompass or adequately express man's inner experiences, which is as real as man's sensory experience. Rational thought relates to man's expression only through image, metaphor, allegory; in other words all man's expression is related and understood through mediated symbols. Yet it is through this rational thought, in conjunction with man's intellectual maturity and “courage to know”, that he may delve into the irrational, the intuitive, the revelatory nature that abides in the heart, the soul, without fear of it overwhelming the mind.

We see here an example in Rousseau of his tendency toward advocating for the individual as a unit unto himself, through his expression in language, yet connected through that very language to a universal “essence”. Each individual demonstrates his or her uniqueness—his or her *nature*—while participating through language with the whole of Nature. Nature expresses itself through the nature of the individual. To the extent that one individual speaks or writes, there is a matrix by which to compare and contrast the nature within the individual to the nature of another, and of the whole of society. In his posthumous essay, Rousseau takes this up:

Reflection is born of the comparison of ideas, and it is the plurality of ideas that leads to their comparison. One who is aware of only a single object has no basis for comparison...to the degree that something strikes us as novel we want to know it. Thus we come to ponder what is before our faces, and experience of the strange leads us to examine the familiar.

In two ways, this essay acts as an early antecedent to Cassirer's symbolic forms. First, for Rousseau, Nature has encountered a rift between its essence and its expression. This rift may be renewed, but only through the social contract. In the “state of Nature”, men react—almost by instinct—to the situation at hand, according to impulse. But under the

social contract, there are assurances regarding the behavior of each as determined by right, duty, justice and law, allowing men to respond with thoughtfulness, rather than impulse, offering all a greater sense of safety and stability. At the same time, injustice and illegality remain possible as a choice of conduct. But in this choice lies the possibility for man of his own highest moral potential: if all act according to the social contract at all times, there would exist a state of “spontaneous universal cooperation,” which makes “each individual obedient to all, but none subject to any particular, and therefore private will or authority.”⁵⁸

With this, we see an idea carried through also by Cassirer: that human “nature” has within it the ability to adapt, grow and change under changing needs and conditions. For Rousseau, it is within society that man must live up to his highest moral potential, for Cassirer, agreeing with Kant on this point indicates that civilization... “is not the source of happiness,⁵⁹ and its meaning does not even consist in providing men with intellectual satisfactions. It is rather the setting in which man is to test and prove his freedom. And he must undergo this test ever and again.”⁶⁰ To the degree that human beings can reflect on the conditions in their lives, and adapt to them under moral guidelines, humans may direct their own nature, and with it, over time, human nature toward greater and greater conditions of liberty, equality and justice. Such will allow human beings to follow their highest human potential, and realize it “anew” daily. While Cassirer agrees with this

58 On the Origin of Language. P. 77

59 This alludes to, and rejects, the proponents of history—like Pope—who hold that history may be seen in eudaemonistic terms.

60 Cassirer also notes this idea’s expression in Goethe, regarding his *Metamorphosis of Plants*: “with his conception of the ‘formation and transformation of organic natures,’ a new ideal of knowledge was created.” (RKG, p. 68). Grasping the process of life, and man’s expression of that life has become the new ideal of knowledge. Moreover, Cassirer acknowledges Kant’s alignment with Goethe on this point, for it was Goethe who said, [Man] only earns his freedom and existence, who daily conquers them anew.”

assessment of the evolutionary prospect of man developing his own moral conduct toward freedom, he yet disagrees with Rousseau regarding man's impetus and motivation. Indeed, for Cassirer, man does not hold the impetus to move toward freedom, but instead would prefer to be told what to do, what to think. This is one of the main premises in the Myth of the State, while man is the animal with the greatest ability toward freedom, it is not his natural calling. "Freedom is not the natural inheritance of man. In order to possess it, we have to create it. If man were simply to follow his natural instincts, he would not strive for freedom, he would choose dependence. Obviously, it is much easier to depend upon others than to think, to judge, and to decide for himself."⁶¹ As Krois indicates, "as animal symbolicum man does not live by his natural instincts alone, and though man may flee from responsibility, it is an act of self-destruction."⁶²

With this thought regarding man's ultimate responsibility to his own freedom, his future, and in changing the conditions of his life, in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), Cassirer sought to reinvigorate the principles and core concepts of the Enlightenment. Cassirer noted that the purpose of that work was to place "the philosophy of the Enlightenment against the background of another and broader historical and philosophical theme. . . and a special phase of that whole intellectual development through which modern philosophic thought gained its characteristic self-confidence and self-consciousness."⁶³ For Cassirer, the milieu of the Enlightenment was contained more within the tension between the rationalist and idealist intellectual tendencies. The Enlightenment for Cassirer was embodied with the "spirit struggling with purely

61 MS. P. 288

62 Krois. Symbolic Forms and History. P. 169.

63 PE. P. v-vi

objective problems, [which] achieves clarity and depth in its understanding of its own nature and destiny, and of its own fundamental character and mission".⁶⁴

64 PE. P. vi

Chapter Three: The influence of the Renaissance and Nicholas Cusanus

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, it is of utmost importance to contextualize Cassirer within the ongoing philosophic conversation surrounding being and becoming, unity and multiplicity, and the other in the one; symbolic forms represents an example of a “third path” that chooses to unite the dualisms into a comprehensive system of being. Second, as Cusanus represents the bridge between this ancient philosophical dialogue and Cassirer’s own reframing of the solution, the main themes in Cusanus that inform Cassirer’s symbolic forms must be unfolded and analyzed. Finally, once these two philosophical and historical contexts have been explored, they must be integrated into this new interpretation of Cassirer’s symbolic forms, and it must be shown how Cassirer utilizes these ancient and Renaissance ideas to underpin the transformative ideals inherent within symbolic forms.

In the first section of this work, I describe first the historical thought leading up to Cusanus’ theology, with an eye to its relation with the underlying themes presented in the previous chapter. If we look through Cassirer’s eyes to the writings of Nicholas Cusanus, we see the same questions of being, becoming and beyond borne out in Christian terms, yet with the fullness of a sense of the necessity for a unity of the sensible and intelligible. His unique interplay of knowledge and ignorance, unfolding and enfolding, and how these concepts interact with the absolute maximum (God), transforms the traditional ideas of being and becoming to incorporate human action with spiritual understanding toward a vivified freedom. It is in this framework that Cassirer poses new

questions, finds new solutions, and uncovers a third path (through Cusanus) which leads to a resolution of the problem through symbolic forms. Finally, I demonstrate how Cusanus' ideas—particularly the *coincidentia oppositorum* and learned ignorance—inform Cassirer's symbolic forms.

Plato, neo-Platonism and being

Traditionally the end of reason in metaphysics was seeking an answer to these questions:

- "What is the nature of all of being?"
- "What is man's place in all of being?"

How these questions are approached and answered has defined movements of philosophical paradigms, and fundamentally sets the framework for Cassirer's symbolic forms, as he begins the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* noting that it was the question of being that began all philosophic speculation. On the one hand, these questions seek a uniform essence that all *being* shares, yet on the other hand they seek the place of man—and *his* essence—within that overarching root of being itself. Such is the basis for philosophy to grapple with the concepts of unity and multiplicity.

Cassirer notes that problems and paradoxes surrounding the notion of being have plagued philosophers due to the interpretation of being as *substance*. The pre-Socratics sought a foundation for all of being, the *prima materia*, yet carved it out of “this very same world;”¹ then, a “purely rational principle” replaced the concrete material, yet “despite its ideal coloration, it was closely connected to the world of existing things.”²

These precarious beginnings gained no sure foundation until Plato departed from these attempts at identifying the nature of being, and instead pinpoints being as a

1 PSF 1. P. 73

2 PSF I P. 73 (referring to Pythagoras' numbers and Democritus' atoms)

problem. “He no longer simply inquired into the order, condition and structure of being, but inquired into the concept of being and the meaning of that concept.”³ It is through these discourses—between identifying being as substance (*ousia, substantia*) and being as a problem—that philosophy has moved; but, it is only where “being has the sharply defined meaning of a *problem* [that] thought attains to the sharply defined meaning and value of a *principle*.”⁴ For Cassirer, this thought reaches its apex during the Enlightenment in Kant, who on this very principle transforms the world of being into a world of action by unfolding the inquiry comprehensively through reason. As we shall see, Cassirer’s own disposition to this question lies at the heart of understanding Cassirer’s philosophic anthropology and the cultural interpretation offered through symbolic forms.

The historical ontological seeking does not diminish, but rather enhances, and builds toward epistemological underpinnings. There is an integral connection between thoughts of god, or God, as the first principle that allows us to determine how human beings know the world and our place in it. With Aristotle’s idea of the unmoved mover as the first principle, knowledge of nature and the primacy of substance becomes edified as the foundation to knowledge. This substance-formation as being carries through in Ancient and medieval thought, asserting the primacy of being-as-substance in this Aristotelian manner. Despite language that supports being as an idea within an abstract ontological category, the context and function of the term indicates quite the opposite: that being was understood as a category of substance. It is in Renaissance thought that being first takes on a new meaning. Language of the Renaissance used the term to mean

3 PSF I. P. 74

4 PSF I. P. 74

not only *of* the world (i.e. substance), but also *beyond* the world, thereby questioning the essence or nature of being itself; [language] is a “way of having a world, it is a medium for discourse about the term being.”⁵ This point expands with the anthropological study of the nature of man, his essence, subjectivity, and structure in the world. We shall now lay out this process more specifically.

Plato begins with two realms of being—the sensible and the intelligible. In the one, objects exist in time and space, with qualities that can be perceived through sense organs—color, taste, odor. In this realm, where time passes, change is constant. Opposed to this, the second realm, however, is outside both time and space. Here there are Forms, embodying the ideal idea that encapsulates the universal essence of the sensory-particulars. Here reason is absolute, the mind dominates, and there is perfect equilibrium, stability, and constancy. Where in the first realm we may sense any particular dog or cat, it is only in the intelligible realm that we understand and “know” the essence of it. Thus, while knowledge is possible only in the intelligible realm, it seeks objects in the sensible realm on which to apply itself. Further, in the realm of forms, the mind conceives of such concepts as humanity, goodness, justice, beauty, or courage prior to the senses witnessing these ideas: experience “may suggest the Forms to us, but it neither cognizes nor constitutes them.”⁶ Between these realms lies irreconcilable difference. Each is utterly and irrevocably discrete in its own quality, character, and influence; neither remotely approaches the other.

However, in a discussion of the good, in book IV of the *Republic*, Plato leads us in a new direction, as Socrates takes up discussion with Glaucon, indicating that the good

⁵ John Michael Krois Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. P. 75

⁶ Runkle. P. 8

must be beyond both essence and existence. For the good must be in itself and for itself; it must be an idea beyond all mundane notions it, but at the same time must exist and participate in actual existence. The good must be in a sense a transcendental idea—an idea of ideas, through which we can understand such other ideas as justice, man, beauty.⁷ But, further, Socrates ties this into ideas beyond essence and being, as he says to Glaucon, “Therefore, say that not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also existence and being are in them besides as a result of it, although the good isn’t being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power.”⁸

In a mere sentence, Plato offers a third alternative to his pre-existing two realms of intelligible and sensible—the realm of the beyond. This subtle addition points neo-Platonic and early Christian era thinkers in the direction of an anagogic formulation of being, allowing them to “rise” above both sensible and intelligible to the “beyond”. Through the historical transmission of ideas, we see the permutation of Plato’s realms into their eventual use in Renaissance—and eventually Cassirerian—thought. For this discussion, however, we seek a link between the Renaissance and Cassirer, through the idea of being and the questions of essence and existence. While Plato is the primary source initiating the conversation, his thought is carried through by Plotinus to Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite to Cusanus.

Plotinus, who originates the tradition of neo-Platonism, takes the idea of the beyond to its farthest conclusion with the claim God, “the One,” as the ultimate *beyond*, can be neither described or experienced in the sensible realm, nor understood or

7 Plato. The Republic. Trans. Alan Bloom. P. 402

8 Plato. The Republic. Trans. Alan Bloom. 509b; (emphasis mine)

conceived through the intelligible realm, and yet—and herein lies the great paradox of Plotinus—it is the cause and source of all things, their very substance. On the one hand, God exists, subsisting in all things; yet, on the other hand, God is unknowable, distant, remote, removed from the world of senses. Through Plotinus we move now to Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (henceforth, Dionysius), two of Cusanus' primary influences, both of whom work within this framework, one from a pagan and the other from a Christian angle.

Proclus (412-485 AD) was not only the most distinguished transmitter of the third century's neo-Platonic ideas originating in the teachings of Plotinus, but was also the first thinker to give a “full statement of the One as Beyond”.⁹ Writing in the early to mid-fifth century and in the late fifth / early sixth century, respectively, Proclus and Dionysius were both predominantly influenced by Plotinus' ideas of the beyond, which in turn united in the thought of Cusanus with an admixture of ideas that stopped just short of an heretical-pagan conception of God and took a sharp turn toward Him.

Proclus maintained a typical neo-Platonic sense of the beyond, in that there is always a movement between the sensible and the intelligible: there is always a relationship between the knowing and the object known, an inseparable link between them. He does not offer a positive definition of the beyond. Standing on its own, the beyond always relies on an apophatic definition, which furthermore is always referred back to, and dependent upon, being. Following Plotinus, the beyond is the transcendent cause, as well as the substance, of things: “all both proceed from It and remain in It.”¹⁰ The importance that Proclus gives to Plotinus in this sense is that the beyond, which in

9 Cranz. P. 95

10 Cranz. P. 99

concept maintains qualities not unlike the One, now also exists within human beings, which proceed from it, and retain it; “the One in us is an essential stage on the way to the One itself”.¹¹

From this point, Dionysius takes a short leap and identifies the One, in Proclus’ sense, with the Christian God. The primary characteristic that Dionysius adds to this identity is a positive one, of being an active and willing figure. In addition, Dionysius gives spatial sense to the beyond (God), by referring to it (Him) as “above” (huper), in the sense of transcending. Dionysius is able to move in this direction because his definition of the beyond relies on being. For Dionysius, being maintains a sensible connotation, and limits the possibility of knowing: one can know objects of the senses through being but cannot know the beyond through being. The beyond transcends knowing, and only through the imagination can we reach to “above beingly.”¹²

Thus we see three concepts coming forth from Proclus and Dionysius that become integral to Cusanus’ thought. First, there is the idea that a relationship is always maintained between the sensible and the intelligible. Second, that God (or the One, or the beyond), expresses itself both as the beyond, but also through human beings. Finally, despite this activity through human beings, God remains “beyond”—remains in a sphere separate and distinct from the knowing (intellect) and activity of humans. Even though humans can never reach this transcendent God *beyond* as unity and totality, due to the limits of being in the sensible realm, humans can come to “know” and “sense” the beyond *because* and *as* it expresses itself through them.

11 Cranz. P. 99

12 Cranz. P. 101

Independently, these three tributaries do not evoke more than the Medieval and Renaissance themes reiterated. It is their confluence in Cusanus' thought that places him in a unique relation to the previous thinkers and sets out a new direction for those to come:

[Cusanus] requires a *concrete* subject as the central point and the point of departure for all truly creative activity. And this subject, according to him, can exist nowhere but in the mind of man. The first and foremost result of this point of view is a new version of the *theory of knowledge*. Genuine and true knowledge is not merely directed towards a simple reproduction of reality, rather it always represents a specific direction of intellectual activity.¹³

We turn now to this Christian philosopher, Nicholas Cusanus, who begins to bring together these two realms of thought. By using mathematics, Cusanus describes and explains man's relationship to God. Through this, a path is laid with five main concepts linking Cusanus with Cassirer, in vital connections to an understanding of symbolic forms. There are two primary categories through which we can analyze these connections. The first category contains two concepts: that of the invisible, formless, yet active forces of Life and Geist; the second category demonstrates how those forces come to expression in the world. Cassirer calls the elements of the second group "basis phenomena," *I*, *action* and *work*, and credits Goethe with their inception. Cusanus however, does not have any explicit categories that can be compared to Cassirer's basis phenomena; the way in which Cusanus frames these concepts develops implicitly within his Christian beliefs, as an undercurrent of thought running through the period of the Renaissance.

These concepts are tied together through the *coincidentia oppositorum*, as well as the "Absolute Maximum" and what it entails, in the service of a higher notion of *freedom* for both thinkers. For this reason Cassirer's symbolic forms, and his inspiration for the

13 ICPR. P. 41 Italics in the original.

conception of a connection between spirit and life with freedom through culture, overlap and interconnect with Cusanus.

These questions embodied the whole of philosophical striving; this is what Plato sought, what Aristotle set out to show, and, to some degree, it is what all the great metaphysicians—including Cassirer—set out to unravel. Cassirer notes that Plato’s interpretation of the dictum “know thyself” marked a turning point in philosophy. To know thyself in this way, one must know others, approaching them, inquiring of them, learning of oneself through them. This goes far beyond a mere Socratic dialogue, and demonstrates the limits of such dialogue. To understand oneself, man must “project it upon a larger plan;”¹⁴ he must include a theory of the state: “The nature of man is written in capital letters in the nature of the state. Here the hidden meaning of the text suddenly emerges, and what seemed obscure and confused becomes clear and legible.”¹⁵ Human nature, when viewed only through the individual; humans are too close to their own experiences that when they view them, there is distortion, entanglement, confusion. The untangling of humans involvement of their own lives becomes possible through a philosophic rendering of the state.

Cassirer expands this thought of Plato with the understanding that political life is not the only form through which humans might observe and critique their own actions. Indeed, for Cassirer, the systematic ordering of human thoughts, feelings, desires, and passions were organized through the symbolic forms of myth, language, religion and art. For Cassirer, these forms offer a much-broader foundation on which to study “man”. He says, “the state, however important, is not all. It cannot express or absorb all the other

14 EM. P. 63

15 EM. P. 63

activities of man.”¹⁶ Furthermore, while the state cannot and does not encompass all critical aspects of man, neither do the traditional ways of studying man. Cassirer recognizes the value of psychological introspection, biological observation, and historical investigation, but all of these fall short in a comprehensive anthropological philosophy of man.

“The philosophy of symbolic forms starts from the presupposition that, if there is any definition of the nature, or ‘essence’ of man, this definition can only be understood as a functional one, not a substantial one...Man’s outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature—but his work. It is this work, it is the system of human activities which defines and determines the circle of ‘humanity’”.¹⁷

Cusanus

Historical Background

In 1927, Ernst Cassirer’s the *Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* brings a diversion and new life to the thought of Nicholas of Cusa, and Cusanus becomes reborn to the modern world. Born in 1401 at Kues, Germany, Cusanus was not, in his own lifetime, credited with a great deal of intellectual or philosophical contribution. We know very little about the man and his work prior to 1440, at which time *De Docta Ignorantia* was published. He has been remembered primarily as an ecclesiastic, becoming a cardinal of the Church in 1448 and appointed Bishop of Brixen in Tyrol in 1450. Schooled early in neo-Platonic thought, Cusanus also learned philosophy mathematics and philological criticism. However, he would never be satisfied with the inconsistencies presented between Neo-Platonism and Plato nor between Plato

16 EM. P. 63

17 EM. P. 67-68

and Aristotle. Indeed, in this way he was at odds with other circles of thought of the 15th century: the Florentine academy, with Ficino and Pico della Mirandola at the helm, attempted not to maintain clear distinctions between Scholasticism and Platonism, but rather sought to find a syncretistic unity between the two.¹⁸ Perhaps it was precisely this unwillingness to flow within the dominant tide of the Renaissance that moved Cusanus to the periphery of Renaissance studies.

