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Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Between Reason and Relativism; a Critical Appraisal

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By Sebastian Luft

This paper pursues the double task of (a) presenting Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms as a systematic critique of culture and (b) assessing this systematic approach with regards to the question of reason vs. relativism. First, it reconstructs the development of his theory to its mature presentation in his Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Cassirer here presents a critique of culture as fulfilling Kant's critical work by insisting on the plurality of reason as spirit, manifesting itself in symbolic forms. In the second part, the consequences of this approach will be drawn by considering the systematics Cassirer intended with this theory. As can be reconstructed from his metaphilosophical reflections, the strength of Cassirer's philosophy is that it accounts for the plurality of rational-spiritual activity while at the same time not succumbing to a relativism. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms steers a middle course between a rational fundamentalism and a postmodern relativism.

Introduction: A Brief History of Ideas

I would like to commence this exposition with a brief history of ideas regarding Cassirer's own philosophy. This is no random narrative but employs Cassirer's own insight that systematic philosophical problems evolve from within and out of a historical setting and as such have their own history. Cassirer's peculiar method, ingeniously mixing historic with systematic analysis, may be applied to his own philosophy.

It is curious to note that a thinker as influential as Ernst Cassirer has almost entirely been forgotten in the country where he came in 1941 to teach first at Yale, then at Columbia University, and where he died in 1945 and witnessed a considerable amount of success.¹ This success owes on the one hand to his many studies in the history of philosophy—most notably his four-volume *The Problem of Knowledge*—and to his systematic studies in the philosophy of logic and mathematics (*Substance and Function*) already prior to the development of his own philosophical approach. Finally his systematic masterpiece *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, published 1923–1929, established for him a solid international reputation. On the other hand, it owes also to the fact that Cassirer was able to maintain close contacts to the sciences and to current philosophical endeavors of his time. Finally, in his last work, *The Myth of the State*, published posthumously in 1946, he presented the public with a penetrating critique of fascism,

equaling Adorno/Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, yet with an original assessment stemming directly from his philosophical standpoint and with an ultimately positive, optimistic hope for the future of Western civilization.

Furthermore, in the United States, instead of translating his lengthy *magnum opus*, Cassirer wrote his two last works in English. It was especially in *An Essay on Man* where he attempted to introduce his systematic ideas in a popular fashion and which has remained widely read decades later. Yet, his popularity was so great at the time of his death that already as of the 1940s the majority of his larger works had been translated into English. However, beginning in the 1960s, Cassirer increasingly became a forgotten thinker whose style of philosophizing has often been considered "academic," due to the sheer learnedness of his writings echoing the style of philosophizing of past epochs.² The waning of interest in his philosophy probably also owes to a general discrediting of reason in the wake of postmodern critique. However, it was not until the late 1970s and 1980s, when his voluminous *Nachlass*, collected at Yale, was rediscovered by D. P. Verene and J. M. Krois.³ It was especially the latter who reintroduced Cassirer into the German speaking world by pointing out the riches of this collection of papers and who, having initiated an edition of his *Nachlass* and a new edition of his published work, has been mostly responsible for causing a most impressive Cassirer renaissance in Europe. This reawakening began first in Germany, but by now has spread to other parts of Europe, certainly France and Italy,⁴ and has recently begun to flourish in North America. Here, again curiously enough, the interest in Cassirer has been sparked by M. Friedman, a Kant scholar mainly of analytic orientation, who has made the intriguing attempt to reconstruct the "Parting of the Ways" between analytic and continental philosophy by going back to the celebrated 1929 Davos dispute between Cassirer and Heidegger, a philosophical conference which also the young Carnap attended. In Friedman's reading of this encounter and the ensuing developments, he presents, quite surprisingly, Cassirer as winning the day concerning the dispute over the role of logic in philosophical method.⁵

However, upon closer inspection, one finds that Cassirer's thoughts have not entirely been forgotten. Certainly, stomaching a systematic work of more than a thousand pages interwoven with discussions of problems in the history of philosophy has gone out of fashion. Nevertheless, Cassirer's influence ranges from thinkers within the more proximate neo-Kantian movement to the—again, almost forgotten—American philosopher Susanne Langer, who utilized his ideas of symbolism for her aesthetic philosophy "in a new key."⁶ Remaining in the field of aesthetics, it was especially one philosopher, again from the analytic tradition, who has taken up Cassirer's ideas of multiple symbolic forms, interpreted as worlds, namely Nelson

Goodman in his “Ways of World-Making”—as we shall see, in a very fresh and creative, yet ultimately misled manner.⁷ Furthermore it is no lesser a person than Jürgen Habermas who applauds the “liberating power of Symbolic Forms” in Cassirer’s idea of the original plurality of reason.⁸ Also, Post-Modernity in its insistence on the plurality and “différence” of truths and its dismissal of the paradigm of “logocentricity,” echoes Cassirer’s idea of the plural universe of “discourse.”⁹ Cassirer’s exposition of a meaningful universe of symbols is taken up in modern semiotics, as Eco himself would most surely acknowledge.¹⁰ Finally, although the allusions are few, Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a universal method of understanding the world deserves a renewed close look in light of Cassirer’s plurality of symbolic forms as principal ways in which we understand the world within an historical horizon.¹¹ And this is not talking of his influence on anthropology, sociology, and psychology (especially Gestalt theory).¹²

Also *systematically* speaking, Cassirer was able to exert such an influence because he was a thinker deeply immersed in the scientific and philosophical discussions and currents of his age. In his philosophy he has taken up divergent tendencies such as theories of mathematics and logic, the theory of relativity, has remained a keen observer of newer developments in linguistics and mythological as well as anthropological research. Furthermore, he was in close contact with the most prominent figures of contemporary philosophy, such as, certainly, the neo-Kantians,¹³ but was also an intimate knower of Bergson, Dilthey, Simmel, as well as the phenomenologists, especially Husserl, Scheler, and Heidegger. As is immediately visible—and readily acknowledged by Cassirer—phenomenology has great import in his philosophy, which should make him interesting for contemporary continental philosophy. But to be sure, phenomenology is but one strain in his systematic position.¹⁴

As a Jew, Cassirer shared the fate of many other Jewish intellectuals who had to emigrate from their home country Germany and had to start anew from “zero.” The same went for their works, mostly written in German, which, after the war, were either mostly forgotten or simply out of print. Whereas the philosophical world could be so fortunate as to witness a critical edition of e.g., Husserl’s unpublished materials see the light of day after the Second World War, thus making him accessible and recognized as one of the seminal figures in philosophy of the twentieth century, the public has had to wait another forty years to see Cassirer come to life again in a renewed joint editorial effort. Indeed, many indications point to a novel interest in one of the most impressive philosophical figures of the twentieth century. This can be best shown by shedding Cassirer’s thought of its thick cloak of historical analysis and presenting his own systematic philosophical import.

Instead of problematizing a specific aspect of his thought, I would first like to give a short exposition of the basic systematic ideas of the philosophy of Symbolic Forms. I will then proceed to mention a number of problems with his approach, and try to resolve certain issues. In conclusion I will point out where I think that Cassirer's philosophical efforts can be of paradigmatic importance for contemporary thought by showing that Cassirer both broaches and offers answers to the problems of relativism and the plurality of reason. At the same time, he remains loyal to the ideal of rigorous philosophical method and philosophical systematics. This makes him especially interesting for current philosophical projects which oftentimes seem to be gridlocked on either side of the divide between a rather "old-fashioned" belief in reason and a postmodern relativism. Thus, what has been remarked about Cassirer's character, to be a "conciliatory" and a mediating figure between extremes, may be applied to his philosophy. This is precisely what, to my mind, can place him in a meaningful way into the midst of contemporary debates.

I. Cassirer's Philosophy as Critique of Culture and the Plurality of Symbolic Forms

The idea of symbolic formation is prefigured in Cassirer's first systematic work of 1910, *Substance and Function*, and is, at hindsight, already operative here, however limited only to one specific sphere, that of logical formation of concepts in exact, e.g., mathematical, science. As is typical for Cassirer, he develops his systematic ideas in the discussion of problems in the history of philosophy (the latter of which he likes to refer to as epistemology).¹⁵ As we shall see later, it is not merely by accident that Cassirer frames his systematic concepts in the seemingly larger framework of the history of ideas. He is perhaps one of the first to both understand and implement the fact that philosophical, and more broadly cultural, problems not only stand within a historical setting but have a history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) without which it is impossible for us to understand any kind of problem within the world of spirit.

The distinction between substance and function is, simply put, that between different paradigms within the theory of scientific conceptualization.¹⁶ The traditional, essentially Aristotelian account of scientific concepts is a substantial theory. It is based on the naive belief that there is a simple correlation between being and thought. Hence, concepts represent the thematic thing pure and simple. Concepts are thus *substantial*—they refer to substances that are somewhere independently "out there" in the world. Concepts are conceived as naively conceptualizing substances as existing objects ("things"). The objects in turn are substantial because they stand on their own ground and do not require another substance upon which they

depend. Things to which substantial categories are applied are framed in the concepts of *substantia* and *accidens*. Substantial categories thus reflect the essentially substantial nature of things in the world and mirror a substantialist epistemology.

However, there is also another way of conceptualizing objects, namely in terms of their *function* within a certain “series” of relations. This goes especially for mathematical functions. The concept of number exemplifies this best. Whereas a number can be considered a substantial “entity” (the concept “4”), a natural number must also be conceived of within what Cassirer calls a series (*Reihe*), e.g., the series of numbers 3, 4, 5, and in this series “4” has its function or “meaning.” The number 4 can only be conceptualized and hence “understood” in the series of natural numbers and in relation to them. Thus, the “concept” of the number four seen as a representative of the series of natural numbers is not substantial but rather functional within a certain series of meaning: The concept “four” is not a concept unless or without being integrated into the series of natural numbers, where it stands as a representative of this series. Thus, it is not “substantial” as referring to an independent entity but only functional within this specific “context.” Hence, the functionalist account can also be called “contextual.”

While this can be understood as merely an alternative way of forming scientific concepts, this distinction also has a significance within the development of modern science. Cassirer sees here a progress in the use of the concept of function over against that of substance. For example, in view of modern physics, there can be no talk of “substances” when one speaks of electrons, but the concept of an electron is a functional term in the context of a certain physical conceptualization. It only becomes “visible” as a fact when seen in the framework of a certain functional series, in this case a certain theory. The scientific theory as a whole is this “functional series” within which the concept of “electron” takes on sense. As is known, in a different theory, the wave theory, the subject matter is thematized in terms of waves. When talking of certain concepts, it is the function *within which* they are used that determines the “reality” of what one talks about. There is no independent, “substantial” reality just as there is no independent, “substantial” thing such as an electron. Rather, an electron is a “*conceptual scheme*” within a certain theory as an encompassing “schematism” of conceptualization. Thus, there is no simple correlation between being and thought. Rather, it is always a certain way of thinking and hence conceptualizing that makes “being” apperceptible. Such concepts are, to speak in Husserl’s terminology of the *Crisis*, idealizations or abstractions which are not derived from a “substance” in the prescientific life-world, but they are mental formations, “figments” used in order to explain certain phenomena in a specific scientific theoretical context. In contrast to Husserl, however, there is no life-world as a “raw being” “underneath” conceptualizations stemming from certain

types of experience, but all experience is by necessity an abstraction (even the concept “raw being”!).¹⁷

Now, as mentioned, these two accounts, substantialist and functionalist, are not merely two alternative ways of scientific conceptualization, but also indicate to Cassirer the *progress* scientific and logical theory have undergone especially since the Renaissance.¹⁸ In fact, this is where Cassirer’s own philosophical considerations set in. According to him this development mirrors no other than the ensuing *transcendental turn* that has taken place in modern philosophy.¹⁹ As it turns out retrospectively, the critical historical study of *Substance and Function* is merely an exemplification of the change in framing philosophical problems in the wake of idealistic (transcendental) philosophy. The shift from a substantialist account, which conceives of objects as “substances,” i.e., *independent* of their conceptualization, to a functionalist account, which frames phenomena in a meaningful “series” of function, is *equal* to the shift from considering objects as they exist independently, to considering them *in so far as they are experienced*.²⁰ And in this experience, objects can only be experienced as functional, i.e., in a certain meaningful context, having, or better serving a function in a framework of scientific explanation. Even science, in a philosophical reflection on its method, has undergone a certain “Copernican turn” in that it cannot disregard the “import” of experience in its perception of its object of investigation, and in so far as it conceptualizes these experiences, the concepts are by necessity functional concepts within a “functional series,” in other words, within a scientific theory or context. Everything factual, Cassirer liked to quote Goethe, “is already [laden with] theory,” because it presupposes that it is “seen,” i.e., experienced within an “epistemic” and hence conceptual scheme.²¹ Seeing something means *understanding* the seen in a specific way. And depending on the theory employed, the constitutional principles of this “series” can change. This “series” is not necessarily a “causal” succession or theory, but has according to the specific theory its own laws of functioning.

From here, it took Cassirer almost another decade to develop the full-fledged philosophy of symbolic forms. In the meantime, and not by accident, he worked mainly in a field popular in the early years of the twentieth century, namely the study of myth.²² One phenomenon which fascinated many ethnologists and anthropologists was the discovery that the so-called primitive cultures were anything but “primitive.” Rather, their religious belief did indeed have its own “logic” of functioning which might be different to our “modern” and Western “enlightened” society but which nevertheless had clearly definable laws and rules of function, in their religious practice, in their beliefs and consequently way of explaining (“conceptualizing”) their world. The world of mythical societies is a world which has its *own* order and as such, has its *own* sense and

meaning. Yet, this sense is no longer *our* sense, it even contradicts it in certain areas. “Enlightened” societies no longer believe in cosmogonies and myths, unless they are understood in a demythologized way. To a mythological society, however, the meaning of myths was not something “behind” the stories, but they were immediately and genuinely taken to be true, establishing a direct link to the transcendent realm. Cassirer drew the consequence from this assessment, and it is in this context that he first formulates his idea of a symbolic form:

Myth can be interpreted as *itself* a “functional series” in conceptualizing the world, in so far as myth can be called a “concept,” i.e., a narrative which establishes a certain “theory” in the “soft” sense of giving an account of understanding the (mythic) world. Such a series has a certain function for primitive man, it is the *form* in which this specific way of understanding the world is conceptualized—be the concept a mythical tale, a rite, or another mythical “objectification.” A certain tale is a representative of this mythological world view, in Cassirer’s words, a *symbol*. Myth is a form of meaning in which primitive man lives. It is a life of, or rather *in*, meaning or sense. The decisive step to the theory of the Symbolic Forms, and with the backdrop of the distinction between substance and function, is the realization that there is not merely *one* functional form, such as science, but that myth can also be thought of as such a functional series, and that there is in fact a *plurality* of symbolic forms which equally have a specific function, namely science but also others, namely language, myth, religion, and art.²³ What makes these forms *symbolic* is that they *point to* not merely one, but *alternative* “functional series” to explain the world or in which world becomes apprehended and thus comprehended. In the world of meaning—and there is no other real world for us—there is not merely one perceived X as a substratum with different meanings, but what this X is understood as depends on the symbolic form *within* which it is viewed, i.e., thematized. A tree is something completely different to primitive man than to the artist or the biologist. Cassirer calls these forms symbolic because the “X” in view is never a simple substance but stands as a symbol for the form in which it has its function. It *points to* the meaningful whole or totality: to the world of myth, of art, of religion, of science.