Yet, the legacy of Nicolas of Cusa has many historical debts. Through the Christian venue, the natural, narrow stream of intellects through which we have come to know Cusanus' work is comprised of Pico della Miranda (ca. 1494), Faber Stapulensis (ca.1514), and Giordano Bruno in the 1600s. In a 1647 letter to Hector-Pierre Chanut, a French Diplomat and Ambassador to Sweden, even René Descartes enters into a dialogue with Cusanus' theory of the infinite as applied to the world, criticizing it for assuming limits where limits cannot be known.¹⁹

Further, the Platonic influences on Cusanus must not be underestimated, and it is within these foundations and the questions of *being*, *one and the many*, and *same and other* that Cusanus frames a discussion of *finite* and *infinite*, with the finite embodied by the world and man, and the infinite representing God. While his conclusions—based on a priori, abstract and speculative thought—hint at Nicholas Copernicus' revolutionary re-

18 ICRP. Page 2

19 Descartes, René; Ariew, Roger. *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*. Hackett, 2000. It would be remiss of me and a disservice to Cusanus not to mention that Descartes' understanding of Cusanus' premise is incorrect: Descartes criticizes Cusanus' theory of the infinite as applied to the world, when in fact, Cusanus does not propound an infinite world, but rather an infinite God. Descartes argues, "And my opinion is less difficult to accept than theirs, since I do not say the world is infinite, but indefinite. There is a remarkable enough difference between these two. For to say that something is infinite, we have to have some argument that makes us know it as such and we can have that only in the case of God." Indeed, this is precisely what Cusanus also argues in *De Docta Ignorantia*.

configuring of the universe,²⁰ his intent is neither to undermine Aristotelian empiricism nor to refute the existing ecclesiastical hierarchic order. Rather, he begins by positing the question of the possibility of knowledge of God,²¹ and from this extrapolates the relationship of humans with both a finite world and infinite possibility, and only in doing so re-frames the medieval cosmological order.

The importance of this can only be understood through a brief glance at the existing medieval order juxtaposed against Cusanus' thought. "But the kernel of Cusanus' work is not contained in the thought that God, the Absolute Being, is beyond any positive determination, that He is only to be described through negative predications, or that He can be conceived of only by going beyond, by transcending all finite measures, proportions and comparisons. Had that been the case, no new way, no new objective would have been indicated."²² In other words, the "old" way was apophatic, and can only be transcended by "going beyond" in a positive, but yet unknowing, sense. It is precisely this theme that we see with Cassirer.

For this discussion,²³ Jacob Burckhardt's work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, in which he coined the phrase, "the Renaissance," is the work that Cassirer responds to regarding his formulation of the influence of the Renaissance. Cassirer supports Burckhardt's thesis that the Renaissance was the beginning of the recognition of the individual in political, social, intellectual, and personal life; however, Cassirer separates from Burckhardt where theory meets practice: Burckhardt sees these as

20 Danielson, Dennis Richard, p. 96.

21 According to Cassirer, this questioning places Cusanus as the first modern thinker, for his epistemological approach to questions of Divine knowledge.

22 ICRP. P. 8

23 Although it offers an alternative to Burckhardt's conception of the Renaissance, Cassirer does not address Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*.

separate during the Renaissance, while Cassirer sees confluence and cohesion of thought and practice. Following Warburg's assessment of Burckhardt's interpretation of the Renaissance,²⁴ Cassirer seeks to elude the trappings of syncretistically defining the Renaissance through its various components, as does Burckhardt, and rather relates all those components to a grounding idea. All thought of the Renaissance begins with the system of thought which permeates men at this time; the foundation for a movement or an historical period is laid long before the actual period reaches mass notice. Using Mirandola, Cusanus, and Neo-Platonism, Cassirer traces the dominant thought-processes that led to the expression of individuality that marks the Renaissance: How the renaissance came to be; what gave it birth. Burckhardt elucidates the fact of the birth, Cassirer elucidates its gestation:

...the history of philosophy must never forget that it can only make responsible generalizations by immersing itself in the most concrete particulars and in the most subtle nuances of historical detail. What is needed is the universality of a systematic point of view and of a systematic orientation which in no way coincides with the universality of merely empirical concepts used in the periodization of history for convenient classification. To supply just this will be the aim of the following study. ...it intends to remain within the realm of the history of philosophical problems and to seek on that basis to answer the question: whether and to what extent the movement of thought in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries constitutes a self-contained unity despite the multiplicity of starting points and the divergence of solutions to the various problems posed.²⁵

His words describing Cusanus' *De Docta Ignorantia* easily apply to his own formulation of this thought:

24 Warburg writes, [Burckhardt] "did nothing more, than first of all observe Renaissance man in his most highly developed type and Renaissance art in the form of its finest creations. As he did so he was quite untroubled by whether he would himself ever be able to achieve a comprehensive treatment of the whole civilization... instead of tackling the problem of the history of Renaissance civilization in all its full and fascinating artistic unity, to divide it up into a number of outwardly disconnected parts, and then with perfect equanimity to study and describe each one separately." Quoted in Wind, p. 24-25

25 ICRP. P. 5-6.

[Cusanus' theology] abandons Scholastic logic, the logic of generic concepts, dominated by the principle of contradiction and of the excluded middle; but it demands in its place a new type of mathematical logic, one that does not exclude but, in fact, requires the possibility of the coincidence of opposites, and requires the convergence of the Absolute-Greatest with the Absolute-Smallest as the firm principle and the necessary vehicle of progressing knowledge.²⁶

It was this movement that began Cassirer's own unique expression, his own progression of knowledge. Within the realm of the known, the empirical world of categories, the breaking-down into ever-finer parts can go on indefinitely; there is no discussion of, nor even room for, the very thing it progresses to—infinity. Referring to Cusanus, Cassirer says of this, “The only relationship that exists between the conditioned, endlessly conditionable world and the world of the unconditioned is that of complete mutual exclusion. The only valid predications of the unconditioned arise out of the negation of all empirical predicates.”²⁷

Philosophical Overview

Cusanus used mathematics as a way to explain God. Equating God to the “absolute maximum” he demonstrates how any finite number becomes relative when compared with the absolute maximum, and emphasizes that the absolute maximum is no less than *absolute*—if something, anything is not the absolute maximum, then it resides in a realm distinct and apart from that maximum. To understand the idea of infinity, Cusanus' layman explains, begin with a circle of small circumference. For any circle, there is only one relationship between the diameter and the circumference, and that relationship always is approximately 3. But now, imagine the circle as infinite—the circumference and the diameter will also be infinite. But how can this be? How can there

26 ICPR. P. 14

27 ICPR. P.21

be 2 infinities? This cannot be. But, the greater the circle, the more similar the arc of the circle to a straight line; thus in infinity, the arc *becomes* a straight line, and the distinction of more and less is eradicated.

We see this puzzle also in the division of a continuum. Any number has only one relationship with any other number, but that relationship is dependent on their places in the series. Thus, 1 in relation to 5 is 5, yet 1 in relation to infinity is infinity, and 5 in relation to infinity is infinity, and so forth for all numbers.

Finally, picture a polygon. Add five sides to it; add ten more sides; add 50, and 100. The more sides added to a polygon, the closer that shape comes to a circle. But a polygon is never a circle. Infinite sides can be added, and it will remain a polygon. These examples demonstrate that distinctions become annihilated in the face of a mathematical infinity. One particular or a set of particulars becomes completely relative when the realm of the determined approaches the infinite non-determined.

We see this idea carried out in the realm of concepts such as the true, the just, and the good. Nothing can ever be perfectly true, just or good. If there is ever a *more* true, *more* just or *more* good, then it exists only in finitude; to these ideal concepts, we continue to add improvements based on immediate experience—like adding sides to a polygon. In *The Layman on Wisdom* Cusanus states,

And even though [God] communicates Himself most liberally to all things, because He is the infinite good, nonetheless He cannot be grasped in anything as He is. Infinite identity cannot be received in another thing, because it would be received in another in a different manner. Although it is not able to be received in another except in a different manner, it is still received in the better mode. An infinity that cannot be multiplied is unfolded better in a differentiated reception. For great diversity expresses better that which cannot be multiplied. And so it happens that when wisdom is received in various forms in different

ways, everything called to identity participates in wisdom in the manner appropriate to each thing.²⁸

Above all, Cusanus grounds his philosophy and his theology in reliance on the intellect. Where there is contradiction, it is through the intellect where resolution occurs; where God is able to be known, it is through the intellect—not a revelatory, mystical experience, but a knowing: “True love of God is *amor Dei intellectualis*...No one can love what he has not known [but]...Love by itself without any admixture of knowledge, would be an impossibility.”²⁹ Through the intellect, Cusanus relates God to the world (from formless to form), then reconnects the world to the human mind (from form back to formless).

This starting point takes up the question of the possibility of knowing an Absolute being versus knowing an empirically-determined being. Cusanus is, according to Cassirer, the “first modern thinker,” for raising the question of the possibility of knowledge of God. More than this, however, it is Cusanus’ turn in intellectual perspective that brings him to a unique standpoint of the *coincidence of opposites*, which is laid out first in *De Docta Ignorantia* but is carried through as the intellectual center in all of his works. Although the *coincidentia oppositorum* is not unique to Renaissance Theology, which resolved opposites and conflict through God, the use of mind and action together offer in Cusanus a unique turn to that concept. Through intellect, Cusanus attempts to “embrace incomprehensible incomprehensibly in knowing ignorance.”³⁰ Cusanus begins to attempt to reconcile the formless with form, Absolute being with being, the essence of being with physical attributes of being, offering “some sort of way

28 The Layman on Wisdom and the Mind p.49

29 ICRP. P. 13

30 Cranz. P. 3 also ICRP P. 8 fn 1

of reasoning about things divine.”³¹ With this statement, he is not saying that he has come to a conclusion, nor built a system, but is seeking after a new method of reconciliation between the knowable and the unknowable.

For Cusanus, action becomes the demonstration of the life of spirit-within and its relationship with the world. In bringing together God-as-Universal with Man-as-particular, and grounding this relationship in Mathematics, Nicholas Cusanus builds a framework for the re-unification of the metaphysics of being (or life) with the individual experience and understanding of that life. These ideas of Cusanus inform Ernst Cassirer’s symbolic forms, forming a framework through which Cassirer’s own critical idealism takes shape. Only in understanding our relationships with each other as finite beings, yet keeping in mind the infinity of *all* perspectives, can we build relationships wherein we act with the integrity and courage to which we are called as rational beings, unfolding thought progressively “in its own autonomous movement and rhythm.”³² This for Cassirer is the functional unity of truth, as expressed and understood through the relationship of the diverse autonomous symbolic forms.

De Docta Ignorantia and the Coincidentia Oppositorum

“It probably is one of those things we are seeking that by nature lead to intellection; but no one uses it rightly, as a thing that in every way is apt to draw men toward being.”

“How do you mean?” He said.

I shall attempt to make at least my opinion plain. Join me in looking at the things I distinguish for myself as leading or not leading to what we are speaking of; and agree or disagree so that we may see more clearly whether this is as I divine it to be...

“Here, I show,” I said, “if you can make it out, that some objects of sensation do not summon the intellect to the activity of investigation because they

31 Cranz. P. 3

32 PSF III P. xiv

seem to be adequately judged by sense, while others bid it in every way to undertake a consideration because sense seems to produce nothing healthy...

The ones that don't summon the intellect," I said, "are all those that don't at the same time go over to the opposite sensation. But the ones that do go over I class among those that summon the intellect, when the sensation doesn't reveal one thing any more than its opposite, regardless of whether the object strikes the senses from near or far off. But you will see my meaning more clearly this way: these, we say, would be three fingers—the smallest, the second and the middle...

"Surely each of them looks equally like a finger, and in this respect it makes no difference whether it's seen in the middle or in the extremes, whether it's white or black, or whether it's thick or thin, or anything else of the sort. In all these things the soul of many is not compelled to ask the intellect what a finger is. For the sight at no point indicates to the soul that the finger is at the same time the opposite of a finger."³³

This passage from Plato's Republic is quoted by Cusanus in *The Layman on*

Wisdom and the Mind to demonstrate his agreement that when the sensuous experience contradicts itself—when something can be experienced as hard and soft, heavy and light, big and small—then the intellect is the faculty that judges "the essence of both to see if the confused sensation may be better distinguished."³⁴ In this way, Cusanus advocates the need for such contradictions, so that the intellect may be stimulated to seek knowledge,³⁵ yet when ultimately comprehended the *knowledge* becomes surpassed by wisdom. Wisdom in this sense³⁶ for Cusanus is obtained when the contradictions of sensory perception resolve themselves within the mind itself.

In Descartes's *Cogito ergo sum*, we find a sudden shift in man's thinking about himself. In the instant that man thinks himself, he creates himself in that moment, unbound to history, tradition, or custom. All that he is exists in that moment of self

33 Republic. 523a-d

34 Cusanus. *The Layman*. P. 67

35 Cassirer notes that Cusanus' notion of sensibility is opposed to that of Plato's, and that, at passages like the ones indicated, Cusanus refers to Plato at the times when Plato is "more friendly to sensory perception, admitting that it has a value for knowledge." ICRP P. 170.

36 It should be noted that Cusanus' view of wisdom follows the medieval sense for it: that wisdom is attained through grace and is separate and distinct from knowledge. The more-dominant Renaissance view of Grace is that wisdom follows from and through knowledge; thus, Cusanus holds an atypical view of wisdom for the Renaissance period.

reflection. This was no dénouement in philosophic thought; there was no evolution, no development, no steady progress whereby Descartes came to this point. It wasn't; then, it was. Prior to the Cartesian man's self reflective self creation, there was only man in context, man in relation to others. Man had only been understood and had only understood himself through external relations that defined who he is. Only first, at the moment of *cogito*, when man thinks his own being, does he become both the thing in itself and the thing for itself. In a revolutionary moment of *cogito* man becomes self-aware, self-conscious.

But then a new problem arises. In this self-awareness, man now sees himself separate, as an individual, the *subject* of his own contemplation. With this, a new orientation to the world of objects is born. No longer is man one player in the movement of life's dramas, dependent on the other actors for their parts, but rather the fixed center, around which all those parts move. Cusanus posited this fixed center, but related it back to his *coincidentia oppositorum*. All measurements refer back to fixed and invariable points; without this, to grasp movement would deteriorate into simply a series of relative positions and a description would become impossible. The mind must have these points of referral. Cassirer notes that "the choice for these points is not prescribed once and for all by the objective nature of things; rather it belongs to the freedom proper of the mind."³⁷ Motion and rest, however can also be relative depending on the observer, perspective can change: two passengers driving in two vehicles at 55 miles per hour, to each other are relatively at a standstill, yet to someone on a curb, they are at 55 miles per

37 ICRP. P. 177

hour. “It is the task of the intellect to relate these different views to each other and to assemble them ‘complicatively’ into a unity.”³⁸

Without those mental fixed points, man loses his grounding, he loses the fact of perspective and relationship; as the center of his own individual cosmos, he tends to overlook the human world, the world of connectivity. Leading to an ironic isolation in a world that is becoming progressively more “multi-cultural”, man defends this “center” from difference and change that seem to attack it from all sides. In his defense, he solidifies his position against all that would corrupt his center, turning a blind eye to the human condition. Yet, what has he to fear from these differences, this change? Man can yet stand firm in his center, and also seek out the *other* without losing himself. It is precisely this paradoxical situation-- abiding in both the particular and the universal simultaneously-- where Cassirer leaves his mark in Western philosophy. It is this ability to hold within the mind the immanent manifold and the specific particular that raises humanity to a new level, and gives us a new basis for which to invite new knowledge into the world. In this place, we can deny the truth of hierarchy and segregation becoming solidified; we can change that poverty and unemployment “tend now to be accepted as inevitable evils”.³⁹ If thought is to be congruent with life, and when knowing and being unite, one must be prepared to speak and act in accordance with ideals that eliminate “evils” in the mind as well as society and culture. It is precisely within this paradox that Cassirer finds the greatest hope for human freedom. Here we find a new opportunity for the cause of events, as Socrates in his jail cell—the direction and choice of the human mind. Kant and Cassirer are concerned about the laws of relationships of forms--science,

38 ICPR. P. 177

39 Guattari, Felix. “The Postmodern Dead End”. In Flash Art. P. 40.

language, arts. Here we are concerned about the laws of relationships of consciousness: how inner thought relates and builds relationships with the outer world, as well as the relationship of inner thought to itself.

In the introduction of general ideas, the mental world is contrasted with the sensible and reduced to a classification of all things to common types. “We can know things indirectly only if they are similar to things which we know directly, and things are never exactly similar”.⁴⁰ In Cusanus’ thought, despite the greater and greater understanding that we may achieve through categorization and subtly nuanced differentiations, the schism between our knowledge of what is knowable (the immediate particular) and the Absolute maximum remains infinite. As Cassirer says, “By its essence and by definition, the absolute object lies beyond every possibility of comparison and measurement and therefore beyond the possibility of knowledge. If the characteristic feature of all empirical knowing and measuring consists in reducing one quantity to another, one element to another through a definite series of operations, i.e., *through a finite series of mental steps*, every such reduction must fail when it comes to the infinite.”

In Cusanus, however, this exclusion leads ultimately and paradoxically to *inclusion*, through Cusanus’ idea of *participation*. This is how Cassirer describes Cusanus’ concept of *participation*:

“Far from excluding each other, separation and ‘participation’...can only be thought of *through* and *in relation* to each other. In the definition of empirical knowledge, *both* elements are necessarily posited and connected with each other. For no empirical knowledge is possible that is not related to an ideal being and to an ideal being-thus. *But empirical knowledge does not simply contain the truth of the ideal, nor does it comprehend that truth as one of its constituent elements.* The character of empirical knowledge is, as we have seen, its limitless determinability; the character of the ideal is its delimitation, its necessary and unequivocal *determinateness* which gives to determinability a definite form and direction.

40 Cusanus. *De Docta Ignorantia* P. vii

Thus, everything conditioned and finite aims at the unconditioned, without ever being able to attain it.”⁴¹

Thus we see that despite a clear separation between the sensible and the intelligible, each is nonetheless dependent upon the other for its own understanding. The link, the bond between them, comes precisely through the category of *experience*. Through experience, *knowledge* is attained, but it follows Cusanus’ idea of *coincidentia oppositorum*, as *knowing ignorance*, in which the intelligible is the ideal, and the whole holds the sensible within itself, only maintaining its completeness through the union of all particulars. On the other hand, the sensible realm, ignorant of the whole due to limited perspective, gains insight only through its own ignorance and the extension of *conjecture*, “the notion of the eternal ‘otherness’ of idea and appearance, joined with the notion of the participation of the appearance in the idea...Even in otherness, knowledge can and should extend in all directions.”⁴²

Cusanus predicates his argument in *De Docta Ignorantia* on existence as a matter of fact. Thus he removes himself from questions of being, not engaging arguments of substance or transcendent being. This is why we see his term for God as simply the absolute maximum, rather than (or opposed to) the maximum being. God's existence is never in question, but we cannot reach to know or understand God within terms that limit him in any way, as being might. Cusanus’ new language "absolute maximum" wavers on the edge of substance and transcendence, and our understanding must expand to stand at that edge, viewing both simultaneously, giving a new view for the idea of being. To the

41 ICRP P. 22 (emphasis added)

42 ICRP P.23

one side Cusanus directs us to knowing through seeing; but, in this seeing and knowing, we admit that we also do not see and do not know the divine incomprehensible.