What kind of “world” are we talking about here, and what is the relation between a symbolic form and such a “world of meaning”? In one of the few definitions Cassirer ever gives, he characterizes a symbolic form as follows: “Under a ‘symbolic form’ shall be understood every energy of spirit through which a spiritual meaning-content is connected to a concrete sensual sign and is intrinsically bound to that sign.”²⁴ Thus, instead of interpreting a symbolic form as a meaningful world, a “special world,” as, e.g., Goodman has understood it, a symbolic form is rather that which *encompasses* the experiencing agent and that which he/she experiences. It is

the “energy of spirit” *generating* a “space of meaning” in which we find ourselves together with that which we experience in and with a specific sense. A symbolic form is not itself a world but that which *forms* a world as a meaningful context or totality. Human life is a life “in” meaning in the sense that it is a “spiritual energy” that *overarches* every experiencing process and connects that which is experienced to a “spiritual meaning-content,” i.e., language, religion, myth, art, etc. The single experienced object never stands alone but is always connected to a symbolic form, or the symbolic form bestows meaning upon a single X. In a striking metaphor, Cassirer compares the symbolic forms to the light which is necessary to see objects in this “openness”—only that there is not just *one* “light” (of “being”) but it is the light *spirit* generates and which is broken into different refractions. What is seen can only be seen in the light, but this light is the light of spirit, which is not itself “one.” In another characteristic phrase, Cassirer calls this state of affairs “symbolic pregnancy,”²⁵ in the sense that a single experienced object is “pregnant with meaning” as it stands in the context of a symbolic form in which it becomes understood as this or that (depending on the specific form “*in actu*”). Merleau-Ponty’s talk of the world as being “pregnant with meaning”²⁶ is a direct allusion to Cassirer’s concept of symbolic pregnancy. But Cassirer himself here alludes to the original meaning of symbol stemming from the Greek “*sym-ballein*,” i.e., literally a “throwing together” of two entities, in this case the concept of the object and its symbolic meaning in its specific form. This, in turn, reiterates Goethe’s theory of the “primal phenomenon” (*Urphänomen*) of which Goethe says that one must not try to find anything behind it but that it itself “is what it teaches us” (*es ist selbst die Lehre*). What is experienced is not a “thing” but a phenomenon in the original sense of the word, i.e., *something shows* itself to us as a representative of a certain form, “pregnant” with its meaning. Yet, in contrast to Goethe, not just single unique phenomena merit the title “primal phenomenon” as paradigm cases of this “showing”; to Cassirer, every object has a certain specific pregnancy—and can even have different ones, depending on the form within which it is apperceived (the meandering line can be a sine curve or an artistic ornament).

To phrase it in another, perhaps more familiar terminology, the symbolic form is the *schema* in which something is experienced and as such the form in which any experience is always already carried out. Coming from Cassirer’s Kantian background, from what has been said it is clear to him: A symbolic form is the condition of the possibility of experiencing. It is a *transcendental form of intuition*. It has to be pointed out that in his theory of symbolic forms Cassirer remains a transcendental philosopher in the Kantian tradition. We are not talking about the object of experience but our *experience of* the object, with the necessary addition that this experience is in itself schematized in a plural manner. The symbolic forms are not “contexts”

gathered from empirical data but a priori forms in which spiritual life carries itself out. However, whereas Kant focused primarily on the object of natural science—and in this narrow understanding he was read by the neo-Kantian mainstream, esp. of the Marburg school—Cassirer's realization is that *any* intuited object stands under laws or forms of intuition, only that these forms represent different “spiritual energies” which do not belong to the type of intuition that characterizes science and its ideal of exactness. To be sure, Cassirer does not revoke the forms of intuition, space and time. Rather, space and time mean something different in mythical than in scientific thought. In this sense, every form of intuition as energy of spirit represents a meaningful form that stands on its own ground and has its own “right.” “The concept of truth and reality of science is different than that of religion or art.”²⁷ Each symbolic form has its own way of functioning with its own cognitive meaning, telos and veracity. The symbolic forms of language, myth, religion and science neither form a hierarchy in which the higher one “sublates” the lower in a dialectical fashion. Nor do they form strata that do not have any relation with each other. Rather, the symbolic forms are to be understood as parallel functional series with their *own* right and their *own* way of functioning serving their *own* cognitive function, however not like impenetrable “vessels” but as forms which can realize their mutual independence. They are, to say it with a Heideggerian term, equi-primordial and stand on their own ground. As such, their relation to other forms is secondary.

Describing the plurality of these forms is thus the task of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Perhaps for lack of a better term, Cassirer terms this project a critique of *culture*, in this establishing a direct connection to Kant's critique of reason, which he purports to fulfill: “Hence, the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture. It seeks to understand and to show how all content of culture, in so far as it is more than merely a particular content, presupposes an original deed of the spirit. In so doing, the basic thesis of idealism finds its genuine and complete authentication [*Bewährung*].”²⁸ Yet, acknowledging different forms of spiritual energy (“deeds”) does not mean that the different “truths” of these different forms are a random collection or that truth itself becomes relative. This has to be ruled out from the beginning especially in the light of Cassirer's repeated invocation of Kant's critical philosophy, although Kant was too much fixated on reason. To say that the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture is the same as insisting on the observation that reason is not just *pure* reason alone. Reason can be better understood as spirit which has different ways of “manifesting” itself through symbolic forms generating specific objectivities (the objectifications of art, of language, scientific theories etc. and their corresponding meaningful “realms”). Reason remains reason; it is just no longer conceived as a monolithic structure. Where in Kant this transcendental project

is mainly carried out for the sake of a system of knowledge,²⁹ we shall have to ask in the second part whether Cassirer has the same goal.

To say, however, that reason is plural does not mean that it is split or ruptured into incoherent fragments. The plural forms of spirit all bear the mark of reason. Reason is plural and *therefore* universal—as spirit. The One of spirit is rather, as Cassirer likes to point out, quoting the Greek “*hen diapherómenon heautô*,” “one which is differentiated within itself.” Or to say it in another famous quotation: *to on légetai pollachôs*, being is spoken of (!) in manifold ways—it might be “originally” one (which would be a purely metaphysical, speculative statement), but we are speaking in the transcendental register of our *experience of being*. As such, the energy of spirit is not only plural, but each symbolic form in which it asserts its spiritual energy has its own way of working and more importantly, has or serves its own and genuine cognitive function. As Cassirer reminds us, the “truth” or validity claim of myth is completely different from that of science. The pressing question, “which is the *real* truth?” can be rejected, paradoxically, as skeptical because the quest for exact and real truth is a specifically *scientific* question that has little or nothing to do with the “truth” of art or religion. In other words, demanding “exact truth” is a question that makes sense only in the symbolic form of science and cannot be applied to that of myth.³⁰ To do so would mean committing a *metábasis eis allo génos*. One can *compare* these different truths but one cannot “*mix*” them by transposing the truth-*principles* from one form to the other. All “truth” is contextual, even that of exact science because it is relative to the symbolic form in which it has its specific function. The true is the whole, but each particular truth is relative upon its symbolic context. The whole is hence not any sphere-shaped absolute (to cite Parmenides’ image) but the absolute is essentially the relative. It is impossible to rid oneself of symbolic forms and to see “absolutely” or “freely.” We never see the “thing in itself” but only phenomena bearing a certain symbolic pregnancy. Likewise, we do not live in one world but in a plurality of meaningful contexts that have been generated by the energy of spirit, which is nothing but human reason conceived of in the totality of its achievements. Yet, as we shall see, this does not visibly overcome of the threat of relativism, which Cassirer felt and sought to battle.

II. Problems with the System of Symbolic Forms and Possible Resolutions:

Cassirer’s Theory of Symbolic Forms as Ethical Critique of Culture

Problems arise (at the latest) when one makes the attempt to systematize these symbolic forms or to mold these observations into a philosophical system, which, one assumes (perhaps naively), was Cassirer’s aim. The first question is, most obviously, how one is to imagine the relation of the different forms to one another. In other words, what is the systematic

upshot of this theory? Is the claim to the plurality of symbolic forms a purely descriptive assessment allowing for further factual development or does Cassirer have a certain fixed systematics in the back of his mind? Just how many forms are there—are there more than the ones Cassirer presents to us, and what about the ones he merely mentions (such as, in a few places, economy)³¹ but does not analyze? And did he not mention more forms because there are no more or because he simply did not bother or was not interested in dealing with them? Is his philosophy of culture a “working philosophy” with open, even endless horizons for future researchers? And if the forms he mentions are indeed the only ones, by which criteria does he claim this and how does he know this? If all truth is contextual, what about the truth of the theory of symbolic forms itself? In this cluster of questions let us first turn to the question of a system of symbolic forms. I cannot claim that these issues can indeed be completely resolved, but want to point to possible ways of dealing with the problems arising from Cassirer’s systematic approach. It is my belief that Cassirer does not in the end get caught up in a simple or trivial relativism but that his philosophy in fact presents an intriguing way out of relativism precisely in the *application* of his theory.