Attempting to use finite concepts to explain or attain “the infinite” certainly has logical flaws and linguistic aporias. However, if we grant the premise that the absolute maximum (God) exists (as Cusanus begs us to do), then we must also grant that within it lies all possibilities—including contraries, paradoxes and opposites—but that also within it all these become unified. While granting these premises does not make them so, it does point to a solution that Cusanus himself never explicated: that mind itself can hold paradoxes and contraries without actually being contradictory. The mind can conceive of a finite point and an infinite line⁴³ and hold both of these concepts simultaneously without itself being compromised or contradictory. The mind simply cannot imagine them both existing, in the sense of taking on form in time and space, simultaneously. The mind can hold all possibilities of being within itself, beyond existing, prior to all possibilities of existence. It is this use of the mind—its ability to unify contrary concepts within itself, as a new way of “knowing,” that Cusanus confirms in *The Layman on Wisdom and the Mind*, and which continues the foundation for Cusanus’ conception of freedom.

Particularly important to Cassirer was his defense of the Weimar Republic. In His the *Liberating Power of Symbolic Forms*, Jürgen Habermas notes that Cassirer “sketched with bold strokes the origins of human rights and democracy in the tradition of rational law.”⁴⁴ This analysis of Cassirer's defense of the Weimar Republic reflects Cassirer's

43 Note, that for Cusanus, the minutest and the maximum are the same, that “infinite smallest” and “infinite largeness” (re-) unite in, or as, infinity.

44 Habermas. P. 23

affinity with Cusanus' defense of government. Consider this passage from *De*

Concordantia Catholica, written by Cusanus during the Council of Basel, 1432-33:

Each well-ordered government (*superioritas ordinate*) arises from the elective concordance of free submission because people have this divine seed by virtue of the common and equal birth of all human beings and the same natural rights. As a result [we could say] that each power which stems, as human beings do, primarily from God, might be assessed as divine power if it arises from the common consent of the subjects. He who is constituted in such a way that he carries the will of all in himself, may be looked upon as public and common purpose, and as the father of everyone when he, in well-ordered power and according to the rules, governs all and everything without arrogant pride. If he recognizes himself as creature of all his subjects together, then he exists as the father of each of them. This is an ordained and divine matrimony of the spiritual union which is rooted in the firm and continuous concordance, and through which the commonwealth is best guided to its goal of eternal bliss in full peace.

Wilhelm Dupré makes the claim that it is here that Cusanus first states that natural law, as extrapolated to all laws and rooted in reason and the mind, constitutes the foundation for man's freedom. As reason cannot be contained, dictated, or enforced, and as reason follows from thought, all thinking beings therefore must be free.⁴⁵ Perhaps it is this to which Cassirer hearkens to when he says, "The idea of a Republican Constitution is in no sense a stranger, let alone an alien intruder, in the overall context of German thought and culture. Rather, it grew out of this very ground, and was nourished by its most authentic forces..."⁴⁶

Furthermore, power (and for Cusanus, particularly spiritual power) is founded through this freedom—compelling subjects to obey authority entails its abuse, not its rightful use. Freedom as such manifests itself in human relations and how people interact with others and individual situations. It manifests in the choice to get closer to a person or situation or to turn away from it, to take action or not to take action, even to think a

45 Dupré. P. 208-209

46 Habermas. P.23

thought, not think a thought, or devise new and innovative thoughts. “Nobody can compel our thinking to accept the truth it discovers, nor to connect thought with actions. And vice versa: if we observe that striving and desire are part of our being, the act of judgment lets us see that a free decision cannot be taken without insight, and that the free will originates in the growing independence of imagination, reason, and mind.”⁴⁷

With these beginnings, and the linking of freedom with mind (imagination and reason) and with power, Cusanus brings together a point where freedom is enacted through the efforts of the human mind. The mind is where human intellectual faculties culminate and give rise to the method of expression of soul. Within the mind, perceptions and senses are collected and united, assimilating objects and relationships. The mind for Cusanus is integrally related to the concept of measurement, from which the word was derived (*mens* comes from the verb *mensurare*). This reflects Cusanus’ reliance on and belief in the strength and truth of mathematics, as well as the discriminating power of the mind as a method for knowing the truth. It is the mind that mediates between spirit and freedom, for, within the seat of the mind, spirit enters for the human to then determine (through freedom) what to think and how to act.

Cassirer would agree with Cusanus’ assessment that the power that “moves the mind and inspires the intellect”⁴⁸ is termed *geist* indicating a movement of spirit through all things in their individual particularity.

The spirit is a force that appears in the spontaneity of human beings. In processes of completion, is the spirit which initiates these processes by anticipating, and giving them, their goals. Spirit in this sense *means unity in and through differences*. The particular and singular do not get lost, but form the core of what Cusanus calls *the harmony of the world*.⁴⁹

47 Dupré. P. 212

48 Dupré. P. 211

49 Dupré. P. 211. Emphasis mine.

Spirit thus becomes the impetus for the imagination, for human creativity, and for the possibility of artistic creation. When human beings act, the impetus is through the mind, which has assessed the process and assimilated the situation toward making a judgment regarding ultimate action⁵⁰.

Because the absolute contains all and is contained within all, the intellectual bridge has been built to cross over into the knowing of that absolute. God, the absolute maximum, divinity, can now be understood within objective reality, by the human ego or intellect. The extent to which human beings perceive and sense through their physical faculties, the extent to which they are open to their own awareness of these perceptions, is the extent to which humans consciously create their world. Man brings into existence something that was not previously there; we notice it and recognize its previous absence and its current presence: mind becomes visible to itself. "The human mind," writes Cusanus, "is a divine seed that comprehends in its simple essence the totality of everything knowable; but in order for this seed to blossom and bear fruit, it must be planted in the soil of the sensible world."⁵¹

We have seen how for Cusanus the interaction of spirit and activity produces the human world, through the choices made by and the movement of the mind. These interactions serve to express the infinite through the finite, and give humans a vehicle through which they can become aware of, or perhaps even know, the infinite. We now move forward to Cassirer's symbolic forms, which takes on a these themes through his *basis phenomena*.

50 In this same line of thought, Leonardo Da Vinci says, "Error is never rooted in the experience, in the sense data, but in reflection, in the wrong judgment we make about them." ICRP P.154

51 Cusanus. De conjecturis ii.16, quoted in ICRP, P. 45

We know from Cassirer's manuscripts that he had intended to write a survey of the historical use and meaning of the term *nous*, most commonly translated as mind, word or spirit, from Plato through Plotinus, Augustine, and the Renaissance to Descartes and modern philosophy.⁵² We can suppose that he intended to unite the terms of spirit and mind with the idea of freedom in the realm of culture, for it is there, in all its expressions, that man experiences freedom. Cusanus had a tremendous influence on Cassirer's understanding of symbolic form as man's expression of himself in the world. In the next section, I lay out Cassirer's understanding of symbolic forms, with a particular emphasis on his devotion to the metaphysics which is implicit in the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Demonstrating the parallels between symbolic forms and Cusanus' understanding of the human-God relationship, I show how Cassirer introduces an alternative to thought that has led to over-emphasis of the particular and experiential, without equal emphasis on its relationship to the whole.

Life and Geist

Cassirer begins his study with an investigation into the spheres of meaning through systematic structures, divisions and differences that occur within the structures of human reason in its tendency to measure, count, and discern; therefore, he has been understood primarily through his epistemological beginnings and only recently been recast through a metaphysical mold. Cassirer himself addresses this in the manuscripts that comprise the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. He says (referring to the three previous volumes), "The analysis had to be directed primarily and narrowly to knowledge of differences—but should not these differences at the same time refer us to

52 PSF IV P. xix

an overarching whole which embraces them all, as aspects, and connects them together?”⁵³ To talk of the metaphysics of symbolic forms brings new light, new meaning, and new understanding to Cassirer’s philosophy and its functionality. Despite these differences in origination, there are nonetheless similarities and parallel tendencies in these two thinkers. To conclude this chapter, these similarities shall be demonstrated and their connections elucidated.

We must first begin with Cassirer’s concepts of Life and Geist, which begin with a distinction between animals and humans. While both have Life, only humans have Spirit—one originates in organic form, the other in cultural forms. Any distinction that attempts to separate man from animal based solely on organic forms, such as walking on two legs, fails at its foundation, for in the organic construction, humans are simply animals. We might even be convinced that animals have thoughts and feelings; however, humans differ from animals through their expression of these thoughts and feelings in language, myth, art and religion. This, Cassirer notes, is a functional difference; man relates to other humans and to the world through the objectification of his thoughts and feelings.

He turns to Uexküll for explanation. Animals (including humans) perceive their environments through their specific sensory receptors—the sight from the compound eyes of the fly, the detection of odor, or the temperature of a flea. Each animal develops “instinctive” responses to these environmental stimuli, which are really just predetermined reactions. The limited responses of animals (not-including humans) follow from the limited stimuli, and those from limited conditions. Herein lies the pivotal point of difference between humans and other animals. Instead of reacting, following an

instinctive response, the human can instead imagine a future need, a future possibility, and make a choice regarding the response. First arises a need, then an intent, and within this an “idea of the future [which] characterizes all human action.”⁵⁴

“We must place something not yet existing before ourselves in ‘images’ in order, then, to proceed from this ‘possibility’ to the ‘reality,’ from potency to act.”⁵⁵ Thus, for humans, life becomes externalized through the subject in action; both the “I” and its objectification become known for the human whereas “the animal performs these actions, but it does not stand apart from them and is not able to regard them objectively, either individually or as a whole.”⁵⁶

Geist, on the other hand, evolves out of the human characteristics of “I” and “action”—the first two basis phenomena—as the method of producing human culture; geist unifies humans in the functionality of that very production—not all humans produce the same things, but all humans produce things in the same way. Objectivity diverges and comes together when we look to the method and meaning underlying the subjectivity of production, which embodies the essence of the human mind. Through this process, life moves into a new unity with itself, expressing itself as geist in humans. “The actual ‘concrete’ reality of geist consists rather in the fact that all its different basic aspects mesh with one another and coalesce, that, in the true sense of the word, they are ‘concretized.’”⁵⁷

To further understand Cassirer’s adaptation of the term geist, we must look to his objections to the intellectual movement of the “life philosophers,” embodied in

54 LCS P. 26

55 LCS P. 26

56 PSF IV P. 76

57 PSF IV. P. 7

Nietzsche, Bergson, and Dilthey, but most notably represented by Simmel. For these thinkers, a clear opposition is depicted between “Leben” and “Geist”. Seeking dichotomies, the metaphysics of these philosophers ultimately reiterated the traditional antithesis of “One” and “Many,” “Being” and “Becoming,” “Matter” and “Form”. Rather than resolving these antinomies, Lebensphilosophie served only to strengthen and solidify the polarities.

As an example, Cassirer lays out Simmel’s “Transcendent Character of Life,” and notes that in this process, Simmel not only reduces the traditional oppositions to a logical formula, but in so doing, exacerbates the divisions by distinguishing concrete “polarities of thought” and developing a theory wherein, through greater and greater abstraction of form, the idea opposes life rather than being resolved in and through it. Cassirer says:

If we begin with the “opposition” of the unlimited and the limit, of idea and life, then it is not longer possible to make understandable how these two necessarily determine each other, how they are to become correlative to each other. Yet it is this very correlation that is the primarily certain and the primarily given while their separation is something later, a mere construction of thought. The question of how life “achieves” form, how form comes to life, is therefore, of course, unsolvable. This is not because there is an unbridgeable gulf between them, but because the hypothesis of “pure” form (as well as the hypothesis of “pure” life) already contains a contradiction within itself.⁵⁸

In laying out Simmel’s presentation of the problem in this manner, Cassirer is suggesting that symbolic forms offer a different solution to this problem. Indeed, he alludes to this by saying that “the ‘turn to the idea’ requires in every case this turn to ‘symbolic form’ as its precondition and necessary access...we do not merely contrast the ‘immediacy’ of life to the ‘mediacy’ of thought...only such mediation can lead us out of the theoretical antinomies.”⁵⁹ Thus, Cassirer indicates that the metaphysics of symbolic

58 PSF IV. P. 15

59 PSF IV. P. 14

forms will offer a release from the abstraction of form and enter into a dialogue with a solution to these external dualisms.

There are five main concepts that we see in both Cusanus and Cassirer. These can be thought of within two “groupings.” The first group includes the invisible, formless, active forces of Life and Geist, the second entails the ways in which those forces come to expression in the world. Cassirer calls the elements of the second group *basis phenomena*: I, action and work; he credits Goethe with their inception. Cusanus does not have any explicit categories that can be compared to Cassirer’s basis phenomena; the way in which he frames these concepts is developed implicitly within Cusanus’ Christian beliefs, in addition to an undercurrent of thought that ran through the period of the Renaissance. Having discussed these concepts, I will show how they are tied together through the third connective idea, *coincidentia oppositorum*, as well as the *Absolute Maximum* and what it offers in the service of a higher notion of *freedom* in both thinkers.

Basis Phenomena

Transforming Humboldt’s ideas through Goethe, Cassirer quotes Goethe’s

Maxims at the beginning of the chapter on the Basis Phenomena:

“The highest gift we have received from God and nature is life the rotating movement of the monad about itself, knowing neither pause nor rest. The impulse to nurture this life is ineradicably implanted in each individual, although its specific nature remains a mystery to ourselves and to others.

“The second benefit from active higher beings is the experienced, our becoming truly aware, the living monad’s intervention into the surroundings of the outer world. *Through this it becomes truly aware of itself as internal lack of limits, and as externally limited.* Although it requires a predisposition, *attention*, and luck, we can become clear ourselves about what we experience; but to others it remains a mystery.

“As the third there now arises will redirect toward the outer world as actions and deed, as speech and writing; these belong to it more than to ourselves; *this is why the outer world can more readily attain an understanding about it than*

*we ourselves are able to. However, in the outer world one senses that in order to really be clear about this, it is necessary to learn as much as possible about what we have experienced. This is why people are so greatly interested in youthful beginnings, stages of education, biographical details, anecdotes and the like.”*⁶⁰

Through Goethe, in the fourth volume of the *Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer begins to approach a phenomenological grounding for his metaphysics. As we see above, Goethe first addresses life, in the same sense as Humboldt, as the “movement of the monad about itself.” The “I” experiences the movement of life as a mystery, but, nonetheless, its primary impulse is to nurture that very life. The “I” nurturing its own life is the first of the basis phenomena; it continually seeks to know itself through its own movement, and consequently, through its interaction with the outside world. Thus, action becomes the second basis phenomenon. Action (interaction, reaction) bears forth the nature of the “I”, revealing it to itself. Awareness and attention aid the “I” in knowing itself; only the “I” can piece together an impulse and its action to understand the impulse in the action. No one else has access to those thoughts, those desires, those drives that propel men forward in movement, in action. Thus, the second basis phenomenon reveals man only to himself; it is in the third basis phenomena where man is revealed to another.⁶¹

The precursor to the basis phenomena, *energeia*, Humboldt’s term that refers to a form which contains the qualities of being both enduring and transitory, by its inner nature, as language is. While culturally concrete, language does not “exist” but for the moment that it is spoken, and it changes with each expression. “The speech act is never in this sense an act of mere assimilation; rather, it is... a creative act, an act of shaping and

60 Goethe’s *Maxims*, 391-393 (Emphasis added)

61 Fichte sought to understand the nature of subjectivity in a similar way, positing the “I, positing itself”, uniting the I and its object in an activity of “intellectual intuition”, (Schindler. P. 105) although Cassirer himself identifies the activity of the self’s interaction with itself more frequently with Humboldt’s distinction between *energeia* and *ergon*, the rule of creation and the created work.

reshaping.”⁶² Language in this sense becomes the primary example for all of the symbolic forms, not merely as an expression of a perception or thought, but as a “form of life,” a creative intellectual act that weaves between life’s expression and its objective manifestation, a dynamic process that unifies them to each other through “correlation and cooperation”. This is however, in contrast with Fichte, who asserts that language precedes and thus determines consciousness. Language may move and change over time yet, it “always remains ‘the same living linguistic force of nature’, original and irrepressible”.⁶³

The first basis phenomenon under this new perspective remains the “I,” the monad moving, rotating about itself; however, to this motion, Cassirer introduces two new aspects. First, Cassirer recognizes that the “I” can be interpreted in a biological, a transcendental, or a psychological sense. To alleviate dispute regarding which I this phenomenon pertains to, Cassirer “ignores” all differences in these separate senses. Regardless of origin, they all have one thing in common, which he applies to each and defines as characteristic of this basis phenomenon: they all exist as a “stream in motion;” they are bound “to no particular state.” This “I” is never bound to the present moment and no term that would adhere it to the present can approach a description of it. “It is not bound to a particular moment, but rather encompasses the totality of all aspects of life, the past, present and future...I do not experience myself as ‘being’ (ontologically; fixed in different positions in time one after another and to this extent, ‘enduring’). I experience myself as present, as past, and as going-to-be”⁶⁴

62 PSF IV. P. 16

63 Fichte, *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, ed. Reinhard Lauth (Hamburg, 1978), p. 62. Quoted in Robertson, P. 158

64 PSF IV. P. 139

The second basis phenomenon in this perspective adds to the first an element of consciousness and efficacy. “We not only experience ourselves in ‘perception’ in transition from state to state, but we experience ourselves as having an influence and acting.”⁶⁵ From our action we become conscious of both ourselves and the world, without actually experiencing either our self or the world; rather we experience something else altogether different, and something that grows from us but stands in opposition to us, yet out of this opposition comes “our consciousness of the ‘object.’”⁶⁶ In this regard, we are able to see and experience the results of our thoughts and intentions and come to know the actualization of the self that creates them. The bond that action forms through reaction and their resulting interaction is for Cassirer the second “genuine” basis phenomenon, because these actions are “originally constitutive” and can be “derived from nothing else.”

The third basis phenomenon in the Goethean sense is transformed for Cassirer from being merely an approach to the “external world” into the door to the “final advance toward reality.” Through action, works are created and are the objectified expression of action (in this, Cassirer agrees with Goethe); but where, for Goethe, the work is the final step in the process of expression (which ends ultimately in alienation), for Cassirer the action leads to a “completely new position” which leads to “an authentic consciousness of reality.” This, however, requires our own involvement with the production of these works—we must become willing to be aware of the results of our action, and of the *Weltanschauung* underneath and behind the thoughts that produce those actions. We must “move beyond the sphere of mythic affect (mastery by means of wish) to mastery by

65PSF IV. P. 139

66 PSF IV. P. 140

means of the work.”⁶⁷ When we do this, we attain the “‘spirit’ of objectivity...and with it, the final ‘advance’ toward reality.”