To begin with, with regards to the huge theoretical claim such as the one Cassirer makes with the theory of symbolic formation, the question as to a certain systematics of this sketch is not an external one. Rather, it is a question that the very setup evokes. However, Cassirer would most likely feel misunderstood were one to think he intended to draft a full-blown philosophical system such as that of, say, Hegel. Although his draft of a “phenomenology of knowledge” especially in the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* has many allusions to Hegel, Cassirer’s own approach is far too critical as to believe that the system of knowledge can be developed in a purely theoretical “logics”—let alone out of a single principle. Yet even a “low-key theory” such as Cassirer’s needs to become clear about its own stance with regards to a systematics. Indeed, in this context, Cassirer insists on the difference between forging a philosophical system and *philosophizing systematically*.³² It is especially in this respect that one can rightfully speak of Cassirer’s departing from one of the main paradigms of neo-Kantianism, *viz.*, the erection of a systematic edifice.³³ Yet as we shall see, there are, paradoxically speaking, systematic reasons for rejecting a philosophical system. Nevertheless, describing the symbolic forms is certainly a systematic task in Cassirer’s in-depth demonstration of how certain symbolic forms function. The three volumes of the *Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms*, in total over one thousand pages, demonstrate this impressively. What makes these descriptions “systematic” can well be compared to the systematic claim *Husserl* makes in describing certain regions of intentional life. External perception, just as the symbolic form of

language, has a certain “systematic” manner of functioning and unfolding. “Systematic” is often synonymous with “essential” or “eidetic” in so far as the manner in which perception of an external object through *kinaestheses* functions is necessary for every being constituted as having a lived-body, as do certain grammatical structures hold for a certain branch of language, i.e., indo-European languages. In this sense, and Cassirer makes this very explicit, the method of his analyses is indeed phenomenological as it is about a proper and detailed description of the phenomena in question in a coherent, “systematic” manner.³⁴

However, the mere order in which Cassirer discusses the symbolic forms—first language, then myth, then science, without claiming to be exhaustive—must bear a certain systematic significance. More simply put, there must be reasons why specifically *these* forms are discussed and in *this* particular order. Only on few occasions does he actually reflect on these issues: Myth, he claims, is the most fundamental symbolic form because in every culture it is the first state upon which higher cultural life develops. All other symbolic forms come forth from myth and develop their own structure in contrast to it: “the problem of the origins of art, of the origins of writing, the origins of law and of science lead back to a level in which they all still rest in the unmediated and undifferentiated unity of mythical consciousness.”³⁵ Probably, nobody would seriously dispute this. Yet why, then, does he not discuss this symbolic form first, instead of, as he in effect does, language? To make a case for Cassirer, perhaps one reason for this is that he does not want the plurality of symbolic forms to be understood in a hierarchy or as levels of spirit’s self-unfolding as in Hegel’s scenario.³⁶ In this sense, the seemingly random way of discussing the forms can be seen as an acknowledgment of the plurality and in this sense mutual independence of the symbolic forms and their irreducibility vis-à-vis one another. He is a “phenomenologist” in the sense of not wanting to have his view obstructed from the outset by systematic prejudgments.

Yet this assessment again becomes questionable in view of the claim that myth is the most fundamental form in which all others are rooted. Their supposed “equi-primordality” can thus not be maintained. This becomes especially clear when one compares the different symbolic forms Cassirer lays out: whereas it is not too hard to imagine that art, religion and science are alternative symbolic forms conceptualizing the world in their specific way, how can language be interpreted as a symbolic form of its own? Does language not *penetrate* all of these spheres, and this being the case, how can it then be a true symbolic form (i.e., a form of its own)? Would it not have to be appended to one, or even all of the symbolic forms? Perhaps it is *precisely because* language penetrates all spheres of human life—i.e., spiritual life—that Cassirer considers language a symbolic form of its own, conveying—in a unique way—a

meaning that only language can reveal. Instead of criticizing this approach one could even exploit it by saying that, again, Cassirer was so true a phenomenologist heeding to the things themselves that he was not concerned with systematic boundaries and limits prematurely cutting off internal or essential connections. Rather, he merely wanted to authentically describe these forms in which we understand the world in a manifold of meaningful ways. Nevertheless, declaring language to be a symbolic form remains problematic (for the reasons mentioned).

Yet, there might also be a deeper, intrinsically systematic meaning for this apparent randomness which we can explicate by turning to the issue of the *number* of the symbolic forms. As pointed out, Cassirer only discusses in depth the symbolic forms of language, myth and science, and he mentions religion, art, and once even (in his later work) technology and economy, but does not offer a closer analysis of the latter.³⁷ Is this to be understood as (ultimately) an exhaustive account of the symbolic forms or are there even more which he simply does not mention? Are there perhaps even sub-forms within certain forms? Or rather, is this universe of symbolic formation comparable to an open, flexible system, where, perhaps over the course of history, new forms can develop just as technology is a phenomenon of the more immediate past?³⁸ If this were the case, leaving open the question of “closure” would be a necessary consequence of the temporality of symbolic forms and their diversity, and Cassirer makes it repeatedly clear that he is merely making a beginning in his research of symbolic formation. Further differentiations and distinctions might make it necessary to discern yet another form, or history might be headed in a way that a new symbolic form arises due to special circumstances (for even an account of the way spirit has evolved up to now cannot rule out unexpected changes in the future)—or, finally, one can not *a priori* exclude as impossible that historical, archeological research might perhaps discover an as of yet unknown human culture which does not dispose of anything comparable to myth as a foundational level in the way it has been conceptualized previously. In this sense, the philosophy of Symbolic Forms would be—quite like Husserl wished to conceive of phenomenology—a working philosophy with potentially endless horizons open for future generations of philosophers (and positive scientists). In other words, declaring a fixed number of symbolic forms would preclude the discovery of yet unknown forms. The fact that the symbolic forms are transcendental does not mean they are eidetic, i.e., supra-temporal.

Furthermore, even attempting to pronounce such a fixed number would be problematic for yet another reason, and approaching it reveals another muddy (and perhaps the most difficult) point in Cassirer’s theory. Principally, one of the main discoveries of the theory of symbolic forms is that every concept and statement is embedded in a functional

conceptualization or, which says the same, every utterance is contextual or perspectival (or, if it was not in fact Cassirer's discovery, at least he attempted to draw systematic conclusions from it). Cassirer certainly was aware of the fact that this must certainly be true for the utterances of the philosopher, as well. But what about these utterances? What about philosophy, what about the philosophy of symbolic forms itself? Would not philosophy itself fall under the contextuality of symbolic formation? In the three published volumes of his *magnum opus* Cassirer did not explicitly thematize the role of philosophy in the totality of the symbolic forms, and it soon became obvious that this could not be due merely to a forgetfulness on his part, but in fact represents a blind spot in his theory—something he shied away from perhaps subconsciously on purpose.

Yet, the question of the role of philosophy within the symbolic forms can be immediately linked to the question of their systematics. Again, the question must be: why does Cassirer not give an exhaustive overview of the symbolic forms, and this not due to some shortcoming but for systematic reasons? The answer is implied: Making a statement of this type would mean occupying in *itself* a certain perspective. It is an answer that the *philosophy* of symbolic forms itself is not permitted to spell out. This leads, it seems, to two consequences, both highly problematic: It could either mean (a) that philosophy occupies a higher stance than the other symbolic forms: it would be a perspective overlooking these. Immediately one must ask how this is possible if one cannot escape the guise of symbolic experiencing? Such a perspective would be utterly impossible to attain. It would be a "view from nowhere"—where the point of the transcendental theory of symbolic formation is precisely that seeing "raw being" is illusory—be this "prior to" or "beyond" symbolic formation. In the framework of this philosophy, there can be no "nowhere."

On the other hand (b), if philosophy is not a view from nowhere and if one acknowledges the perspectivalness of every spiritual action the consequence would be that philosophy would in fact constitute *in itself* a symbolic form. But this, too, has disastrous consequences: if the theory of the symbolic forms is but one form next to others, this would amount to a relativism as this "truth" would stand equally next to others. It would be merely one theory of conceptualizing a universe of meaning next to that of myth, art, religion, and so on. The theory would annul and cancel itself out. In other words, the implicit reasons for Cassirer's shying away from a full-fledged system would be that he would have to give in to the consequence that asserting such a systematics would declare one symbolic form as absolute and render the others relative to it, where it is precisely the point that all the actual and possible symbolic forms are relative but

legitimate. Thus, in this reading, Cassirer has shied away from *having to admit* that his philosophy is a relativism.

As we shall immediately see, the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is neither of the two alternatives outlined. As it turns out, there is a third viable alternative. In Cassirer's view, the philosopher does not stand above the energy of spirit; rather, she can "merely" describe it. This "mere description," however, is in fact capable of quite a lot. Philosophy's primary task, according to Cassirer, is analyzing the different ways in which spirit manifests itself in the world and reducing this apparent manifold to irreducible forms (and within these forms to certain basic phenomena).³⁹ However, philosophical thought can and must never make a statement about their totality or anticipate their exact quantity, therein perhaps prematurely exhausting them. This is the only "systematic" *caveat* the philosopher must bear in mind. For, the philosopher of symbolic forms does not and cannot stand detached from these forms but is *immersed* in them and wants to bring them to full fruition by trying to understand them both in themselves and in relation to each other. The philosopher is somebody who is no longer bound to one form, which hence exerts an "absolutizing" claim unto others. Rather, she as "disinterested" and uninvested observer has the ability, through philosophical reflection, to move from one form to another, without remaining "caught" in any of them. This reflection is "relativistic" in comparing different forms of spirit, but not a relativism which concludes that one is as "good" as the other.

Neither is it an "absolutism" because an absolute standpoint is merely an a priori presupposition if one were to claim the standpoint of absolute spirit. For, every claim to absoluteness jeopardizes the richness and mutual relativity of the symbolic forms and purports to speak from an absolute, ultimately preposterous standpoint. Thus, the fact that Cassirer, at least in his published writings, shies away from such "absolutizing" statements must be interpreted as intentional and stems from his intuitive distrust of any conception of "absolute spirit" into which every spiritual activity is eventually "sublated." There is a title for such an absolute standpoint: it is called ideology. Cassirer's thought is therefore also a fervent battle against totalizing theories, in philosophy in general and in the way certain theories factor into concrete historical situations in particular. Cassirer will ultimately turn this into an ethical reading and application of his thought.

The role of philosophy, i.e., the philosophy of symbolic forms, is described best in Cassirer's unpublished drafts to a fourth volume of this work:

This is the peculiarity of philosophical knowledge [Erkenntnis] as "self-knowledge of reason": it does not create a principally new symbol form... but it *comprehends* the earlier

modalities [of symbolic formation] as that which they are: particular symbolic forms....

Philosophy is both critique and fulfillment of symbolic forms....

Philosophy does not purport to posit another, higher form in place of the old forms, it does not want to replace one symbol by another—but its task consists in *seeing through the fundamental symbolic character of knowledge itself*. We cannot cast off these forms, although the compulsion [Zwang] to do so is innate in us, but we must grasp and *understand* it in its relative necessity.... We cannot overcome [this compulsion] by throwing off the cloak of symbolic forms and seeing the “absolute” face to face, but only by grasping each symbol in its *position* and understanding it as limited and conditioned by others. The “absolute” is always merely the complete, the accomplished and systematically overseen relative—and especially the absoluteness of spirit is not and cannot be anything else.⁴⁰

Philosophy thus has no “locus” of its own; rather, it is a spiritual endeavor, sifting through, as it were, the different symbolic forms, comprehending each of them in its peculiar place and *holding* each in this place, seeing to it that they do not “cross over” and blend into one another. Perhaps the role of the philosopher, to Cassirer, can be best called that of a watch-guard ensuring that none of these forms turns into an absolute stance and as such exerts a power which is not only unduly but can also become potentially dangerous. From here one can approach one field which Cassirer does not address explicitly and which one might expect to be considered a symbolic form of its own, namely *ethics*. Although Cassirer never drafted an “ethics,” his late work, written in the wake of World War II, can be read as a certain rehashing or recapturing of this seemingly neglected field in his earlier work.⁴¹ However, it is not a wholly new line of thought he is taking up here but merely a new twist to his basic theory. As especially his last work, *The Myth of the State*, intends to demonstrate, his whole philosophical intentions are in effect geared towards ethical application, and in doing so remain akin to the fundamentally enlightened character of his thought. As should have become clear by now, the philosophy of symbolic forms is by no means a postmodern relativism in simply acknowledging a plurality of meaningful contexts. Rather, it shows us that this plurality is an intrinsic characteristic of reason itself. At the same time, Cassirer insists that each of these forms has a certain cognitive function and truth in the overall framework of spirit. At the same time, it is a philosophy dedicated to enlightenment and to taking over responsibility, namely to be watchful that this plurality is maintained in a philosophical self-clarification. The plurality of spirit is its universality, and maintaining it is no easy task. As such philosophy is devoted to the freedom of spirit (*Geist*) and battles any *Ungeist*. Hence, doing philosophy in Cassirer’s spirit is itself an ethical deed.

This is the theoretical backdrop through which Cassirer comes to criticize fascism. One characteristic of the type of fascism the national socialistic dictatorship represented according to Cassirer consisted in, on the one hand, being acutely aware of the symbolic character of knowledge. Therefore, on the other hand, it was especially able to manipulate public or political discourse. Contrary to this misuse, Cassirer strives to show that the political sphere is more than just a public arena of rhetoric, but the open discourse of civilized mankind which has to be guarded against abuse and intolerance. Yet, seeing through the mechanisms of public discourse does not mean using them in an ethical way. Quite to the contrary: fascist rhetoric consisted precisely in mixing symbolic forms, deliberately overstepping boundaries, specifically with the attempt to enable the rational forces of a civil society to become weakened in such a way as to make it possible for other, especially mythical forces to invade this discourse of a society built on rational, democratic principles. This is in a nutshell his critique of Nazi ideology: that the symbolic form of myth consisting of irrational forces threatens to destroy modern civilization and its achievements in letting it enter unfiltered into this society, which was established on the basis of rational principles. For example, by reverting to categories such as “good” or “evil” and amplifying them by use of modern technology and media, they have the potential to overpower the rational and sober voice of reason. Myth in itself is not the problem to Cassirer—as is amply clear from thematizing it as a symbolic form—but utilizing mythological categories in rational discourse contorts rationality itself. What goes on here is a mingling of “truths” which is aimed at discrediting the truth of rational, democratic, intersubjectively consensual discourse. In spite of the problems pointed out with the systematic implications and intricacies of Cassirer’s theory, his timeliness lies in his attempt to not only draft a universal portrait of reason in its different cultural forms within the world of spirit but also in his intent to steer this seemingly high-spirited “academic” discourse towards an ethical employment in a state of a “crisis in man’s knowledge of himself.”⁴² In this he has taken seriously Kant’s admonition that reason cannot content itself with being pure reason alone but that its primacy lies in its practical application.

To summarize briefly, these are the points in the case of Cassirer, which should make him (it seems to me) especially attractive to contemporary thought:

—Cassirer’s thought has developed, and most likely only *could* develop, because it was linked so closely to two different spheres: a) modern science, and b) the history of philosophy. It was only in close connection to both that Cassirer worked out his own theory and, conversely, was able to contribute theoretically to the sciences as well as the history of philosophy proper with a systematic intention, and not just as historiography. Philosophizing in an “ivory tower”

was something neither to be desired nor even possible to Cassirer. Not to say anything more concrete about how Cassirer adhered to this method (this is not the place to discuss this), this is a “stylistic” ideal which contemporary philosophy would benefit to adopt or emulate.

—Systematically speaking: Although reason is one, this reason is better understood as “spirit” and as such it is always already in the state of plurality. Spirit is broken in refractions of independent, but not unrelated, symbolic forms. In this regard, Cassirer attempts to salvage the paradigm of reason without succumbing to a postmodern position where “anything goes” in different referential frameworks. Yet he pays heed to the diversity and plurality of spiritual life. Consequently, the symbolic forms are not arbitrary “language games” but genuine and clearly identifiable forms in which spirit generates meaning. Cassirer thus safely and in a most original way navigates between the Skylla of absolutism or rational fundamentalism and the Charybdis of relativism.