“Basis Phenomena...are not something which is mediated for us; rather, they are the ways, the modes of mediation itself...They are the windows of our knowledge of reality that through which reality opens up to us.”⁶⁸ Thus the three basis phenomena are “I,” “action” and “work,” or the “I,” the “you”, and the “it,” or, finally, the “phenomenon of the Self,” the “phenomenon of the other”, and the “phenomenon of the world.” The expression of each through symbolic forms is what Cassirer referred to in an *Essay on Man*, when he says, "Man cannot find himself, he cannot become aware of his individuality, save through the medium of social life."⁶⁹ But it is precisely this uniqueness as a social animal of thought and individuality that burdens man with responsibility. For it is the combination of self-awareness, its expression, and its refinement through culture that allows only man to shape his surroundings based on his self image and self-perception. "He cannot live his life without expressing his life."⁷⁰ Yet this expression itself is dualistic in nature--the subconscious dialectic dance of expansion and contraction, growth and maintenance, creation and destruction, the reconciling of opposites in the nature of man, as expressed in society through the cultural forms of language, myth, religion and art.

The importance of the basis phenomena is not the “whatness” of each of them, but rather their function: their place and purpose within the entire system and unity of symbolic forms. It is only through their dynamic interaction as expressions of the

67 PSF IV. P. 141

68 PSF IV. P. 137-138.

69 EM. p. 223

70 EM. p. 224

interplay of spirit and life that the traditional antinomies of cultural forms (which are grounded in a static standpoint of being) are transmuted. Turning the objective into a method of understanding the subjective, and recognizing its relationship back to the subjective, turns us not to “the unity of the ‘thing,’ the absolute object—rather [to] unity of spirit, of the spiritual energy as such in all the diversity of the ‘symbolic forms’.”⁷¹ Through this dynamic play of ‘spirit’s energy’ the basis phenomena “disclose and make ‘reality’ accessible to us [through] their systematic totality and systematic organization.”⁷²

Only through ourselves, in conjunction with the works that we create, the objectification of our self through the works that we create, are we able to be known to others. Thora Ilin Bayer notes that here, the work “werk” is used, indicating an inter-subjective activity, that “carries cultural, intellectual or artistic meaning,” as opposed to “arbeit” which is the product of human labor. This *werk* for Cassirer contrasts with action, and would be better translated as *intellectual work*. Insofar as intellectual work is the product of the action, it also reaches its fulfillment through that very same action. The movement of action ends in and through its expression in the world without the simultaneous creation of an “other”. “From the consciousness of works grows the consciousness of things.”⁷³ Connected in this way to the original question of *being*, Cassirer notes that “it is important that being not be given to us as a fully separate essence (being outside us), but rather that it be given to us in the medium of work.”⁷⁴ We can understand this final basis phenomenon through Goethe, the artist: art must remain

71 Quoted in Lofts. P. 203

72 PSF IV. P. 153.

73 PSF IV. P. 141

74 PSF IV. P. 141.

the expression of the innermost depths of its creator; it needs no explanation, no analysis—the work must be simply that which is borne forth through the artist’s impulse to life. It is precisely in this creative act that the artist can be known to others, yet at the same time not known with any definiteness. We may also understand this through Schiller, who writes, “Spricht die Seele, so spricht, ach! Schon die Seele nicht mehr” (“Speaks the soul, then what speaks, alas is the soul no more”)⁷⁵ As soon as the artist expresses that very innermost being and objectifies it, no longer does it hold the passion, the emotion, the intent within its inception; it is now at the mercy of every passerby who might impose meaning on it, and never fully comprehend that soul that created it.

Furthermore, the mere expression restrains the artist and imposes limitations. For Goethe, the expression of the “I”, its action, its work, should not be questioned, should not be probed for understanding—the incomprehensible must remain incomprehensible, for the more understanding that we attempt to impose, the further the form retracts from its origin, the more alienating and restricted is the “I”.

At this very point, when Goethe and Simmel define “what is” precisely and definitively their experience for their time, that Cassirer steps in to say, there is another way of asking the question, that will turn out different answers. To show us this, Cassirer turns our attention toward “the transfiguration of ‘life’ through the form of the ‘question’ that is the specifically Socratic achievement.”⁷⁶ Socrates and the sophists both approach the question of the basis of “life”, but each turns to the problem in a different manner. The sophists ask about the “origins” of being—“whence language, whence justice, whence the state, whence morality;” their answer speaks specifically to how these

75 PSF IV Fnt. 13, P. 130

76 PSF I P. 133

questions are framed, and they respond with the idea of “grown” versus “made.” Things in nature “grow,” constructs of man are “made;” each stands in its own realm, opposed to the other. The Socratics, on the other hand, look instead not to the origins, but rather to the development, the “end,” the telos of a thing. How these questions are framed determines what answers are found; the answers correspond to the question, so changing the questions changes the answers.

However, at this point, we must also recognize that thought, in the form of these questions and answers, is transmitted through the generations according to different schools. Here is how Cassirer changes the question:

How can we do justice to the Goethean demand for the recognition of “primary phenomena” and to the Cartesian-Kantian demand for “reflection” in knowledge and philosophy? How can we uphold that form of certainty and “immediateness,” which Goethe attributes to primary phenomena and at the same time grant the no less unassailable right of “thought,” which wants to bring everything before its bench for investigation ... Here romanticism there positivism; here “reason and science” there their opposite—even their complete rejection—here “irrationalism,” here rationalism, here mysticism here “physicalism” ... must we necessarily declare ourselves for one of these alternatives? Or is there a way to reconcile them ...? Can we preserve respect for the primary phenomena without acting in opposition to the critical spirit, without becoming guilty of sinning against the mind, which occurs when we deny its original right—its autonomy—so that we treat it as something foreign, as an intruder?⁷⁷

Cassirer returns us at this point to Goethe’s basis phenomena, but with questions focused on the reconciliation of opposites, while maintaining the integrity of reason, now informing the resulting perspective and definition. Yet it is at this point that Cassirer, while enunciating his grandest hope, reveals a limitation of his ideal and his philosophy. If the ideal of this philosophy is to “preserve respect for the primary phenomena without acting in opposition to the critical spirit” without denying the mind’s autonomy, Cassirer offers no suggestion for “ideal” actions, neither for ideal thoughts. Indeed, in the *Myth of*

the State, his best known work which elucidates the actions to avoid, only comes to this assessment with hindsight. How do people, on a daily basis, assess their thoughts and their actions to be in alignment with some moral or ethical ideal? Cassirer never answers this question. The closest answer that he offers is to place philosophy as the “watchman” over cultural twists and turns. However, not only is this too close to Plato’s philosopher king who may end up as tyrant, but it also removes his ideal of the autonomy of the mind. Either people are free to think and do as they choose, or they are told what to think and do, which both enslaves, and does not guarantee a higher ethical stance. While Cassirer stands firmly in the tradition of striving for an ethical world—through cultural forms dependent on individual world-making—the best he can offer is to rely on individual good-will and to remind people that their actions affect the whole. In the immediate world of an individual the whole will not be felt, and people will continue to choose actions based on self-interest.

This limitation aside, for Cassirer, only through human action and experience can the work of spirit be known, and this work is the essence of human freedom as cultural expression. But more than this, the basis phenomena incorporate the subjective with the objective in a manner of production that brings tangibility to an otherwise idealistic conception of the inner-workings of the human spirit of expression. If Cassirer had stopped with the phenomena that were accessible only to the realm of the subject, of spirit, his critics who see him as a passive idealist would be verified. However, Cassirer clearly formulates a concrete construction of form, in and through the basis phenomenon of work: “Man lives with objects only in so far as he lives with these forms; he reveals reality to himself, and himself to reality, in that he lets himself and the environment enter

into a plastic medium, in which the two do not merely make contact, but fuse with each other.”⁷⁸

Conclusion

Cassirer says of Cusanus, “For Dionysius... ‘deification’ takes place ...in a completely determined series of steps...For Cusanus it is a single act, one in which man puts himself into an immediate relationship to God...the *visio intellectualis* presupposes self-movement of the mind as well as an original force in the mind itself that unfolds in a continuous process of thought.” As we delve into Cassirer’s own symbolic forms, we see this same thought process evolve for him: “We can arrive at a system of the manifold manifestations of the mind only by pursuing different directions taken by its original imaginative power. In them we see reflected the essential nature of the human spirit for it can only disclose itself to us by shaping sensible matter.”⁷⁹ Further: “Seen in this context, the way in which we apply the conceptual opposition of the *subjective* and *objective* in giving form to the world of experience, in constructing nature, appears to be not so much the solution to the problem of cognition, as its perfect expression.”⁸⁰ This he claims is where metaphysics errs, by addressing only certain aspects of reality, rather than providing a “total vision” and a “total interpretation”⁸¹ of reality. The substance concept and the function concept are not bifurcated; through symbolic forms are we able to observe the manifestation of the character of the mind in its completeness.

Like Cusanus, Cassirer seeks a “new form of knowledge,” which cannot be attained through adhering to either syllogistic reasoning or metaphysical faith. In the first,

78 LM P. 10

79 PSF I. P. 88

80 PSF I. P. 91

81 PSF I. P. 155

concepts begin as equal and then become filtered through comparisons and distinctions, and give us insight only into that which is finite and conditioned; in the second, we may feel or imagine infinity or God, yet in this realm all that we know is bounded and affirmed only through the not-knowing that glares back at us as we seek to know that infinity.

In symbolic forms we find similar opposing philosophical views that, until Cassirer, had not found reconciliation. These themes Cassirer adapts to his philosophy of Symbolic Forms by utilizing the notion of the coincidence of opposites as a springboard for the reconciliation of symbolic form in culture. Note what Cassirer says of Cusanus, and how these words reflect Cassirer's own system of thought:

In the cosmology of Cusanus the universe dissolved into an infinite multiplicity of infinitely different movements, each circling around its own center, and all held together both by their relationship to a common cause and by their participation in one and the same universal order. The same is true of the spiritual being. Every spiritual being has its center within itself. And its participation in the divine consists precisely in this centering, in this indissoluble individuality. Individuality is not simply a limitation; rather it represents a particular value that may not be eliminated or extinguished.”⁸²

Thus, through entering the dialogue on *being*, and insisting on its functional, interactive quality as opposed to substance-orientation, Cassirer shifts traditional terms; he is able then to talk about culture as a “system of actions” through which the empirical world is constructed and reconstructed.⁸³ Thus, the burden of responsibility to produce and transform the world of cultural forms lies on individuals. Culture is particular under each individual's expression, yet has the potential to be national, even universal. The “multiplicity of infinitely different movements” becomes the individual expression of

82 ICRP. P. 28

83 SMC P. 65

each human being as they create their lives through that self expression. Each person sits at the center of his or her individual cosmos, “circling around its own center.” That same person maintains a “spiritual center” that connects individuality to a universal essence via the medium of culture, through which each person’s own contribution becomes part of the soma of the whole. Culture transcends particular communities and offers a basis for the construction of a common world. “This common world is, however, not a given, but an idea and an ideal. Like reason, culture is thus not a given, but a task. In this sense, culture does indeed demand ... actions that actualize the potential of culture and try to realize the promises of practical reason.”⁸⁴ In this way, “individuality is not simply a limitation” in the expression of culture through symbolic forms, but the *necessary* expression of human freedom, the reconciling of the “infinite multiplicity” with individuality coming together into a whole.

We must remember that Cassirer’s underlying project strives toward a “new rule, a new conformity to law”⁸⁵ which does not merely reduce human action to empirical causality, but demands that human actions be scrutinized through a matrix of self-actualizing ethical freedoms in conjunction with the empirical laws of science. Through Cusanus, we find access to the immediate, physical aspect of being human in the world through *action* and *work*, which can be scrutinized by empirical assessment; in addition, we find a connection to the essence of humanity through a connection with the infinite. In Cassirer we see this paralleled in symbolic forms, through the basis phenomena expressing human consciousness through culture. These two opposites become resolved

84 Vandenberg. P. 492

85 DIMP. P. 198

in and through each other, offering this “third path” through symbolic forms, which expand a dualistic framework into a dynamic relational process.

Chapter Four: The influence of Humanism on symbolic forms

The great thing about all true and deep intellectual decisions is that they only seem to belong to a particular historical moment of thought, whereas in truth mankind is always standing before them again and again in the course of its development.

-Ernst Cassirer¹

Introduction

“What is man?” Cassirer answers the age-old question, differently than any previous thinker. Man is *animal symbolicum*—a symbolizing animal. Mediating between the sensible and intelligible, between the concepts and intuitions, symbols represent ideas through physical forms—and humans are the only beings capable of expressing thought through matter. Yet, Cassirer did not simply arrive at this claim as a newborn. He stood before this question time and again through his work on Socrates, the Renaissance, and Kant, and his answer developed through his interaction with the answers of previous thinkers in these different time periods using each to evolve his own thinking. The functional relationship of symbolic forms provide these two sides of man—the logical and the pre-logical—more than understanding, they open the door to depth of inquiry into concepts. Thus, in Kantian terms, Cassirer transforms the “how do we know?” to “how do we give meaning?” and finds the answer in a synthesis of cultural forms. Clearly, however, for Cassirer, the “understanding” that expresses itself culturally begins on an individual level, and each individual expression contributes to the whole.

As we recognize ourselves externally, we can come to assess our ideals through our outcomes—but this first requires the courage to take responsibility for that which we externalize. Only then are we able to look more deeply to see what is inside, and to ask if

¹ Quoted in Krois: Cassirer, Symbolic Forms and history. P. 95

we are fulfilling our highest moral and ethical ideals as humans, as a society. “The ‘imperative of pure form’ is supposed to permeate and determine the actions of the individual as well as the populace...as with truth, just law can arise from this alone”.² It is now apparent that Cassirer opposes the skeptical notion of *self-knowledge*. But what positive attributes does Cassirer find in Self-knowledge? Why, in a philosophy of culture, is Cassirer the least bit concerned with self-knowledge?

In this chapter, we follow Cassirer’s philosophic anthropology through his interaction with Socrates, Giambattista Vico, and Kant and with their approaches to answering this question. We find Cassirer aligned with humanism throughout all these inquiries, which further bears upon Cassirer’s own philosophy of symbolic forms. The humanist qualities embodied in symbolic forms are those of autonomy, progress, and self-reflection, which also align him directly with Enlightenment principles. We begin with these building blocks to demonstrate how they interact for Cassirer to form the foundation on which he builds his critical idealism through symbolic forms. The solution, as we shall see, lies neither in the abandonment of philosophy nor in the exalting of the philosophical ideal, but rather in bringing both philosophy and idealism into the realm of culture through *symbolic forms*, where, it can be noted, observed, critiqued, and ultimately changed, in the service of an ethical ideal which places human freedom and dignity at its center. Cassirer says:

It is the task of systematic philosophy, which extends far beyond the theory of knowledge, to free the idea of the world from this onesidedness. It has to grasp the *whole system* of symbolic forms, the application of which produces for us the concept of an ordered reality, and by virtue of which subject and object, ego and world are separated and opposed to each other in definite form, and it must refer each individual in this totality to its fixed place. If we assume this problem solved, then the rights would be assured, and the limits fixed, of each of the particular

2 PSF IV. P. 188

forms of the concept and of knowledge as well as of the general forms of the theoretical, ethical, aesthetic and religious understanding of the world. Each particular form would be "relativized" with regard to the others, but since this "relativization" is throughout reciprocal and since no single form but only the systematic totality can serve as the expression of "truth" and "reality," the limit that results appears as a thoroughly immanent limit, as one that is removed as soon as we again relate the individual to the system of the whole.³

For Cassirer, philosophy cannot be a particular "symbolic form," for it observes, above and outside the activity of the symbolic forms. Philosophy represents expansive understanding, over a variety of fields and forms, seeking an overview of all the different cultural forms. Philosophy strives to see how they actualize individually as well as coordinate with each other, through weaving symbolic forms together, as well as linking them with each other, without jeopardizing the integrity of any one of the individual forms. Each form remains intact, while combining with other forms to create an infinite variety of human expression. Symbolism is the means that makes this possible; philosophy is the art that recognizes and follows the movement of the symbolism, interpreting it in the various ways of "having a world".

Philosophy in this sense becomes the bridge between humanism and the Enlightenment. From the humanist perspective, it is the constant assessment of the external—symbols, in this case—and comparison with the internal from which meaning is derived. With utilizing what is present alongside an awareness of an historical connection, comes knowledge of progress. In this sense, the notion of progress remains for Cassirer one of the quintessential categories to retain from the Enlightenment. As Stephen Bronner describes, "Progress is the crucial category for talking about change, autonomy, and drawing qualitative distinctions. The current understanding of progress, however, has become impoverished. The category has been flattened out. It is a travesty

3 SF, ETR. P. 447

to reduce ‘progress’ to the disenchantment of the world, the dissolution of myths, and the substitution of ‘knowledge for fancy.’”⁴

Socratic Self Knowledge

Speaking of what we know about Socrates, Cassirer says, “Only one question remains: *What is man?* Socrates always maintains and defends the ideal of an objective, absolute universal truth. But the only universe he knows, and to which all his inquiries refer, is the universe of man. His philosophy...is strictly anthropological.”⁵ Cassirer sees in Socrates the very first tenant of humanism: that in order to know the world, man must know himself.

In the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer explains this connection, relating it back to the importance of self-knowledge as a basis for a critical idealism rooted in culture. Since Cassirer returns again and again to a philosophical anthropology, we must begin with the idea of *being*, laying out the historical arguments on the meaning and expression of being, as it now applies to the development of Cassirer’s thought through its humanism. *Being* has been seen as both the paramount abstraction and the most intricate, pervasive subject for philosophical discussion. Thales may be the original philosopher, for his inquiries into the original material of the universe out of which all things were made,⁶ but Parmenides’ influence cast the widest net. His inquiry into the what-ness of being, despite an ultimate abstract rendering of reality that achieved greater distortion and confusion rather than elucidation, usurped the attention of philosophers.

4 Bronner, 2004, p. 18

5 EM. P. 4

6 Russell, Bertrand. 1961. P. 25

Parmenides concluded that there can be no change, no coming-to-be and—perhaps—no plurality or multiplicity at all. But how can this be, when every thought, every moment, every interaction convinces through the experiencing of it that everything changes and multiplicity exists in everything from baby to adult, or seed to stem? There is no infinite homogeneity as would naturally result from his conjecture.

On the one hand, the world we see and in which we live is elusive, deceptive. Yet, when we seek the truth of this illusory world, we find it is much like holding water with a fork—we can sense it, feel it, but when we grasp it, we lose it. Such was the framework for the pre-Socratic dialogue. Cassirer notes that in this attempt to grapple with the nature of being, there remained an imbalance between, and a dependence upon, the “physical” and the “spiritual,” causing an “inner uncertainty” that was exposed and reconciled in Plato’s theory of ideas. “The great systematic and historical achievement of this theory is that here, for the first time, the essential intellectual premise for any philosophical understanding and explanation of the world took on explicit form.”⁷

Unlike the pre-Socratics, who attempted to anchor the idea of being in existence, in the form of association with concrete things, Plato recognizes with uncertainty as a philosophical problem. With no fixed center, how can man develop question about himself and the world? How can he contrive questions around which to develop ideas and answers? Plato turns what was a solid notion of being as a particular thing in existence, to ask what does it *mean to be*. “He no longer simply inquired into the order, condition and structure of being, but inquired into the concept of being and the meaning of that

7 PSF I. P. 73.

concept.”⁸ Shifting the focus to a question of meaning lies at the root of Plato’s dialectic, which encourages critical reflection and the synthesis of ideas.