As such, following from this, there is a clear emphasis on spirit and its achievements. Cassirer’s philosophy is rationalistic but not naively so. It can be called (as it were) a “phenomenology of objective spirit” which highlights the objective, i.e., intersubjective, accomplishments of human beings in a cultural world—over against the emphasis on the single individual. Heidegger is therefore perfectly right to assert that there is no place in Cassirer’s philosophy for what he, Heidegger, calls *Dasein*,⁴³ because it is precisely this focus on “finitude” which the dimension of spirit is destined to overcome. In other words, Cassirer’s philosophy attempts a *middle way* between adhering to a problematic and “old-fashioned” conception of reason, rationality and enlightenment which has rightfully been subject to criticism after World War II on the one hand *and* a postmodern attitude of arbitrariness on the other precisely in linking the paradigm of plurality *to* rationality, conceived of as spirit. It is neither pluralistic alone by binding the plural of symbolic forms to spirit, i.e., to a “rationalistic” way of treating each other in tolerance and mutual respect. Nor is it rationalistic alone by declaring reason to be essentially all that human as *cultural* beings “do” in objective achievements, e.g., in art, religion, politics, economy etc. In opening up this scope of “spirit” the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is also a philosophical program that allows for further “filling in” of “blanks” that Cassirer has merely pointed to but did not himself broach. Thus, one can say that Cassirer has anticipated current debates, like those of relativism vs. absolutism or pluralism/diversity vs. unity, and has pointed to concrete ways of coming to grips with these seemingly unbridgeable concepts.

Appendix: A Note on Goodman

In his famous *Ways of World-Making*,⁴⁴ Goodman sets out to give an account of how it is that these different “worlds” we live in and by, come into being. He explicitly attributes this attempt to Cassirer’s concept of symbolic forms, although he makes it clear at the very outset that there is more that separates them rather than what they share in common. It was instead some interpreters of Cassirer who have made the attempt to better understand Cassirer by comparing him to Goodman.⁴⁵ And indeed, there are many elements in Goodman’s theory of “world-making” which seem to complement or at least shed light on Cassirer’s original idea. I believe that this reading—as intriguing as it may seem—is deeply flawed but that *ex negativo* it can help us better understand what Cassirer’s theory is about.

To begin with, Goodman is clearly committed to relativism, although it is a relativism “under rigorous constraints”:⁴⁶ “The movement is from unique truth and world fixed and found to a diversity of right and even conflicting versions or worlds in the making.”⁴⁷ Not even his own theory, Goodman would most likely claim, needs to bear any unifying truth, and this is clearly not his agenda. What interests him is the multiplicity of “frames of reference”⁴⁸ which is another term for the “multiple actual worlds” we live in. In this sense, they are not entirely different from what Husserl calls the “special worlds” (*Sonderwelten*) as meaningful nexuses of referential implication (*Verweisungszusammenhänge*): Each “version of the world” is “right under a given system—for a given science, a given artist or a given perceiver and situation.”⁴⁹ And it is in this sense that Goodman considers himself “like-minded” to Cassirer, in that, according to Goodman according to Cassirer, the plurality of worlds is “irreducible to a single base.”⁵⁰ So far so good: he concurs with Cassirer on the plurality of worlds—here leaving out whether symbolic forms are to be understood as “worlds”—and disagrees with him in that there is, or even is the need for, a unifying base or even unifying theory that embraces the special forms. However, as one continues in Goodman’s analysis, what *really* marks the difference to Cassirer is something different:

Where Cassirer is mostly content to lay out a “phenomenology of objective spirit” in spirit’s manifold manifestations, Goodman’s agenda lies rather with *what one can do* with this theory, namely, as the title of his work indicates, “ways of world-making” (emphasis added). And it becomes clear that this is utterly divorced from anything Cassirer would ever allow for: Goodman is interested in *how* it is that we as active agents are in the position to *make* worlds—*new* worlds, i. e., especially, through art, but also through other not merely “artistic” activities. The brunt of Goodman’s analyses is the actual laying out of *how* it is that we can make (“create”) new worlds, as it were in giving a set of instructions of how to construct new frames of

reference. These methods are (a) composition and decomposition, (b) weighting, (c) ordering, (d) deletion and supplementation, and (e) deformation.⁵¹ These are nothing but concrete instructions of how to “build” worlds, and not merely there to provide a “map” of the existing ones.⁵² This “building” can be literally the forging of new frames of reference, as in creating a new style in art, among which counts even the philosophical task of explicating the different, implicit worlds we live in: “Comprehension and creation go on together.”⁵³ In this sense, the philosopher not only observes what goes on in different human activities (as ways of world-making) but he or she is him- or herself actively involved in world-making, and this activity is in no way superior to others.

The radical difference to Cassirer is clear: there is no transcendental framework in Goodman. He is merely laying out empirical, even practical “rules” of how to go about creating new worlds as frames of reference, whereas Cassirer, in describing symbolic forms, is giving an analysis of transcendental forms of intuition which lie prior to any given experience. They are, in Cassirer, *laws* by which we experience the world and as such understand it. Furthermore, these forms of intuition are nothing that would ever be in our *power* to create but which are *there prior* to any experiencing and acting in the world. Transcendental forms of intuition can never be “made” but only described in their characteristics. They are the way spirit happens to be constituted, that is, differentiated into different symbolic forms, and these forms are prior to any actual “living.” It is reason *itself* that has already differentiated *itself* into different symbolic forms. It is for this reason that Cassirer’s approach can only be descriptive with regards to giving an account of the symbolic forms; it can only ever be a “phenomenology of spirit.”

But this of course points to a problem. Who or what is this ominous “spirit” Cassirer is talking about? Saying that “spirit” is just another word for “reason” in its diversity only shifts the epistemological problem to another level without solving it. In other words: Cassirer only accounts for a phenomenology of *objective* spirit in highlighting the forms and the manifestations of spirit, but not accounting for, i.e., in effect *characterizing* the actual *energy* which spirit is or constitutes. “Spirit” is a decidedly “operative term” in Cassirer’s theory.⁵⁴ In conclusion, I would like to suggest that such a “phenomenology of *subjective* spirit” can be found in Husserl’s mature analyses of transcendental subjectivity, especially in his draft of a “transcendental logic” in his late phase. Husserl’s method of showing how the world for a subject is built up genetically through first “passive” and then “active” intentional acts could, I reckon, be employed to actually flesh out how a “symbolic form” comes about. To be sure, Husserl only exemplified this in detail with regards to the perceptual life-world, but anticipated the same kind of analysis for the world as an intersubjective and historical world of culture. In

this, however, his philosophical system has equally remained incomplete. This is not the place, however, to broach such a discussion.

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Notes

1. For an account of Cassirer's time in the United States, see D. Gawronski, "Ernst Cassirer: His Life and His Work," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (Evanston, Ill.: Open Court, 1949), pp. 31–37; and T. Cassirer, *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), esp. pp. 278ff.

2. Another reason for his lacking popularity in the United States is that Cassirer died after only four years residence (rather visit, as was initially planned) in the United States, i.e., before he could actually establish a circle of American students and followers.

3. See *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945*, ed. Donald P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); and Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. Four: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms, Including the Text of Cassirer's Manuscript on Basis Phenomena*, ed. John M. Krois and Donald P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). I shall be quoting from the latter texts, which first appeared in 1995 as critical edition, ed. by J. M. Krois as Vol. 1 of the German edition of the unpublished papers of Ernst Cassirer.

4. In the German-speaking world, the main proponents of Cassirer research are E. W. Orth, O. Schwemmer, B. Recki, E. Rudolph, D. Kaegi, and Chr. Möckel, to name the most prolific ones. For an overview of the newer Cassirer research, see *Über Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, ed. by H.-J. Braun, H. Holzhey, and E. W. Orth (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988); as well as *Ernst Cassirers Werk und Wirkung*, ed. by D. Frede and R. Schmücker (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1997). For Cassirer's reception in France, see *Ernst Cassirer. De Marbourg à New York. L'itinéraire philosophique* (Paris: Cerf, 1990). In Italy, it is especially the scholarly works of M. Ferrari which have presented the most influential Cassirer interpretations. More generally speaking, the interest in neo-Kantianism has been especially strong in Italy for some years. See *Neokantianismo e*

fenomenologia: Logica, psicologia, cultura e teoria della conoscenza, ed. St. Besoli, M. Ferrari, and L. Guidetti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2002).

5. M. Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (LaSalle: Open Court, 2000), esp. chaps. 7 and 8, pp. 111ff.

6. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy In a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942). Although this work is dedicated to her teacher, A. N. Whitehead, and has surprisingly few explicit references to Cassirer, the latter is nevertheless the dominant figure behind her work. Her own contribution can be seen in the detailed work on aesthetics in what she calls the general movement of *symbolic transformation* (see *Philosophy In a New Key*, p. viii). Langer has also translated Cassirer's *Language and Myth* into English, see below, note 23.

7. See the appendix for a brief discussion of Goodman's reading of Cassirer.

8. See "Die befreiende Kraft der symbolischen Formgebung. Ernst Cassirers humanistisches Erbe und die Bibliothek Warburg," in *Ernst Cassirers Werk und Wirkung*, ed. Frede and Schmücker, pp. 79–104. This positive assessment is not a mere eulogy of Cassirer; rather, in reading Habermas's text it becomes immediately clear that, in the way he frames Cassirer's approach and in his critique, Habermas is pursuing his own agenda. His critique of Cassirer consists in insisting that there can be no "place" or language of the philosophy of symbolic forms because language itself is a symbolic form. However, he already sees in Cassirer's own analysis of language a turn to a pragmatic analysis of language at work which, had Cassirer drawn the conclusions, would have led him to overcome his "epistemological narrowing" ("erkenntnistheoretische Verengung," p. 100), see *Ernst Cassirers Werk und Wirkung*, ed. Frede and Schmücker, pp. 98–100.

9. For a rather "postmodern" reading of Cassirer, see H. Paetzold, *Ernst Cassirer zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1993).

10. See M. Soboleva, "Zur philosophischen Hermeneutik Ernst Cassirers," in *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, Neue Folge, vols. 1–2 (2001), p. 281. See p. 290 and note 60 (on the same page).

11. Gadamer makes few allusions to Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. He, like most contemporaries of Cassirer, understood Cassirer to be mainly a historian of philosophy, most notably through his four volume study of *The Problem of Knowledge*. However, it is quite certain that Gadamer knew of Cassirer's systematic ideas of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. It would be worth a whole study of its own to show this, but paradigms of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, such as "understanding" and "history

of effects" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), have parallels or even equivalents in Cassirer's theory: the symbolic forms are not "ontological" categories but functional forms by which we live in and comprehend the world. The fact that Gadamer focuses on the mode of understanding in the human sciences and Cassirer on the plurality of understandings in all forms of interaction in the world might account for the fact that Gadamer has not explicitly reverted to Cassirer. Cassirer also conceived of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as a "hermeneutics." The passage where he mentions this will be discussed subsequently.

12. For an overview over the influences on Cassirer as well as Cassirer's influence on his contemporaries, see J. M. Krois, "Problematik, Eigenart und Aktualität der Cassirerschen Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen," in *Über Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, ed. Braun, Holzhey, and Orth, pp. 15–44.

13. The earlier Cassirer was perceived by his fellow scholars in the neo-Kantian movement throughout Germany as a new "rising star," see U. Sieg, *Aufstieg und Niedergang des Marburger Neukantianismus. Die Geschichte einer philosophischen Schulgemeinschaft* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), chap. 3.3., pp. 328–345, esp. p. 333f. For an account of the neo-Kantian movement in general see the definitive study by K. Chr. Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus. Die deutsche Universitätsphilosophie zwischen Idealismus und Positivismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986). This study is partly translated into English as *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

14. It was especially Orth who has made an effort to point out the phenomenological elements in Cassirer's philosophy. See esp. "Phänomenologie in Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen," in E. W. Orth, *Von der Erkenntnistheorie zur Kulturphilosophie: Studien zu Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), pp. 162–175. For another comparison between phenomenology (Husserl's, to be precise) and the philosophy of symbolic forms, see Chr. Möckel, "Die anschauliche Natur des ideierend abstrahierten Allgemeinen. Eine Kontroverse zwischen Edmund Husserl und Ernst Cassirer," in *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, vol. 1–2 (2001), pp. 233–258; and M. Bösch, "Symbolische Prägnanz und passive Synthesis. Genetische Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung bei Cassirer und Husserl," in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 109 (2001), pp. 148–161.

15. This goes at least for his interpretation of modern philosophy as of the Renaissance, which is the topic of his four-volume *The Problem of Knowledge*. Yet in the introduction to the problem of symbolic forms in the first volume of his magnum opus he

even goes back to the Presocratic paradigm of *noein* and *einai* (Parmenides) to frame the problem of philosophy as that of knowledge. This is not to be seen as a narrowing of his view of philosophy stemming from the neo-Kantian background (which conceives of philosophy as scientific epistemology) but rather a systematic framing of his own problem of the symbolic forms, which expands the problem of critique of knowledge (the problem of critical philosophy) to that of a critique of culture. See the systematic introduction to the first volume, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen I, Die Sprache* (Oxford: B. Cassirer, 1954), pp. 3–52. This three-volume work will be quoted subsequently as “PhsF” + Roman numeral indicating the volume number.

16. In the following, I am drawing on main lines from Cassirer’s *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, esp. chaps. 1–2 and the concluding chapters, 6–8. It is interesting to note that already in this work Friedman sees Cassirer departing from the strict “party line” of Marburg neo-Kantianism in his insistence on the procedural character of schematizing sensibility with the aid of categories, see Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*, chap. 3, p. 32.

17. Husserl’s concept of the life-world is equally a conceptualization—to be sure, of prescientific experience—and as such an abstraction. Although Cassirer insists that we can never “escape” symbolic formation, he does draw a distinction between “natural” and symbolic experience. This refers back to a discussion, whether one can speak of the symbolic forms as “worlds” in Goodman’s sense. While I agree with Kaegi’s assessment (see D. Kaegi, “Jenseits der symbolischen Formen. Zum Verhältnis von Anschauung und künstlicher Symbolik bei Ernst Cassirer,” in *Dialektik*, vol. 1 [1995], pp. 73–84) that the symbolic forms cannot be understood this way due to the “natural” symbolism of preconceptual experience. Thus, although the comparison with Goodman is misleading for a number of other reasons (see the appendix), I still want to insist on Cassirer’s making a point of the human mind’s inability to leave or step outside the symbolic forms. This is made especially clear in Cassirer’s metaphysical considerations of the philosophy of symbolic forms (in the planned, but never completed fourth volume, see the longer quote here, p. 37). In other words, although there might be symbolisms on essentially two levels, even the “natural symbolism” is a symbolism. That is, even on this level we cannot step outside the basic thesis of idealism which states a coincidence—or in Husserl’s words—a correlation between thinking and being.

18. This shift or replacement of the substantialist by the functionalist account takes place in Descartes’ philosophy. See Cassirer’s treatment of Descartes in volume 1 of *The Problem of Knowledge (Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der*

neueren Zeit [Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1994 (reprint of the third edition)], p. 504). The first edition of this work was published in 1906, four years before *Substance and Function*. In the latter work, Cassirer, as it were, only draws the systematic conclusions he had already reached through his historic studies.

19. In Cassirer's view, modern philosophy is characterized as "*Erkenntniskritik*," literally "epistemo-critique." This entails that the Copernican turn to consciousness is not something that occurred only in Kant's philosophy. Rather, it is a process that has begun essentially with Descartes and came to a certain high point in Kant, and was further developed in post-Kantian philosophies (essentially German Idealism).

20. It should also be mentioned that Kant characterized the categories as "functions of the understanding"; see *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 94, see also *ibid.*, § 9, B 95ff., and B 428.

21. *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff. Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1994 [reprint of the 1st edition of 1910]), p. 322. This Goethe quotation (from *Maximen und Reflexionen*, no. 575) will be employed subsequently by Cassirer time and again. See also Ernst Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, ed. by J. M. Krois et al., *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995), p. 199.

22. As is well known, with Cassirer's call to the University of Hamburg, he came in contact with Aby Warburg and his famous library from which he was to benefit to a degree that, as he himself admitted, was incomparable to any other aid or influence on his work. See the introduction to the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms II, Das mythische Denken* (Oxford: B. Cassirer, 1954), p. xiii.

23. Already in the first presentation of the theory of the plurality of symbolic formation, this enumeration is merely laid out and in no way motivated in its systematic necessity. See *Language and Myth*, trans. S. K. Langer (New York: P. Smith, 1946), p. 8. After stating his claim concerning the "self-dissolution of the spirit" (*ibid.*), he goes on without further ado: "From this point of view, myth, art, language and science appear [!] as symbols... in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own" (*ibid.*).