Extracted from the earlier speculations of the nature of being, that philosophy abandons the methodological limits of *a prima materia* as the “ultimate foundation of all phenomena.” In this way, through the new problem of being, “does thought attain to the sharply defined meaning and value of a principle. It no longer runs parallel to being, a mere reflection ‘about’ being, but by its own inner form, it now determines the inner form of being.”⁹

With this philosophical turn, Cassirer recognizes that the process of self-reflection becomes its own self-determining cause, and can be observed further in the reflection of itself in the external world. It is precisely this turn in Plato that Cassirer applies to the cultural sciences. We saw above that *being* prior to Plato vacillated between physical and spiritual, with no certainty established in its coming into being or passing away; the same phenomenon occurs in culture: beyond our immediate physical experience and observation, we have no need to delve further into understanding that which changes and fluctuates. *Except* that if we apply Cassirer’s observation of Plato to Cassirer’s theory of culture, we find a parallel statement of the problem and a similar solution.

Culture becomes an object for observation as well as a reflection of the overarching process of humanity. Cassirer states, “religion, language, art: these are never tangible for us except in the moments that they themselves have created. They are the tokens, the memorials, and reminders in which we can grasp a religious, linguistic or artistic meaning.” For, in the expression of culture, Cassirer says, “the physical itself is

8 PSF I. P. 74.

9 PSF I. P. 74.

seen in a new *function*.¹⁰ That new function—like the nature of *being* in man—is embodied in the idea of culture *existing* and *becoming* in a self-reflective, dialectical relationship, linking the individual consciousness with a cultural consciousness that is co-creative and co-reflective.

Linking the problem of individual *being* with cultural expression bears two implications; the first regards the individual and self-knowledge, the second relates the individual directly back to culture. Let us first comment on the cultural implication. The symbolic forms of human expression—language, art, religion—bear the burden of being the confluence of individual and cultural expression. No task, no expression takes place in a vacuum. Cassirer notes that each utterance, every “individual act of speaking [has]...in some way influenced ‘the’ language.”¹¹ Just so all individual human expression—work, play, expression itself—manifests in culture and contributes to the “stream of becoming” for all humanity. While not all individual action becomes solidified, it does enter into the mass organism of culture and continue forth. “It is this process that distinguishes the mere transformation [Umbildung], which takes place in the sphere of organic becoming, from the formation [Bildung] of humanity.”¹² Every person shares in the *becoming* of culture, every symbolic form expresses the creative will and power of a multitude of individuals. Yet this individual contribution to culture becomes the essence for the necessity of learned ignorance. In the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer demonstrates this with a discussion on Socrates. He says, “As soon as we believe that we have grasped the ‘true’ face of Socrates and of Socratic thought, then this ‘truth’ dissolves. Our ‘knowledge’ is transformed into ‘ignorance.’

10 LCS. P. 43

11 LCS P. 127

12 LCS P. 127

Socrates seems to defy every attempt to 'pin him down'; his every aspect immediately turns into its opposite.”¹³ Just so in the becoming of culture. As soon as individual expression enters the stream of culture, its truth dissolves, and becomes greater than its origin. The individual remains ignorant of his or her contribution to the truth of the whole, yet the whole of culture is only possible through these contributions. As each individual proceeds, striving toward greater ethical contributions, the whole reflects the impact of these changes.

Anthropology, when applied to cultures or civilizations, may be approached with objective, empirical knowledge—just as biology or other natural sciences utilize such methods (to the degree that these sciences existed at the time of Socrates). However, Cassirer points out that this is precisely the point where Socratic irony reveals itself. When studying man—his thoughts, his consciousness—he cannot utilize the same tools for his own subjective study, as he does with the objective study of the world around him. Instead, “a new activity and function of thought [reveals itself as] the distinctive feature of the philosophy of Socrates.” Rather than a monologue of man with the world, knowledge of man is “transformed into a dialogue.” Through objective observation of man, we can only approach the nature of that which we observe; we identify the qualities that define man—goodness, justice, temperance, courage—but we are unable to define man himself. Only man’s own self-reflection facilitates that. Through this self-reflection that is inter-linked with an idea of the “universe of man,” man is able to “go within” to “go without.”

13 PSF IV. P. 184

Vico: Renaissance Humanism, Autonomy and Knowledge

Where, for Plato we saw that critical reflection of the world, depends first on man's own self-reflection; for the skeptic, the separation and clear distinction of inner and outer constitute "true freedom". Contra skepticism in the tradition of Hume, Cassirer upholds Plato's critical insight and maintains that freedom for man resides in his ability to manifest externally even as experience is reflected and re-constituted in an on-going functional relationship between man and his world. "Give shape to what you do; give it form by starting from mere instinct, from convention, from routine, from 'experience' and 'habituation' in order to arrive at 'self-conscious' action—a work in which you recognize yourself as the sole creator and actor."¹⁴

In the first chapter of an *Essay on Man*, Cassirer begins Following Plato's Socrates, that "self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry". Indeed, who would dispute this? Even Cassirer himself encourages Socratic self-knowledge and Kantian courage to know. But we find at the end of the first paragraph the direction of Cassirer's dispute, his difference of opinion in what constitutes "self-knowledge". He says, "[the skeptic] hopes to throw all the thoughts of man back upon his own being. Self knowledge—he declares—is the first prerequisite of self-realization. *We must try to break the chain connecting us with the outer world in order to enjoy our true freedom*".¹⁵ For Cassirer, there is no "breaking the chain"—the inner world and outer world inform and constitute each other, in mutual, co-operative acts. In other words, the inner externalizes, changing the external, which then is re-interpreted through the internal, and in turn changes it. This relationship is immediate, simultaneous.

¹⁴ PSF IV. P. 186

¹⁵ EM. P. 1, my italics

Cassirer does reject the skeptical separation of man from world as a legitimate method for self-knowledge, replacing it with a transcendental ideal of self-knowledge. Yet at the same time, drawing from Descartes' scientific and mathematical thought, he re-integrates *naturwissenschaften*—objective knowledge obtained through placing oneself outside, observing the world—back into his conception of truth, as it comprises the whole. We cannot simply say that the sum of objective knowledge plus subjective knowledge equals truth. For, while we can observe and measure nature to obtain what we call objective knowledge, how can we observe and measure things such as history or culture and the human activities that comprise them? Cassirer's tacit assumption is that the more informed, the more conscious we are of our motives, drives and thoughts, the better able we are to understand and interpret the external world. The relationship is from inner to outer and back again, with each turn informing the next cycle of understanding.

It was Giambattista Vico, according to Cassirer, who first posed this question, and through his answer, we find a philosophical allegiance between Cassirer and a long line of humanist scholars acknowledging the importance of maintaining a connection between the person and the world. Pico della Mirandola whose *Oration on the Dignity of Man* confirms the high esteem of Renaissance humanists of human reason with “whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will be brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God.”¹⁶

Through humanism, Cassirer unites with a spirit of understanding both history and the human through the use of reason, and for this, he looks closely at Giambattista Vico, who contrasted deeply with the rationalist philosophers who were unable to grasp

16 The Renaissance Philosophy of Man. Cassirer, Kristeller and Randall Eds. P. 225

that history and society were necessarily cultivated through means other than (yet in addition to) logical and rational methods:

Vico's philosophy of civilization has often been regarded as the first step not only to a new philosophy of history, but also to our modern science of sociology... Vico is perfectly aware of the fact that human culture has to be studied and explained according to sociological principles and methods. He does not strive after sociological explanation in the modern sense. He regards civilization as an organic whole, as a teleological order.¹⁷

This order to which Cassirer is referring is contained in seven aspects of Vico's New Science, which has as its fifth principle that which Vico calls an "ideal eternal history" that entails the necessary development of political, social and cultural aspects of all nations. This "necessary" development makes these ideas—in Vico's mind—universal. Verene notes that "Cassirer appears to be suggesting that this be understood as a principle of general cultural development which grounds cultural process in an original state of mythic consciousness, rather than as a principle of historical decline similar to that of Spengler... Cassirer's point in this lecture was intended to focus on the 'logic of the imagination' side of Vico's conception of the ideal eternal history".¹⁸ The beginning of the cycle of ideal eternal history begins with the age of the gods, where poetic theology or myth "is characteristic of the childhood of the human race," wherein they are "unable to conceive rational categories of things."¹⁹ In the second age, the age of heroes, man has grown out of his childlike illusions of the world, but now attributes individual nature to heroes; the hero becomes the "ideal man" by virtue of his good deeds.²⁰ Vico sees Plato as one example of this phase, as he looked back to Homer for examples of divine and

17 SMC. P. 105.

18 SMC P. 106n

19 Fahey, Tony. Vico on the Making of the Heroic or Dignified Mind.

20 Fahey, Tony. Vico on the Making of the Heroic or Dignified Mind.

heroic ages and to Socrates as a guide for his own human age. The final stage is the age of reason, or the era in which man becomes “fully human”. The significance of this for our study of Cassirer is twofold: for one, Vico was the first to put human understanding in terms of a mythical, pre-logical, childlike understanding and to apply that to the development of nations; for another, Vico felt that this cyclical development of the ideal eternal history is not imposed on man externally, but rather is a product of his own doing.

Vico says, “that which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same.”²¹ However, he fails to incorporate a rational view of history, and, indeed, opposes the logicism and mathematicism of Descartes.²² Only through history, Vico claimed, could we find “real” truth. Cassirer carries forth in his logic of the cultural sciences the ideal of Vico, wherein man becomes both the architect and builder in the construction of life through culture and symbolic forms; however, in addition, he includes the mathematics and science that Vico opposed.

As opposed to the natural sciences and the social sciences, the human sciences cannot be studied objectively, for the human sciences are dynamic and evolving. Like poetry and history, the whole of the humanities bring to life human expression; to study the humanities is to study the means of human expression in all its depth and breadth. Despite being expressed *through* objects, humanities are more than a sparse, “colorless”, objective perspective. Rather, they are “a perception of the world as containing inanimate things and the perception of the world in terms of expressive qualities—the trustworthy,

²¹ Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science*. Quoted in Marcus. *Vico and Plato*. P. 107

²² SMC. P. 103.

fruitful, friendly or terrifying.”²³ Through these expressions, we find the specifically “human world”—the world of culture. Cassirer called this *Kulturwissenschaft* (science of culture), not in agreement with Rickert and Wildeband of the Baden school of neo-Kantianism, but rather—according to Donald Philip Verene—in alignment with Aby Warburg and the Warburg Library for the Science of Culture and the ideal of “universal humanity” which was “the spirit of that institution”.²⁴

Giambattista Vico opposed theories that depended too heavily on rationalism, especially those of natural rights, nonetheless, Cassirer finds a basis for universal ethics in Vico’s thought. Vico says, “we can return to the origin of the branches of human knowledge and, finally, can obtain a criterion for recognizing the true. God knows all things because He contains within himself the elements from which He synthesizes them, whereas man strives to know them by analysis. Thus human knowledge is a kind of dissection of the works of nature.” Cassirer was too steeped in the tenor of the Enlightenment not to embrace universal laws of natural rights, even if, during the Enlightenment these were grounded in mathematical laws. Despite Vico’s opposition to the rational and mathematical principle of universality, he was not opposed to universal rights *per se*. Holding to the humanist tradition, and a concept of universalism that comes out of the Enlightenment, Cassirer would agree with Vico that universalism rooted in transcendental concepts, such as those found in mathematics, offers no solidity for bringing it to bear on real-world problems. Stephen Bronner offers this statement regarding this distinction:

“In reality, however, such universalism is not universal at all: it lacks reciprocity, an open discourse, and a concern with protecting the individual from the arbitrary

23 Krois. Cassirer: Symbol, Form and History. P. 124

24 LCS. Translator’s introduction. P. xviii-xix

exercise of power: That is what differentiates Enlightenment universalism from its imitators, provides it with a self-critical quality, and enables it to contest Eurocentrism and the prevalent belief in a ‘clash of civilizations.’”²⁵

Cassirer states the same idea in this way, that there are "general binding supra-individual, supra-state, supranational ethical claims."²⁶ Through culture and the symbolic forms, Cassirer argues universalism from the standpoint of a “common humanity” as the basis for an ethical critique of culture. It is through the participation in the co-construction of human culture and the ability to create in this way that brings all humans to equality.

Here we begin to see how the cultural sciences enveloping language, myth, art, and religion work together with the idea of self-knowledge to create for Cassirer a unified concept of the “truth of the whole.” Only through man’s expression in the forms of language, art, myth, and religion can we begin to understand man as both a logical and pre-logical being. If we relegate man only to the realm of science or social science, and observe him through logical categories, we eliminate all of the human expression that creates the human world. It is the synthesis of the symbolic interplay between the logical and pre-logical forms of human expression where the truth emerges. The functional relationship unites these two sides of man to give us more than meaning—to give us greater understanding. Thus, in Kantian terms, Cassirer transforms the “how do we know?” to “how do bring meaning to experience?” and finds the answer in a synthesis of cultural forms. Clearly, however, for Cassirer, the “understanding” that expresses itself culturally begins on an individual level, and each individual expression contributes to the whole.

25 Bronner. P. 50

26 SMC. P. 61

Kant: Self Knowledge and Courage

In the humanist tradition of Plato and Vico, self-knowledge becomes accessible through the mere observation of and interaction with the world. For Cassirer, this presents an opportunity for people then to utilize the tenants of the Enlightenment of progress and human advancement with self-knowledge through the symbolic forms of culture in shaping a world in alignment with ethical ideals of humanity based on freedom and equality. Yet, neither Vico nor Plato address the question of why people should be so concerned with self-knowledge. After all, introspection and self-evaluation are difficult—they are chores! Is it not much easier to do what you are told to do, to live in a state of blissful self-ignorance? His roots deep in Kant, Cassirer turns again to his mentor for the link in the humanistic chain to respond to this objection.

Embodying the ethos of the Enlightenment, Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung* addressed the question of the proper use of reason to lift man out of his self-incurred immaturity, where "immaturity is man's inability to make use of his understanding without guidance of another"²⁷ and was "momentous for the internal development of German idealism."²⁸ Centering on man's autonomy, and grounding contemporary ideals within that autonomy, enlightenment therefore is the process by which humans learn to be self-directive rather than merely be subservient or obedient to others in the form of "dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use". In this, Kant recognizes that people are, in a sense ignorant of their own ignorance, because this immaturity has become "almost second nature. [Man] has even grown fond of it and is really incapable for the time being of using his own understanding."²⁹ It is through the free use of public reason that man

27 Kant. P. 54

28 KLTP. 223.

29 Kant. P. 54

grows out of this immaturity. With his cry of *sapere aude!* Kant struck a blow against the irrationalism which sought to diminish his idealism. Yet each epoch, each generation, each nation must come to its own intellectual maturity within the social and political boundaries offered. Thus this motto was an ongoing plea for the whole of human interaction and history: Dare to know, break out continuously from our self-incurred slumber, progress toward “spirit’s autonomous consciousness of itself and of its task,” and embrace the process of “becoming in the spiritual sense.”³⁰

However, in Kant's critical philosophy, the relationship between enlightenment, freedom, and reason could be secured only if critical thought could establish the formal limits of reason. Reason itself, if not held in check, threatens to be overpowering. Kant describes reason with this metaphor: “The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space.”³¹ The intoxicating power of reason resides in its overwhelming drive toward limitless expansion. Humans question through multiple faculties, and use reason to find their answers; we know that every new category created in response to a question may potentially be scrutinized with infinitely further analyses. Kant proceeds to develop statutes counter to the limitless use of reason by establishing the boundaries beyond which reason ought not venture. Universal enlightenment and emancipation of a general humanity is ultimately grounded in the postulation of a natural reason, which, given the opportune conditions, will be able to fulfill its inner telos of self-realization.

Just as Cassirer moved Kant’s schema to the realm of culture, he also re-visioned human freedom based on a cultural participation, rather than, as for Kant, a participation

30 KLT. P. 228

31 Kant. Kritik der reinen Vernunft in Werke, vol. 3. P. 39

in human rationality. In his lecture on "Descartes, Leibniz, and Vico," Cassirer recognizes that each historical epoch has its own form of government. Cassirer says: "The form appropriate to the present development of mankind is a democracy or a monarchy in which legal rights are conceded to every individual because each individual is regarded as a representative of *common humanity*"³². This "common humanity," for Cassirer incorporates the universal sense that "reason" does for Kant.

For Cassirer it is the realm of culture where man gains the tools necessary to test and prove his freedom. The symbolic forms are the forms through which all humans (thus "universal humanity") stand on equal ground, in their ability to create these cultural forms. We see also shadows of Plato here as well. Judgment entails not only the wisdom of distinguishing means and attaining ends, but also of common, or universal belief. Through these, Plato grasped the ever-changing flow of social and political particulars, and Cassirer grasps historical uncertainty, yet the certainty of the use of symbolic forms.

For Kant, judgment, despite its shifting certainties, can be a real source of truth. Regulated by the ideas of reason, unchanging rational norms are necessary to our social and political experiences, as the backdrop for the application of reason. Reason itself cannot constitute any cultural, political or aesthetic standpoint. In a sense, with reason's relinquishment of constituting rational views in these realms, and relegating that endeavor to the hands of judgment, reason acknowledges the shifting uncertainties—the inherent lack of universality—in politics, aesthetics and culture. When someone sees an artwork as beautiful, a piece of legislation as good, or a cultural tradition as endearing, these invoke a universal voice about the good, the beautiful and the endearing, yet, none

32 SMC. P. 106, emphasis mine.

of these instances can be proven as such.³³ These various voices that reflect a universal sentiment in a particular experience is essentially controversial; multiple views are always rationally justifiable, yet inherently at odds. Enlightenment consists in freeing ourselves from our “self-imposed immaturity” by thinking for ourselves, but also thinking *of* others. Instead of following prescribed doctrines and dogmas, Kant encourages us to free ourselves from our self-centeredness through which we limit ourselves personal experience alone. Thus, judgment requires discernment of complexity, such as the set of skills we utilize in aesthetic interpretation—the sorting of empirical evidence, decision making, in learning to evaluate ends and means for interpretations, influences and ethical implications for humanity. Judging thus becomes the discernment of a universal rule to a particular case, the parsing down of a universal to a particular.

This sort of judgment that Kant asks of people to liberate themselves from their own immaturity can thus be contrasted with the passive acceptance of thoughts that are not rigorously questioned and chosen. Unlike day-dreaming, “feeling” or mental laziness, Kant encourages critical examination of thoughts, conjoined with an ethical standpoint against which the thoughts can be evaluated. “This turnabout, this ‘reflection’ ... represents an act of self-assertion”³⁴ It is through practice—the exercising of our judgment—that we grow in the skill of its use, grow in self-confidence when making decisions when we are uncertain about either influences or outcomes.

Much as philosophy acts as a bridge between the various symbolic forms, Kant contends that judgment bridges understanding and reason because it lacks its own “realm

33 Kant Critique of Judgment 214/49: “the taste of reflection ... imputes [the universal validity of its judgments] to everyone ..., without the persons that judge disputing as to the possibility of such a claim, although in particular cases they cannot agree as to [its] correct application.”

34 PSF IV. P. 33

of legislation”. In making a determination as to the progress or constraints of technology on the ethical state of the modern world, or opining that the state of verbal and written communication has deteriorated through emailing, texting and instant messaging, judgment is faculty that spans the particular experience with a larger context bringing these two different and often opposite perspectives.

Choice between this or that, one opinion over another requires judgment. It is only judgment that allows us to move among or between different points of view, perspectives or cultural standpoints or values. If one is steeped in the language of Dickens, abbreviated text messages will appear inane; if one has become accustomed to the “idk” and “ur” of modern communication, flowery description becomes tedious and irrelevant. The nuances of taste experienced by a wine connoisseur or chef will appear extravagant to one who is satisfied with fare from McDonalds. Business people or quantitative statisticians find art or mysticism irrational; people raised in urban settings have fear of open spaces, people raised in agricultural areas feel claustrophobic in city-settings. The ability to assess these differences requires not only a solid use of judgment, which comes with practice, but it also requires the confidence in one’s own use of reason. In a liberal society, people must make ensure that their capacity to judge is well-developed in order to maneuver between different cultures, relationships and experiences. Judgment is essential to the ability to choose what type of life one wants to live—or in Cassirer’s terms, what sort of world one would choose to experience.

The judgment coin, has however, a second side which compliments “sapere aude.” While making decisions based on personal experience, one must automatically be comparing against a judgment of the *other’s* experience. It is the conscious use of this flip

side which mediates prejudice, or quite literally, prejudgment. In terms of Nicholas Cusanus, this is one use of learned ignorance: the self is always making comparisons of personal experience against a whole of which it knows next to nothing. Of what use is a prejudice, in the face of ignorance to all things? In the same way, Cassirer would place symbolic forms as cultural expressions in this same vein. As each person learns to truly think for him or herself, this simultaneously frees us from the subjective conditions by which we constrain our thought to our individual experience rather than considering humanity as a whole.

Judgment in this sense becomes not just about discernment itself, not only about distinction and classification, but rather the prior decision to see those distinctions and divisions in a wider perspective, in relation to as many (approaching the infinite) as possible. In this way, we approach the “truth” of the thing, the “truth” of the situation or relationship. The more perspectives that can be integrated into the functional relationship of the particular, the more closely do we approach its completeness. For Kant, this question ascribes to the individual a moral responsibility: each person’s moral autonomy, their ability to make rational choices and act rationally in the world, becomes a “law unto itself”. For Cassirer, the moral autonomy begins in the attention of thought to the situation, in its determination and invitation to the perspective that is chosen.

This now brings us full-circle, back to the question of why a philosophy of culture might be concerned with the question of self-knowledge. If every individual contributes to the flow of culture, then it behooves “humanity” that each contribution express itself according to the highest ethical ideals. This becomes possible as each individual becomes willing to “have the courage to know” and to examine his or her own thoughts and

actions against an ethical ideal. The “ethical ideal” for Cassirer is not as specific and determined as Kant’s moral imperative. Rather, it is embodied in the totality of Cassirer’s philosophy of culture, wherein culture itself becomes a self-perpetuating ethical ideal. Cassirer’s ethics can be summed up in two ways, both of which are active principles; if we take the admonition of *sapere aude* seriously, we can proactively construct them within our individual and cultural consciousness. The first principle requires an individual to *guard against* attacks on reason, and the second requires an individual to actively *seek reconciliation* in his or her lapses of reason. In Kant, Cassirer unites the legacy of humanism found in Plato and Vico, but requires of man a level of responsibility with the “power” of reflection and cultural expression.

Further, it is in this knowing that we develop the certainty of ourselves wherein we find the courage to act with reason, to take a stand towards upholding human dignity, and to maintain the hope of an ethical standard between human beings wherein the treatment of each other does not deteriorate into violence, terror, and loss of power. In this sense Cassirer stands firmly on the side that values knowledge for its own sake, for knowledge itself is the mechanism by which we obtain the strength to inform our decisions or actions towards an ethical standard that encompasses the moral implication of relationships.

For Cassirer, the first element to be guarded against is the irrational expression of the destructive components of mythical consciousness. It is each person’s responsibility to uncover those propensities in his or her own consciousness, bringing them to the light of rationality where they can be exposed. While mythical consciousness is, by virtue of

its origins,³⁵ necessarily pre-logical (irrational), it is by no means a destructive element in and of itself. Rather, it is an ideational form, just like language, art, or science; it is a method that the human mind uses to give form to a way of knowing.

“For the mind, only that can be visible which has some definite form; but every form of existence has its source in some peculiar way of seeing, some intellectual formulation and intuition of meaning.”³⁶ Indeed, in its own way, mythical thought strives toward logical discernment through minute and specific classifications. We see ultimately a preponderance toward something similar to rational thought, but its manner of expression is different:

The results of these first attempts to analyze and systematize the world of sense-experience are far different from ours. But the processes themselves are very similar; they express the same desire of human nature to come to terms with reality, to live in an ordered universe, and to overcome the chaotic state in which things and thoughts have not yet assumed a definite shape and structure.³⁷

Thus it is not mythical thought as an antithesis of rationality that makes it dangerous. Rather the danger is twofold: first, humans’ suppression of that which they do not understand (their own irrational impulses) often expresses itself destructively, making it seem as though the eruption of the “dark unconscious” is dangerous; second, that which lies hidden is easily manipulable, through modern myths. However, when grasped and balanced with reason and other “intellectual, ethical, and artistic” forces, the overpowering nature of the mythical consciousness becomes subdued.

We shall begin to see how the cultural sciences enveloping language, myth, art, and religion work together with the idea of self-knowledge to create for Cassirer a unified

³⁵See Cassirer. *Language and Myth*. Pgs. 5-8.

³⁶ LM. P. 8

³⁷ MS. P. 15

concept of the “truth of the whole.” Only through man’s expression in the forms of language, art, myth, and religion can we begin to understand man as both a logical and pre-logical being. If we relegate man only to the realm of science or social science, and observe him through logical categories, we eliminate all of the human expression that creates the human world. It is the synthesis of the symbolic interplay between the logical and pre-logical forms of human expression where the truth emerges.

For Cassirer, the essay and *What is Enlightenment* represents the apex of the philosophy of the Enlightenment because they clearly expressing the fundamental conviction that the historical progress of mankind coincides with the “ever more-exact apprehension and the ever-deepening understanding of the thought of freedom.”³⁸ As Donald Verene states, “since the thought of action includes the thought of freedom”, we must take seriously the use of [this] Kantian essay as incorporated into the ideas behind symbolic forms, and utilized by Cassirer to “educate man toward freedom”.³⁹

Conclusion

For Vico, as well as such critical theorists as Horkheimer and Adorno, reasoning itself, at the service of philosophy, has become corrupted by its own power, and weakened the hand that wields it—become the barbarism of rationality. Here we see the paradox of philosophy embodied in humans: through modes of finite expression, humans seek to articulate and manifest that which in them is infinite. All humans may reason, but not all humans bear the burden and responsibility of true philosophy. For,

... philosophical knowledge as the “self knowledge of reason”... does not create new symbolic forms, it does not found in this sense a new creative

³⁸ KLT, p. 227

³⁹ KLT xiv

modality-- but it grasps the earlier modalities as that which they are: as characteristic symbolic forms. As long as philosophy still lies with these forms, as long as it still builds worlds next to and above them, it has not yet truly grasped itself.⁴⁰

For Cassirer, whose *man* is an animal symbolicum rather than animal rationale, it is not the use of reason that is the entrance to a universal humanity, not a grounds through which to claim human rights. Following Vico, it is man's participation in culture that determines the grounds for justice and equality. The symbolic forms of myth, religion, language, art—those human expressions that we all share—become the doorway to humanity's mutually shared coexistence—the creation of a “common humanity”. In this sense, philosophy observes and enunciates the “unwritten law of public conscience” that was exemplified in the perturbation and upheaval over the outcome of the Dreyfus Trial.⁴¹

Cassirer interpreted the Kantian ethic as a call to action, rather than a passive mind-game. Friedrich Albert Lange, also a noted Kant Scholar, resigned from teaching in 1858 when the German Government forbade educators to participate in political activities. Sounding like a pre-cursor to liberalism, he is noted as saying (quoting John Toland), “Let all men freely speak what they think, without being ever branded or punished but for wicked practices, and leaving the speculative opinions to be confuted or approved by whoever pleases; then you are sure to hear the whole truth, and till then very scantily, or obscurely, if at all.”⁴² Clearly, to these Kant Scholars, there is not the passive

40 PSF IV. P. 226

41 As Hannah Arendt describes, “the doctrine of equality before the law was still so firmly emplant in the conscience of the civilized world that a single miscarriage of justice could provoke public indignation from Moscow to New York.... The wrong done to a single Jewish officer in France was able to draw from the rest of the world a more vehement and united reaction than all the persecutions of German Jews a generation later.” (Origins of Totalitarianism. P. 91)

42 Lange, F.A. The History of Materialism.

acquiescence to an unacceptable reality that Marx saw in Kant, but rather a commitment to action based on the moral teachings of Kant. No less was this the case for Ernst Cassirer. Reason's ideals must, for Cassirer become actualized: man must actively seek to form his world according to his highest ideals; symbolic forms that give expression to man's thoughts shape culture and cultural interactions.

For the task of philosophy, for Cassirer, is precisely to observe this formation and creation in its totality, and then, through an understanding of the past, and a willingness to look courageously into the depths of the soul of humanity, to offer up the ideal (as Cassirer understands through humanism) and provide the ethical grounding to move forward toward that ideal. Thus philosophy finds itself active in the formation of the world, yet outside the "work" or the "experience," that humans provide, which solidifies in culture. Thus, philosophy, Cassirer indicates, never can itself be a symbolic form, but rather must be the "objective" watchman who surveys and advises, yet is not the active subject in the process of becoming.

Yet, conceptually, there remains the problem of abstraction: If philosophy is the discipline designated to observe the unity of culture, then who are the designated philosophers? Are they the ivory tower academicians? Who brings philosophy into the world? The realm of symbolic forms—language, art, religion—is not an abstraction and does not exist for Cassirer in the solitary musings of men reading and writing books. The world of symbolic forms is constructed through a world of real people who grapple with real concerns, real problems. The greatest of these is the daily struggle of the human soul toward its own freedom and dignity.

The struggle may be embodied in general malaise and alienation, isolation and solitude; it may be expressed in violence, in discrimination, in oppression, or in simple dismissal or invisibility. With Hegel and Kant, Cassirer stands firmly on the side of the progression of human consciousness seeking its freedom through culture. With Kant, Cassirer encourages man to have the courage to seek enlightenment, to have the courage to learn, and to look into his own soul to see what is there, to see what is expressed through work and experience. Man must utilize the tools of his own making—each individual expression of symbolic form, which enters the somatic flow of cultural vitality—and each of us must strive for the highest ideal of humanity rooted in dignity of each individual, which in its wholeness progresses toward the ideal of humanity's dignity. This chapter concludes with Cassirer's so eloquent statement of this precept:

...the course of human knowledge leads from "representation" to "signification," from the schematism of perception to the symbolic grasp of pure relationships and orders of meaning. All these orders, no matter how absolute we may take them to be, existing in and of themselves, are there "for" man only to the extent that he participates in their development. Man's life in them cannot consist of passive awareness; his life is bound up with their production so that he raises these orders up into his consciousness by means of this course of knowledge. In this act of becoming conscious and of making himself conscious we do not find the power of fate which governs organic processes. Here we attain the realm of freedom.

Indeed, it is precisely this balance with "all forces" —including myth—that contributes to the making of an ideal, ethical human, expressed through the medium of culture. Uniting reason in particular with a universal understanding embodied in language and myth, man has the potential to reach a transcendental moment wherein new thoughts may be expressed toward a cultural ideal. This is possible through a "temporal direction of the will,"⁴³ wherein man orients himself and his thoughts through "review, preview,

43 Krois. Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. P. 167

and overview”⁴⁴ toward that ethical ideal, as embodied in the transcendent moment. This is for Cassirer “the unity, completeness and inner consistency of a person’s character,” which is molded with a “basic direction of its feeling and willing, not in a single feeling or impulse.”⁴⁵ The conscious directing of one’s own thoughts and actions becomes for Cassirer the basis of culture as the ultimate ethical ideal. He says:

Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man’s progressive self liberation. Language, art, religion, science are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new power, the power to build up a world of his own, an ideal world. Philosophy cannot give up its search for fundamental unity in this ideal world. But it does not confound disunity with simplicity. It does not overlook the tensions and frictions, the strong contrasts and deep conflicts between the various powers of man. These cannot be reduced to a common denominator. They tend in different directions and obey different principles. But this multiplicity and disparateness does not denote discord or disharmony. All these functions complete and complement one another. Each one opens a new horizon and shows us a new aspect of humanity. The dissonance is in harmony with itself; the contraries are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent: “harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and a lyre.”⁴⁶

However, to fully understand the integration within Cassirer’s ideal of self-

knowledge, we must dig down one more layer. Cassirer’s adherence to humanistic ideals balanced his potentially egoistic, self-centered concept of self-knowledge; furthermore his re-integration of objective-knowledge contributed to his understanding of the whole. “Without the claim to an independent, objective, and autonomous truth, not only philosophy, but also each particular field of knowledge, natural science as well as the humanities, would lose their stability and their sense.”⁴⁷

44 Krois. Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. P. 167

45 Krois. Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. P. 167

46 EM. P. 244

47 SMC. P. 61

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Ethical Implications of Symbolic Forms

Life, reality, being, existence are nothing but different terms referring to one and the same fundamental fact. These terms do not describe a fixed, rigid, substantial thing. They are to be understood as names of a process. Man is the only being that is not only engaged in this process but who becomes conscious of it; myth, religion, art, science are nothing else than the different steps made by man in his consciousness, in his reflective interpretation of life. Each of them is a mirror of our human experience which, as it were, possesses its own angle of refraction. Philosophy, as the highest and most comprehensive mode of reflection strives to understand them all.

-Ernst Cassirer¹

For the highest objective truth that is accessible to the spirit is ultimately the form of its own activity.

-Ernst Cassirer²

Introduction

Understanding Cassirer's concept of the symbol, and its underlying meaning, lies at the heart of understanding his approach to consciousness, idealism, or ethics broadly defined. However, these ideas inform all aspects of Cassirer's root questions regarding philosophical anthropology and the possibility of freedom through redefining and extending the limits for human actions. This standpoint, from which Cassirer approaches every problem, continually leads back to a need to continually raise traditional philosophic questions about dualisms like subject/object, one/many, or finitude/infinity.

Thus far, I have asserted that an understanding of symbolic forms which integrates Cassirer's peripheral historical and philosophical work draws out a complex and expanded meaning beyond the common understanding of symbolic forms that is derived solely from his magnum opus. In accomplishing this, I have demonstrated the

¹ SMC. P. 194

² PSF 1. P. 111

unity of logic and mythical consciousness in the making of symbolic forms; I have shown the Renaissance roots of symbolic forms through Nicolas Cusanus; I have shown the influence of critical idealism on the core meaning of symbolic forms as action and responsibility.

A second assertion that I have made is that, in this expanded and complex understanding of symbolic forms, there arises an opportunity to reinterpret the Enlightenment categories of progress and autonomy through the lens of symbolic forms, through which humans might learn a new method of discernment that questions insistence on racial or cultural dominance. What remains for this conclusion is to demonstrate the linking of these two assertions through the inversion of dualistic thinking and otherness, to answer the question: *What does symbolic forms offer which brings humans to a new level of relating? Or, How does symbolic forms change the currently-perceived nature of human interaction?*

Cassirer clearly indicates that his project situates the nature of humans away from that of an animal rationale to an animal symbolicum. Through perception, above all creatures, humans form their worlds through symbols, mediating experience and reality through the use of representations. Everything humans experience must be named, designating its special attributes, setting it apart from other things by emphasizing its position in space and time, and carving each thing out of its interconnected relationship with all else. What is thus named is accorded meaning which is established through the filters, experiences and expectations of the namer. In this way, symbols deceive the mind because they are associated with a primary meaning that stands alone, disconnected. Having thus personalized the meaning of the symbolic representation, not only meaning,

but value is given to representation. Consequently, each representation must be defended against any contrasting meaning and value. Any sense of unity, inter-connection or a vision that sees differently must be overcome. On the one hand, Cassirer acknowledges this as human nature, but he insists, on the other hand, that the battle over meaning and values need not dominate human nature. He says, “The problem is not how to break through or in any way lessen the force of strict laws of nature in the realm of empirical events. The problem is to discover and develop a new viewpoint, to set up a new standard which cannot be reduced to that of empirical causality but which on the other hand is in no sense in conflict with it.”³ Thus, the lesson of symbolic forms is that new perceptions can be learned, and with it a change in meaning and values.

Our perspective must evolve. *Connection* to others (as opposed to separation from others) is the basis for genuinely ethical attitudes and actions. Ethical precepts of the past are becoming the imperatives for survival in the future. We must now choose conscious ethical evolution. This evolution requires self-expression through meaningful work (I-action-work). The principles that we learn from symbolic forms can be used as guides to overcoming separation, reconciling difference, and giving meaning to everyday experience. These principles can assist us in navigating the complexities of ethical decision making, and can point us toward moral action, transforming stagnant mores of the 20th century into living, creative spiritual expressions in the 21st century. Each self-identity becomes enriched and expanded through interaction with different belief systems, cultures, faiths, norms, and values. As people open and themselves to multifarious experiences, their own center becomes more secure, while their outward expression becomes more multi-dimensional and diverse. Ethics becomes a project of

3 DIMP. P. 198

breaking down internal and external boundaries which prevent people from perceiving from a variety of perspectives. Self-knowledge becomes a means for responsible action in collaboration with others and the environment.

In chapter 2, I discussed the evolution of the understanding and conceptualization of symbolic forms versus how Cassirer himself understood his project. This is a critical step toward answering the question why symbolic forms are important today. The symbolic form is the keystone that upholds Cassirer's entire ethical project. It is both praxis and poesis of ethical behavior, tying together thought with action on an individual and cultural level. Without this as the starting point toward a clear path of Cassirer's project, it is easy to stray, and to misuse and misunderstand the term symbolic form. It is only in a "correct" understanding of symbolic form that we can come to relate it with the entire ethical project that is at the heart of Cassirer's work. "The true criterion of this value lies not in what the social and political community accomplishes for the needs of the individual, for the security of his empirical existence, but in what it signifies as an instrument in his education into freedom."⁴

Cassirer's emphasis on unity and universality resounds in no way of uniformity—quite the opposite. Cassirer seeks the unity of differences with an understanding that it is only in their unity that reality takes on its multifarious hues and myriad dimensions. First we return to the problem of alienation, and demonstrate Cassirer's *inversion* of the sources of alienation—dualism and externalization. Then, we demonstrate the new possibility that this presents for changing the approach, perception, and attention that each person brings to any interaction—allowing a corresponding shift in thought, and its resultant action. In answering these questions through this process, we come to a new

4 Kant's life and thought, p. 224

stage in “man’s progressive self-liberation”⁵ and show a new direction of thought for humankind, which Drucilla Cornell eloquently describes: “Humanity as an ideal must be *thought* beyond all given representations even if it can only be brought to earth within them. If humanity could be collapsed into any set of historical symbols or representations, then any group excluded from the same would not be able to re-imagine the ideal differently.”⁶

Cassirer’s Critique of Cultural Decline

“As soon as life progresses beyond the purely biological level to the level of mind, and mind in its turn progresses to the level of culture, an *inner conflict* appears. The *entire evolution of culture* consists in the growth, resolution and emergence of this conflict...”⁷ So begins Simmel’s *The Conflict of Modern Culture*. Immediately we see that inner conflict for Simmel is an inevitable, unavoidable, natural progression of human life and interaction, leading only to a bleak and irresolvable continual conflict between a person’s inner world and the external world of culture. Upon its expression, the life-spirit becomes alienated from itself with no possibility of resolution. Yet this statement of modern culture rests at the end of Simmel’s thought; the journey began in his *Philosophy of Money*, developed in *The Concept and Tragedy of Culture*, and ended in *The Conflict of Modern Culture*. We shall see through this journey that for Simmel, and subsequent cultural theorists such as Heidegger, this inevitably leads to reification of the subject and is regarded as a “natural” progression of the human spirit and an ahistorical, ungrounded

5 EM, 228

6 Cornell, *Defending Ideals*. P. 96 It is interesting to note that Cornell came to this idea over 5 years prior to her brilliant work on Cassirer.

7 Emphasis added.

rendition of the causes of alienation in culture. And it is precisely this “inevitability” that Cassirer questions, and where Cassirer begins his critique of cultural decline.

It is through these works that Simmel develops his concept of culture as a dynamic process between the “soul” and its expression in material forms—on the surface, similar to Cassirer’s own description. This dynamic process entails both the objectification of the soul outward as subjectivity externalized and the interpretation of that externalization returning back inwardly to the soul as an educational dialectic. Here, Simmel relies on an understanding of expressionist painting to elucidate his theory, which he develops in *The Conflict of Modern Culture*.

The experience of mankind generally includes hopelessness at the limited nature of their objective expressions. In this expression the tendency has not been reconciliation but an exaggerated reminder of precisely the limits of man. With each expression, man is reminded of his littleness in the objective reality, as compared to the expansive nature of his spirit; the expression itself “threatens and suppresses the spontaneity, the pure self-movement of the I, instead of the increasing and heightening it.”⁸ Cassirer opposes this viewpoint and provides an alternative, which brings spirit in unity with itself precisely through its expression.

What results from Simmel’s formulation of the problem, in *The Tragedy of Culture*, is an inner conflict: “The progress of culture continually presents man with new gifts; but the individual subject sees himself more and more excluded from enjoying them.”⁹ This then leads to “cultural pessimism” and the hopelessness and despair of the self as a victim of its own expressions and creations, burdened with their objectivity

8 LCS P. 104-105

9 LCS. P. 105

rather than being infused with the vitality of the expansive nature of creation. “The I no longer draws from culture the consciousness of its own power, but only the certainty of its own intellectual powerlessness.”¹⁰ For Simmel this is the affliction that burdens man; he despairs, and spirals into an unredeemable dualism between the flowing, living, expressive, creative, expansive nature of the soul and the time-bound, stationary, inflexible, constricting nature of the objects of its creation: “The meaninglessness and confinedness of life strikes you often as so radical and inescapable that you totally despair about it. The only thing that elevates you above this is to grasp this and to despair about it.”¹¹

At the heart of this theory lies the personal expression of the individual through¹² expressionist painting, which Simmel lays out in the *Conflict of Modern Culture*. Traditional modes of painting—depicting life as people see it, not as people experience it—were in no way sufficient to express the roiling emotions of angst, anxiety and turmoil that stirred beneath the surface of individuals in the modern-industrial society. With traditional painting there was an “all too indiscriminate neglect of the agitation...we have become more individual, searching, homeless; we are formed more flowingly, the self of us all rises up close by. Thus the lifeblood of the new artistic statements springs much less than before from the medium’s sources, from the formal energy. Form is no longer the only means one requires to speak, to draw attention; in fact it is no longer even a means that one especially needs.”¹³ The so-called “conflict of modern culture” required the severance of the old with the new and the discovery of new and different ways to

10 LCS P. 105

11 Swedberg & Reich – Georg Simmel’s Aphorisms. In *Theory, Culture & Society* 27(1) P. 42

12 This is a sentiment that Simmel shares with others in the Lebensphilosophie tradition, namely Dilthey and Bergson.

13 Bloch, Ernst. *The Spirit of Utopia*. P. 27

express feelings. No longer was the goal to duplicate reality in art as in photographs, rather the goal was to convey the artists' inner reality in all its confusion and distortion—a reflection of the alienation, isolation and fragmentation caused by social and economic structures that turn people into mindless workers, cogs in a machine that cares not for their humanity.

Creativity in this manner opposes the objective and ultimate in favor of the immediate, the subjective, and the individual. Artists celebrate content over form, overexerting subjectivity; they became free to express abstract subjectivity through abstract form. Munch, Picasso, Kandinsky, even Kafka rejected a rational, commodified world and found new ways to perceive and recreate it in their own image:

Edward Munch's painting *The Scream* is, of course, a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety. It will here be read as an embodiment not merely of the expression of that kind of affect but, even more, as a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself, which seems to have dominated much of what we call high modernism but to have vanished away -- for both practical and theoretical reasons -- in the world of the postmodern. The very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that "emotion" is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling.¹⁴

Unbound by a necessity of rational explanation, these subjective expressions were ends in themselves. Any attempt at explanation reified the work, serving only to objectify it, thus artists denied all attempts at "understanding" their work. "Creative expression!" was the battle cry as they foraged further and further inward for the substance of expression.

14 Jameson. P. 11-12

This emergence of subjective artistic expression culminates in two radical possibilities for art. First, the artist can attempt to break through the objective experience to express only pure subjectivity in the form of raw emotion connected to the depths of the meaning of experiences. Such works need not have an external referent that is identifiable in the painting. These types of works in their most radical form go beyond even the concept *abstract*; in order for there to be an abstraction, there must be an object that is being abstracted. Works such as Kandinsky's *On White*, Man Ray's *The Misunderstood*, or André Breton's *Constellations* represent this depth of subjective expression. The work offers no association with objective reality, nor does the title offer a hint to the meaning underlying the paintings. Vibrant colors, random lines, and the dissociative interplay of components bring meaning to the work by abolishing all possibility of specificity of meaning. All interpretation, all perception varies with the person viewing the art. The individual is central to this type of art-formation: each person stands at the center of his or her own interpretation of the work. Yet, with the grounding theory that all expression is alienating, regardless of how it is conveyed, the end product always lies desolate and unrecognizable, uninterpretable and thereby meaningless.



Figure 4: Kandinsky, *On White*

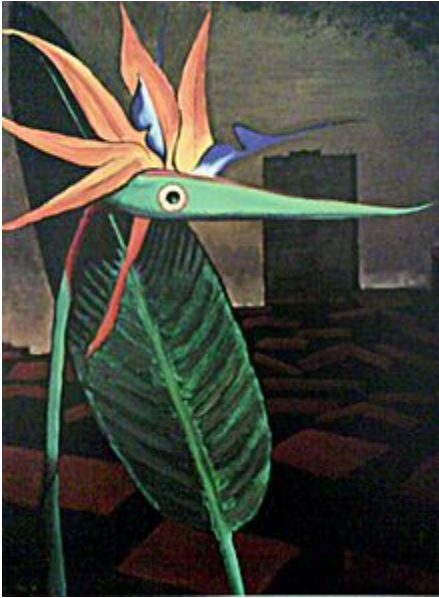


Figure 5: Man Ray, The Misunderstood

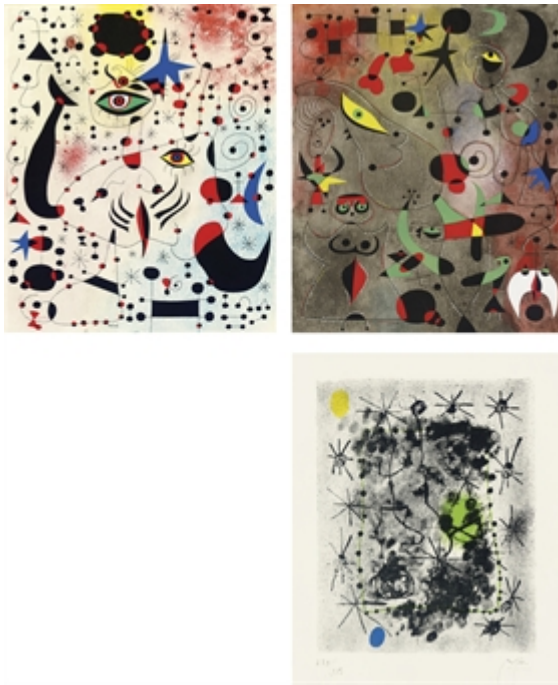


Figure 6: Andre Breton, Constellations

The second possibility for subjective expression lies in the artist expressing not pure subjectivity but a re-interpretation of objective reality through subjective filters. The artist here maintains that there is an objective reality, but that it can be understood and expressed in ways that neither resemble the objective reality nor reflect it as a replica (as traditional art strove to do). Picasso demonstrates his mastery of this in his cubist phase with *Le guitariste* and *The Three Musicians*, which both clearly represent people and instruments but must engage the imagination to identify the art with reality. The movement ushered in through the expressionist heritage speaks to the alienation and emptiness of the subjective experience. Cubes, fragmented lines, and disjointed shapes that make up these types of artwork depict the “cries of the individual subject facing repression and threats to its autonomy, inner life and values.”¹⁵

In this way, the totality of the inner, subjective world reaches out into life through the creative process, enhancing individual life. The subjective spirit remains at the center, pushing the limits of objective experience, and in so doing exerts dominance over the objective spirit while cultivating its own fruitfulness. In this very act, however, the inner life of spirit becomes alienated from itself, creating without escape a self-fulfilling cycle of objectification and alienation. Simmel recognizes this trend in his own work: “objects in their development have a logic of their own--not a conceptual one, nor a natural one, but purely as cultural works of man; bound by their own laws, they turn away from the direction by which they could join the personal development of human souls.”¹⁶ Yet, this

15 Kellner, Doug. Expressionism and Rebellion; in *Passion and Rebellion: the Expressionist Heritage*. Bronner, Stephen Eric and Kellner, Douglas (eds). New York: Columbia University Press. 1988. P. 28.

16 Simmel *On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture*. P.43

fulfillment merely represents the hopeless inevitability of the alienating effects of existence.¹⁷



Figure 7: Pablo Picasso, Three Musicians



Figure 8: Pablo Picasso, Le Guitariste

¹⁷ We shall see shortly that the Frankfurt School situates this alienation in capitalist industrialization, as a response to the oppressive affects of the objectivizing nature of capitalism. In this sense, for the Frankfurt School, the alienation is not inevitable, but rests on the economic milieu.

Finally through such movements as Dadaism and Surrealism, the final dagger is thrust between objective understanding of the subject and meaningless expression by exposing the “latent content” and “secret depths” of history that “disappear under the maze of events.”¹⁸ Surrealists were called to utilize their “automatism”—their link to the “universal consciousness” to get *beyond* what is immediately apparent in reality and to expose these revelations in art. Breton states, “[Automatism] reveals the real functioning of thought, makes manifest the latent truths which, arising from the abyss, annihilate the lies that have accumulated on the surface.”¹⁹

The purposeful “exploding” of subjectivity in rebellion against convention and tradition, and with the intention of expanding the externally-imposed boundaries of the self, ended in a complete dissolution of the very ideals it was rebelling against. Seeking to expose the meaninglessness and denigration of life through irony and ridicule through its “cretinizing illusions, pitiable self-deceptions, unforgivable pomposities”,²⁰ Dada and its successor, surrealism, attacked society and its values, but became the very things that epitomized the laughability and meaninglessness of that very society by expressing such extremes. Without grounding in history, without an objective point of reference which framed and informed these artistic expressions, the real meaning—the critique, the rebellion, the desire to transform an alienating society—became swept aside by extreme abstraction and relativism. Meaning became lost in the expression itself.

As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well,

18 Breton, Andre. What is Surrealism? Selected Writings. Pathfinder Press: NY. P. 204

19 Breton, Andre. What is Surrealism? Selected Writings. Pathfinder Press: NY. P. 206

20 Breton, Andre. What is Surrealism? Selected Writings. Pathfinder Press: NY. P. 204

since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings -- which it may be better and more accurate, following J.-F. Lyotard, to call "intensities" -- are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria...²¹

Only the artist held the key to meaning, all others could only guess or surmise; art had become totally subjective, but also totally relative and at the same time, devoid of a critical moment.

Yet, within this explosion of subjectivity is the only arena for the combating of the larger societal problem of disenchantment and isolation. Early in his writing, Marcuse notes this:

When the artist, who had demanded that the private self had a right to a life of its own, then steps out into the surrounding world, he endures the curse of a culture in which Idea and reality, art and life, subject and object, stand in stark opposition to one another. He finds no fulfillment in the surrounding world's forms of life with all their limitations; his authentic self (Wesen) and his desires find no resonance there; in solitude he stands over against reality.²²

Marcuse sees in this, however, a revolutionary potential, through the anticipation of the "destructiveness of monopoly capitalism,"²³ and in which the emancipatory potential of society can be captured through the transformation of the aesthetic, releasing reality from the binding nature of artistic constriction and opening up a "horizon of change."²⁴ Yet, even here, Marcuse sees reality as a trap, and artwork the bait that lures people into complacent acceptance of the reality. The revolutionary potential of the aesthetic remains within its own dimension, never to cross into the political potentiality of transforming

21 Jameson. P. 15-16

22 Marcuse, Herbert. *Art and Liberation*, Doug Kellner (ed). Routledge: NY. 2007. P. 4

23 Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Beacon Press: Boston, MA. 1978. P. xi

24 Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Beacon Press: Boston, MA. 1978. P. xi

real societal structures. The form and content of art mimics the form and content of society; life and art are experienced as irrational and arbitrary.²⁵

The modernist tradition is marked by this contradiction. On the one hand, modernism strove to find solutions to the developing alienation, yet, on the other hand, this was accomplished through repressing and ignoring that very alienation. While modernism succeeded in revolutionizing art, it failed to revolutionize society²⁶ and the contradictions became further embedded in people's consciousness, which in turn became rooted in and expressed through societal constructs. Although artists in this vein intended to overcome a sense of a loss of self, and to move powerfully toward its reclaiming, they served only to reinforce a reflection of alienation, further repressing the very subjectivity they were attempting to exert. "The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating."²⁷

The human spirit longs for freedom, for an enrichment of itself through its own expression and interaction with other self-expressive spirits. Yet, by the account of Simmel, the human spirit is doomed to eternal alienation. Is this, then, our only choice—to be condemned with no chance for expression, freedom, and interactions? Similarly to Kant, who became freed of his reliance upon the intellect upon his reading of Rousseau, we must allow a new discovery of human freedom through the "ultimate value of humanity."²⁸ Culture on the one hand permits man to reach beyond his self-imposed

25 See: Franz Kafka's *The Trial* or *The Metamorphosis*.

26 Bronner, Stephen and Kellner, Douglas (eds). *Passion and Rebellion: the Expressionist Heritage. "Expressionism and Rebellion."* Doug Kellner. P. 29 Columbia UP. New York. 1988.

27 Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Beacon Press: Boston, MA. 1978. P. xii

28 LCS. P. 104

limitations and find new expressions through the creations of all mankind; yet precisely in this discovery is his own alienation more permanently and painfully etched into his experience. The more the “I” seeks its own expression, movement, and fulfillment, the more it sees the hopelessness of the task of attainment.

And the root of the problem, is not the alienation *per se*. Rather, it is the separation that the feeling of alienation engenders that inflicts people with fear and hatred. “The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as an instrument of unification. As a part of society it is specifically the sector which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation.”²⁹

In either case, resolution is futile. Expansion only leads to limitation, freedom to oppression.

It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. [It] operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity – so is the worker’s activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.³⁰

In either account, the best that can be hoped for is the creation of a life burdened by its fostering of only pessimism, fear, hopelessness, and powerlessness—“The profound strangeness and enmity that exists between the living and creative process of the soul on the one hand and its contents and creations on the other admits of no settlement and no

29 DeBord, Guy. The Society of the Spectacle.

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>

30 Marx, Karl. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. First Manuscript. P. 30

reconciliation.”³¹ Yet Cassirer’s symbolic forms provide a way of interpreting expression and perspective in such a way as to invert the alienation that is taken for granted in the culture theory of Simmel, and offer a way of re-integrating spirit back into the self, precisely through its expression.

Inverting Dualism

In a society defined through a Cartesian view of truth and reality, wherein “objectivity” begets “factual” knowledge through endless comparisons and delineations, a hierarchy is established. While most people do not—practically—make these judgments in daily interactions, the habit of these determinations has become embedded in the *weltanschauung* of our culture. One response to this, as we saw in chapter 2, is the “explosion” of subjectivity—the embracing and claiming of all expression. Yet, as we also saw, this has not curbed, but enhanced, the hopelessness of humanity, by declaring “there’s no such thing as reality, and there’s also no such thing as a ‘you’ or ‘me’ with sufficient rational ability to know anything about that reality.”³² Nor has acceptance of a need for identity politics changed the nature of oppression.

This reading of symbolic forms undermines that dualism, removing the bulwarks that undergird the cultural foundation of racism, sexism, or any oppression that is rooted in binary thinking. Once we begin to introduce an alternative to dualistic thinking that accepts the Cartesian view of reality but incorporates a non-hierarchical determination of the *meaning* of categorizations, then we *must* begin to interpret each experience, each interaction in a new way that is not based on “better or worse”, “black and white”.

31 LCS. P. 107

32 http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2008/12/this_past_april_stanley_fish.html

Humans naturally categorize, divide, and break down items and objects into smaller and more distinct subdivisions, in the Aristotelian sense. As categories are chosen in this way, two sides always oppose each other. There is nothing inherently wrong about this method of perceiving the world, but two problems arise from it. First, it denies other modes of being in the world, the myriad human expressions through aesthetics, mythical consciousness, religion, or language; second, this way of *seeing* the world brings about a perspective that is divisive, creating exclusions, binaries, distinctions of “better” and “worse” where none need to be.

“Different ways of having a world are all reduced to one rational, conceptual order...Cassirer proposes therefore a different fundamental principle, that is, to begin with meaning and the symbol instead of logic and the concept.”³³ With this shift that Cassirer makes, responsibility lies not at the level of the action, but rather of the thought, and how humans direct thought toward particular meanings. Meaning in this sense is immanent, in the Kantian sense, referring to the realm of possible experience: meaning changes with physical reality and cannot be confined to material experience. “For something to have meaning is for it to be *beyond itself* as a physical thing.”³⁴

Recognizing the possibility of different meanings beyond a single experience, humans may choose to re-direct their thoughts toward a meaning that they themselves choose, rather than toward a meaning that has been instilled in them unconsciously, gaining thereby consequences that correspond to the choice. One example of this is the idea of being “true to yourself”. There are many possible meanings for this thought (each person may define what this means for him or herself), but let me give three examples. The first

33 Krois. Symbolic Forms and History. P. 36

34 Krois. Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. P. 108

comes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which Polonius says to Laertes, "And this above all, to thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou then canst not be false to any man." Not without irony, these encouragements follow a laundry list of social and cultural expectations and obligations encouraging Laertes toward polite behavior. A second example is found in American capitalist culture, in which being "true to yourself" means "looking out for number one"—doing whatever it takes to come out on top, to "win" in the capitalist game, to gain power and control over others before they are able to gain power and control over you. A final example is from the Yurok Indians. The Yurok Indians have but one law: to be true to yourself. But the Yurok Indians define this as doing whatever is necessary to help another in need.

We find the same thought, with three very different meanings, and three very different social consequences: the first the social outcome revolves around the status and responsibility of cultural expectations, and very little to do with an actual attempt to act in an authentic manner; the second's social outcome is exemplified in the competitive, oppressive nature of the American capitalist economic system, which leaves the (perceived) weak and powerless people to fend for themselves against institutions that oppress them. But in the third example, a person's own truth is bound by and intertwined with another human being. Lines of separation between one and the other have not merely disappeared—they never existed in the first place.

It is at this level of thought that human ethical consequences begin, and to which the ethical implications of symbolic forms speaks. Only humans, who are rational, who have a choice regarding what thoughts to hold in their minds, have the ability to direct their thoughts away from pervasive traditional dualistic thinking and to follow that

thinking with action. This reading of symbolic forms gives a litmus test for choosing: the thoughts that are most ethical are ones that remove dualistic thinking (or that “behave” as though dualistic thinking did not exist to begin with), and that recognize the “other” *as* the “one”. Human actions are not “determined in accordance with natural laws, as is every other natural event”.³⁵ Action begins at the level of thought and it is at this level that we are able to exercise choice of where to place meaning. It is here that individual freedom begins and carries through into culture: [And then...] language never denotes simply objects, things as such, but always conceptions arising from the autonomous activity of the mind. The nature of concepts, therefore, *depends on the way this active viewing is directed*.³⁶

“Here one can trace directly how humanity really attains its insight into objective reality only through the medium of its own activity and the progressive differentiation of that activity; before man thinks in terms of logical concepts, he holds his experiences by means of clear, separate mythical images. And here, too, the development of language appears to be the counterpart of the development which mythical intuition and thought undergo...man’s activity becomes internally organized, and his conception of Being acquires a correspondingly clear and definite pattern...in distilling [experiences] down to one point. *But the manner of this concentration always depends upon the direction of the subject’s interest, and is determined not so much by the content of the experience as by the teleological perspective from which it is viewed.*”³⁷

It is within the seat of our rationality to make the choice to direct our attention toward Oneness or Separation, or—for that matter—to stand on the edge of finitude and peer into the possibility of the infinite, choosing both thought and action from this new standpoint. Finally, the transfiguration of Kant’s “for what can I hope” is not a simple shift of thought to a transcendental ideal that is experienced in the mind, but rather a

35 Kant. Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose. Kant’s Political Writings. Ed. Hans Reiss. P. 41

36 Language and Myth P. 31. Emphasis mine.

37 Language and Myth. P. 37 (my emphasis)

concrete experience that can be reflected upon, judged for its outcome, re-assessed evaluated, then re-created through the continuation of the ideal. Precisely in this final question, Symbolic Form unites with individual responsibility in the formation of the human world, the human ideal; here, the critique of culture truly begins. Man's question of himself here now, should be, "what is my highest responsibility to humanity, and how do I carry that out?" While we know that one man is not responsible for the entirety of human culture, we do know that each individual expression enters the soma of humanity; if each person critically considered his or her own personal contribution and determined to enact an ideal that resonated both with herself *and* all of humanity.

The shift that Cassirer makes here is to indicate the level of responsibility is not with the action, but rather with the thought. Humans are responsible *both* for what they do *and* for what they think. Behavior is not autonomous: the will is not manifested in the world of phenomena; human actions are not "determined in accordance with natural laws, as is every other natural event".³⁸ Action begins at the level of thought; it is at this level that we are able to exercise choice. It is here that individual freedom begins and carries through into culture, when man asks himself, "Where is my attention?" "On what do I choose to focus?" For Kant the action is based on the will and is subject to the whims of "nature," for Cassirer, the action depends on the immediate situation and is determined immediately through the expression of the thought. Indeed, for Cassirer, the ideal of spirit manifesting is not in the future in the form of an imaginary hope to which one strives, but rather within the makings of the interactions within every moment. Cassirer says of *attention* "What is it that leads or constrains language to collect just these ideas into a

38 Kant. Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose. Kant's Political Writings. Ed. Hans Reiss. P. 41

single whole and denote them by a word? What causes it to select, from the ever-flowing, ever uniform stream of impressions which strike our senses or arise from the autonomous processes of the mind, certain pre-eminent forms, to dwell on them and endow them with a particular significance?”³⁹ And then: “...language never denotes simply objects, things as such, but always conceptions arising from the autonomous activity of the mind. The nature of concepts, therefore, depends on the way this active viewing is directed.”⁴⁰

These two statements indicate that there is a judgment that is brought to the signified prior to its conception. Where is the mind focused when it sees? (or hears? or feels?) The answer to this forms the conception prior to the linguistic or logical formulation of the understanding of the concept. It is at this level, the level *prior to* the conception where people can choose where they will have their focus—they can invite one perception over and above another or another through a decision about where they will place their attention, their focus.

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What is it that leads or constrains language to collect just these ideas into a single whole and denote them by a word? What causes it to select, from the ever-flowing, ever uniform stream of impressions which strike our senses or arise from the autonomous processes of the mind, certain pre-eminent forms, to dwell on them and endow them with a particular significance?⁴¹

This statements indicates that there is a predisposition that is influences the meaning of signification prior to its conception. In the above example, for Laertes this

39 Language and Myth. P. 25

40 Language and Myth P. 31. See Kant's first critique, opening pages.

41 Language and Myth. P. 25

predisposition follows from cultural expectations, in capitalism, the influence is played out in relationships based on money and power, and for the Yurok Indians it is in a commitment to others. Where the mind focuses when it sees (or hears or feels) determines a particular outcome. The mind focused on truth to the self in the capitalist sense will engender competition, power and oppression; the mind focused on truth to the self in the Yurok Indian sense will engender compassion and cooperation. The choice for these outcomes begins within each individual mind.

The answer to this forms the conception prior to the linguistic or logical formulation of the understanding of the concept. It is at this level, the level prior to the conception, where people can choose where they will have their focus—they can invite one perception over and above another, and through that decision they will place their attention, their focus.

Here one can trace directly how humanity really attains its insight into objective reality only through the medium of its own activity and the progressive differentiation of that activity; before man thinks in terms of logical concepts, he holds his experiences by means of clear, separate...images. And here, too, the development of language appears to be the counterpart of the development which mythical intuition and thought undergo...man's activity becomes internally organized, and his conception of *being* acquires a correspondingly clear and definite pattern...in distilling [experiences] down to one point. But the manner of this concentration always depends upon the direction of the subject's interest, and is determined not so much by the content of the experience as by the teleological perspective from which it is viewed.⁴²

While matter must remain in the same form, its mode of signification can shift from one representation of meaning to another. In this sense, there are only “experience totalities”,⁴³ such as memory and perception that coincide in a functional relationship to represent the matter and form. Every experience takes on both of these qualities—

⁴² Language and Myth. P. 37

⁴³ PSF 3. P. 199

memory and perception—thus contributing a dimension of imagination to every encounter with physical reality. “Every present content functions in the sense of representing, just as all representation demands a link with something present in consciousness”.⁴⁴ The perception that only sensory experience gives matter and form meaning contributes to the continued separation of the contribution of *consciousness* from experience.

This Cassirer demonstrates this in his famous example of the line. In visual perception, we may notice the incline or decline of the line, the curvature, its position in space, its length, whether it is jagged, thick, or thin. All of these can be determined with reference only to the line itself—what we may call its objective nature. However, these qualities disappear when the line is viewed through the lens of geometry. As $y=mx+b$, the line “becomes” a schema, the representation of a universal law. Any quality that identified the line as single and unique now dissolves within an equation that not only is universal, but also must consider geometrical relationships and proportions. “The spatial form is nothing but a paradigm for the formula; it remains the mere outward cloak of an essentially unintuitive mathematical idea.”⁴⁵ Any individual meaning disappears within this formula.

This formulaic interpretation too disappears, when we shift our view of the line from a geometric standpoint, to an aesthetic standpoint. If this very same line is viewed as one aspect of a drawing, then its entire meaning shifts as well. Now it becomes a delineation between light and dark, a boundary between two aspects of one picture; it may be a sign, a symbol, a designation of the sacred or the profane; it may be a focal

44 PSF 3. P. 199

45 PSF III P. 200-201

point that draws the viewer in to the picture, or it may be a point that leads the viewer to another part of the picture. Whatever the interpretation, it depends on the eye of the beholder, the immediate experience, with no referent to intrinsic qualities within the line itself.

Cassirer notes that even with a simple line, humans limit themselves to choosing between one and the other instance: either a line is a non-aesthetic representation of a universal schema, or it is a purely subjective aspect of an aesthetic form. Yet, he says, these limits are a false-interpretation of the experience of perception. In addition to raw perception-input, there is also this “spiritual articulation” of the imagination within every determinate experience. To this, he applies the term *symbolic pregnance*, indicating that it is both of these qualities that impress form upon reality, leaving it with its unique fullness. “The symbolic process is like a single stream of life and thought which flows through consciousness, and which by this flowing movement produces the diversity and cohesion, the richness, the continuity, and constancy, of consciousness.”⁴⁶

Symbolic forms must be understood with these ideas of inter-relationality, other-in-the-one and all of the ways of world-making always in the background. Cassirer utilizes traditional philosophical language, but does so on his own terms which were established in his first book, his philosophical and his historical writings. In this sense judgment becomes not about discernment, distinction, and classification, but about the prior decision to see those distinctions and divisions and to make a choice that is beyond the dualism and divisiveness. Cassirer suggests that by adopting a wider perspective, in relation to as many (approaching the infinite) distinctions as possible, we approach the “truth” of the thing, the “truth” of the situation or relationship. The more perspectives that

46 PSF 3. P. 202

can be integrated into the functional relationship of the particular, the more closely we approach its completeness.

For Kant, this question ascribes to the individual a moral responsibility: each person's moral autonomy, their ability to make rational choices and act rationally in the world, becomes a "law unto itself". For Cassirer, moral autonomy begins with the attention of thought to the situation, in its determination and invitation to the perspective that is chosen. John Michael Krois states this succinctly:

Cassirer envisions a thought process that applies to the *intension* rather than the *extension* of concepts. He does not conceive this conceptualization to be the result of an act of comparison or association. No analogy is made. Cassirer points out that all theories of concept formation that require an act of comparison presuppose the function of the concept when they are speaking of *noticing* qualities or characteristics in things.⁴⁷

The *function of concept* in Cassirer's early work transitions in his later work to a "radical metaphor"⁴⁸ which he determines to be an act of imagination rather than logic. It is within the seat of our rationality to make the choice to direct our attention, yet the rational mind must pair with the imagination if it is to allow multiple perspectives,⁴⁹ of which unity of all is one. In a strictly substance-oriented interpretation (such as we see traditionally in Aristotle⁵⁰), oneness succumbs to separation, and allows for the choosing of a perspective that encompasses just one isolated standpoint. Here, according to Cassirer, rests the misleading nature of epistemological discussions that begin with the subject-object dichotomy: the dichotomy is one of *spatial opposition*, not of substance

47 Krois. *Symbolic Forms and History*. P. 97

48 LM. P. 87

49 Let it just be noted that this is not an argument for a perspectivalism such as Nietzsche, which leads to relativism, but a perspectivalism that includes within it a consideration of the totality of all perspectives, which unites, rather than separates multiple interpretations.

50 As John Michael Krois points out, following Cassirer's theory of language, this structure was imposed upon Aristotle by the very structure of the Greek language.

opposition. This semantic misnomer lies at the root of a vicious cycle that applies an *opposition* to a process that is actually a progressive differentiation based in the consciousness of individual experience.

Each symbolic form “is a particular way of seeing, and carries within itself its particular and proper sort of light. The functions of envisagement, the dawn of a conceptual enlightenment can never be realistically derived from things themselves or understood through the nature of its objective contents. For it is not a question of what we see in a certain perspective, but of the perspective itself.”⁵¹ Thus we see how symbolic pregnancy takes into account both the logical *and* the imaginative, which all prior categorical determinations have overlooked. The flow of consciousness which contributes to the sum total of experience now can be utilized positively toward a non-dualistic approach to people, situations and experiences, which takes into account multi-perspectives that all relate back to the whole, as a cognitive progression.

Inverting Externalization

The problem of externalization extends from the problem of dualism. Two ideas, when defined through the language of spatiality and materiality, must be measured against each other. All knowledge presupposes this comparison, that leads only to concepts in opposition against each other and in negation of each other. Thus, when the self externalizes itself, it must, by these rules, conform to a negation of either the self or the other.

The new reading of symbolic forms shifts the concept of self from one which necessarily excludes external expression to one which enfolds all expressions (through I-action-work). The possibilities of thinking of the other as the self and eliminating

⁵¹ LM. P. 11

alienation become possible. Through this lens, there comes a clearer understanding of Mohandas Gandhi's statement, "no one is free while others are oppressed." For as long as one person denies the life of any other, he or she is denying his or her own enfolding of that life. Oppression, maltreatment, disrespect, violence, hatred are only possible because people view others as "not I". If people see each other, their relationships, and their interactions as the very reflections of their own lives and geists, the nature of their interactions toward others would shift to account for "right treatment" of themselves.⁵²

As we saw in chapter two, the theoretical formulation of alienation rests on the idea that the self becomes alien (to itself) with any expression—once expressed it must oppose itself. This occurs in culture through the expression of an inherent inner conflict. The implications of alienation lead to isolation, and fear of the other, which in turn result in cultural expressions of racism, sexism and generally lead to treating others as unknown, as alien themselves. Here, through symbolic forms, the other no longer is disassociated from self; self-expression takes on new meaning and encompasses both self and other:

The works of human culture are the only ones that unite in themselves both conditions in which perfect knowledge is based; they have not only conceptually apprehended existence, but also a thoroughly determined individual and historic one. However, the internal structure of this existence is accessible and open to the human spirit only because it is its creator.⁵³

In capitalism or culture, the moment that life expresses itself through work, or art, or just living, that expression removes itself from the essence of its creator. This produces an unrecognizable reflection and leaves emptiness behind. This traditionally is seen as a dialectical process, wherein *spirit* becomes externalized, and the self interacts

⁵² This is really an elaborate statement of the golden rule: "treat others as you would like to be treated". This reading of symbolic forms gives a philosophical grounding to why one should treat another as oneself.

⁵³ LCS. P. 9

with it completely but separately—as though with a foreigner, thereby forging a new entity (or relationship) that is neither the one nor the other, but a new entity comprised of both even though further removed from each. This process repeatedly creates culture that is simply an endless cycle of alienation and reification. It is through Cusanus' influence on symbolic forms that an inversion of this alienating process takes place.

Cassirer removes the dialectic and makes the experience of the self *immediate* as a single act of expression. *Work* as a basis phenomenon reverses the dialectic creation of a foreign entity, and expression becomes the *only* way in which a person can come to know his or her essence; there must be a convergence of inner with outer. The relationship is not one of alienation, but rather of extension, of creation, and of recognition. Cassirer asserts this unity between expression and life through symbolic forms, as he says, “The artist is just as much a discoverer of the forms of Nature as the scientist is the discoverer of Natural laws.”⁵⁴ Expression becomes the key to understanding self reflection and also the essential act of human freedom. As Donald Phillip Verene notes, “It is clear that for Cassirer the freedom of man resides in his ability to give form to experience.”⁵⁵

The self and the other now need not exclude each other; both are not only connected, but also integral to each other. The consequence of this inversion of alienation is that the *other* no longer needs to be perceived as alien or foreign. “By teaching us to see the one in the other, the other in the One, the separation itself guarantees the possibility of true participation of the sensible in the ideal.”⁵⁶ While humans are limited in the material unfolding of knowledge, within the realm of the intellect and the

54 EM 143-144

55 Verene. *Symbol, Myth and Culture*. P. 39.

56 ICRP. 23-24

imagination knowledge can extend infinitely. “Individuality is not simply a *limitation*; rather, it represents a particular *value* that may not be eliminated or extinguished...only by virtue of this thought do the multiplicity, the difference and the heterogeneity of these forms cease to appear to be a contradiction...and become instead a necessary expression of that universality itself.”⁵⁷ Otherness itself becomes the means by which to end the isolation of alienation.

The constraints laid upon the mind through dualism and otherness restrict the very creative, imaginative, and artistic activities that feed the soul with ever-deeper understandings of itself. Every philosophical, historic or scientific argument places opposing and conflicting ideas directly at its center; from these ideas, humans experience conflict, resignation, and isolation. Life becomes dream-like, a phantasm, and humans see their own nullity with no possibility of escape. This reading of symbolic forms produces an opportunity to invert these past ways of thinking, offering humans a way of knowing themselves and each other beyond separation and division.

Although glaringly poignant in its observation of modern culture, Cassirer’s *Myth of the State* sounds a challenge to modern culture to open its eyes to itself, and not to be blinded by the myths laid out by those with apparent cultural control. In criticism of modern culture, Cassirer says:

Our modern political life has abruptly returned to forms which seemed to have been entirely forgotten. To be sure, we no longer have the primitive kind of sortilege, the divination by lot; we no longer observe the flight of birds nor do we inspect the entrails of slain animals...Our modern politicians know very well that the great masses are much more easily moved by the force of imagination than by sheer physical force. And they have made ample use of this knowledge. The politician becomes a sort of public fortuneteller. Prophecy is an essential element

57 ICRP. P. 29

in the new technique of rulership. The most improbable or even impossible promises are made; the millennium is predicted over and over again.⁵⁸

The principles behind symbolic forms as laid out in the preceding chapters counteract the alienating, separating impulses promulgated through modern culture. Yet until man is willing to overcome his own crisis of self-knowledge, Cassirer's hope for an ethical turn in culture will fall on blind eyes and deaf ears.

58 MS. P. 289

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Odsherreds Gymnasium, Asnæs, Denmark, Major in Sociology, June 1985-June 1986

Professional Experience

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, *Program Officer*; August, 2011-Present

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, *Assistant Program Director*; June 2008-August, 2011

Rutgers University, Department of Student Life, Cook Campus Center, *Assistant Director of Operations*; September 2007-June 2008

Rutgers University, Department of Student Life, Busch Campus Center, *Events Coordinator*; January 2007-August 2007

Rutgers University, Department of Student Life, Rutgers Student Center, *Operations and Programming Manager, Red Lion Café*; September 2003-January 2007

Teaching Experience

Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Department of Political Science

- Instructor, 790:355 Women in American Politics, Summer Session 2004
- Teaching Assistant, 790:201 American Government, 2004-2006
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Middlesex County College, Department of Government

- Instructor, POS 220 United States National Government, Spring 2006
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Conference Papers and Presentations

- “Do's and Don'ts of Fellowship Applications” on the panel *Reflections on Interdisciplinary Research and Funding Opportunities* at the Conference on *Applying for External Funding: Advice and Guidance on How to Navigate the Funding Maze*; April 20th, 2009
- "Self Identity and Symbolic Form: How Internalized Racism Expresses Itself in Nella Larsen's Novel *Quicksand*." Rutgers University, Graduate Forum on Race & Ethnicity; March 8, 2008
- “Leadership and Conflict: Demonstrating Leadership through Working Out Conflict” Rutgers University; Rutgers College Campus Centers, September 3, 2006
- “New People and Places: Negotiating Social Relations with an Eye to Justice” Rutgers University, Office of Social Justice and LGBT Communities, New Student Orientation Diversity Facilitator, September 2, 2007

Publications

The Margaret Lakes Trail Project (USDA Forest Service, Shaver Lake, CA September, 1993)

A Little Respect, Training Manual and Guide, with Catherine Charlton (Rutgers Department of Health Education, New Brunswick, NJ. May 1990)

The Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship: A Review of Three Decades, 1981-2011 (Princeton, NJ: The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, May 2011)