24. *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1983), p. 175 (my translation).

25. See *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen III, Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Oxford: B. Cassirer, 1954), part II, chap. 5, pp. 222–237. This concept is often regarded as a novel theme within the theory of symbolic forms (see Krois, "Problematik," p. 23f.),

whereas it seems to me Cassirer has merely, as it were at the end of constructing his philosophy of symbolic forms (in the third volume of 1929), found a “pregnant” term for what has been already thematic all along, only that the concept of symbolic pregnancy pays more attention to the individual object (as a concrete symbol) rather than the symbolic form within which it appears or to which it is bound.

26. See *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 337.

27. *PhsF I*, p. 24

28. *PhsF I*, p. 11

29. See *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 860.

30. To employ a different example which, at first sight, has little to do with Cassirer’s analyses but which upon closer inspection (it appears to me) would be a good item to demonstrate the validity of this theory is the debate between “creationists” and “evolutionists” in the context of high school education so hotly debated in some parts of the world, including the United States of America. It seems to me that one could resolve this issue—at least theoretically—with the tools of symbolic forms: Following Cassirer, one could say that both the creationist and evolutionist accounts of the origin of man have their own right and justification but only *in* a certain symbolic framework. The solution or resolving of this debate would then be to say that there *is* no debate—or rather, there *should not* be one—between these in the first place because they both only make sense within their own symbolic form and hence also serve different cognitive functions and interests: The evolutionistic account is a specifically *scientific* account conceived of and carried out with help of scientific methods in order to give an “objective” account of this origin in “objective” time. On the other hand, the creationist account might be termed a mythological or religious account which e.g., serves to show metaphorically man’s creation and position in the world in relation to the godly creator (which science deliberately excludes as a sort of methodical epoché). The mistake in this debate is, said from another perspective, that each account takes itself as absolute, i.e., does not realize that it speaks from out of a certain symbolic form which does in no way exclude other accounts stemming from other symbolic forms. To apply the same truth criteria (e.g., exactitude) from one form to another would be a classical *metabasis* in Cassirer’s eyes.—To be sure, this is merely a philosophical framing of the problem and does not take other issues into consideration, such as political interests involved or the danger of religious fanaticism.

31. *PhsF II*, p. ix.

32. Indeed, in his treatment of Hegel in the third volume of *The Problem of Knowledge*, Cassirer criticizes Hegel's concept of systematics. Hegel's system is essentially unable to deduce the principle from which one concept arises from another. Therefore, this system has ultimately no explanatory power "outside" of itself. See *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, vol. 3: Die nachkantischen Systeme (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1994), p. 370f. See Bayer's comments on the character of Cassirer's "systematic overview" in T. I. Bayer, *Cassirer's Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* (New York/London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 172f.

33. It is a longstanding discussion in Cassirer research whether he truly departed from the classic form of neo-Kantianism or whether, in his deepest intentions, remained loyal to them. Whereas Krois, in "Problematik," claims that Cassirer indeed was underway to an original conception of his own (see also W. Marx, "Cassirer's Philosophie—ein Abschied von kantianisierender Letztbegründung," in *Über Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, ed. Braun, Holzhey, and Orth, pp. 75–88), other studies have shown that Cassirer, in his main intentions with his philosophy of symbolic forms, has remained true to the Marburg school; see Orth, *Von der Erkenntnistheorie zur Kulturphilosophie*, and J. Seidengart, "Die philosophische Bedeutung des Unendlichkeitsbegriffs in Ernst Cassirers Neukantianismus," in *Neukantianismus—Perspektiven und Probleme*, ed. Orth and Holzhey [Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994], pp. 442–456, esp. p. 447ff.). One especially interesting question is whether Cassirer has remained close to Natorp's late philosophy in which he allegedly also departed from the Marburg doctrine; see M. Heidegger, "Zur Geschichte des philosophischen Lehrstuhls seit 1866," in *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1991), pp. 304–311. In this fairly unknown text from 1927, in which Heidegger traces the history of Marburg neo-Kantianism (the *Lehrstuhl* he refers to is the chair of the Marburg philosophical faculty which Cohen and later Natorp occupied), he points out Natorp's late development as overcoming the specific Marburg doctrine of neo-Kantianism, and concludes: "Cassirer trifft auf eigenem Wege mit den Bemühungen Natorps zusammen..." (p. 310).

34. See the footnote Cassirer makes in the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* on Husserl, *PhsF II*, p. 16, where he sees Husserl (of *Ideas I*) in direct accordance with Cassirer's own project.

35. *PhsF II*, p. ix.

36. This is not to say that Cassirer does not imagine a certain "dialectic," namely between language and spirit (see Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, esp.

the text on “Geist’ und ‘Leben,’” pp. 3–32). However, this dialectic takes place within each symbolic form and is not a way of explaining the relation of different forms to each other as in Hegel where the dialectical method is designed to show the evolvment of one “form” of spirit out of another. On Cassirer’s relation to Hegel see D. P. Verene, “Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer: The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,” in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 30 (1969), pp. 33–46, esp. p. 37ff.

37. Art and technology are discussed in *An Essay on Man* (chap. 9) and *The Myth of the State* (chap. 18). Cassirer also mentions history among symbolic forms and devotes a chapter to it in his *Essay in Man*. However, it is not clear whether history is in itself a symbolic form or rather the (temporal) form in which the symbolic forms themselves “evolve.” This ambiguity cannot be discussed here. For a discussion of history in Cassirer’s philosophy see J. M. Krois, *Cassirer. Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1987), esp. chap. 5 (p. 172ff.).

38. Compare this conception of an openness of symbolic formation to Rickert’s concept of an “open system.” This system conception assumes a system which is however not “static” but rather dynamic and open to new additions but nevertheless retains its basic “system form.”

39. In the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer expounds his theory of the “basis phenomena” which are conceived of certain “primal phenomena” by which every symbolic form must be ordered. See Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, pp. 123–195. For a thorough commentary on this concept, see T. I. Bayer, *Cassirer’s Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, pp. 129–152.

40. Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, p. 264f. (my translation; I deliberately deviate here from Krois’s elegant but freer translation).

41. Although he mentions law (*Recht*) as a symbolic form, there is no separate treatment of it, nor, more specifically, of morality. Recki criticizes Cassirer’s approach, in that his conception of culture made it “impossible” for him to write an ethics. Paradoxically, she claims that it is not the distance to the sphere of the practical but rather the proximity which makes a clear-cut and distinct conception of ethical action impossible: “Was eine Ethik auf der Grundlage von Cassirers Kulturphilosophie an der konsequenten begrifflichen Entwicklung hindert..., ist im Gegenteil gerade die hohe *praktische Appetenz*: der Ausgang von der *Praktizität* alles Menschlichen, mit dem im Grunde alle prägnanten Äußerungen schon als Form der Selbstbestimmung begriffen sind, so daß die spezifische Differenz der moralischen Fragestellung freilich—*im Ansatz* stecken bleibt.” (B. Recki, “Kultur ohne

Moral? Warum Ernst Cassirer trotz der Einsicht in den Primat der praktischen Vernunft keine Ethik schreiben konnte," in *Ernst Cassirers Werk und Wirkung*, ed. Frede and Schmücker, pp. 58–78, quotation from p. 78). This reading in my opinion completely misinterprets Cassirer's whole intention which is to link his critique of culture to an ethical consideration of culture. This "high practical appetite" is precisely Cassirer's intention!

42. See *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 1.

43. See "Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger," in M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, pp. 274–296, here p. 289: "Ich glaube [says Heidegger], daß das, was ich mit Dasein bezeichne, sich nicht übersetzen läßt mit einem Begriff Cassirers."

44. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of World-Making* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978). Here, his first essay "Words, Works, Worlds" (p. 1–22) will be the main focus of my attention.

45. See for example A. Graeser, *Ernst Cassirer* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994). See D. Kaegi, "Jenseits der symbolischen Formen," whose essay is essentially a critique of this reading. Again, it is not Goodman who is responsible for this but it is this interpretation which misreads both.

46. Goodman, *Ways of World-Making*, p. x.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., p. 2.

49. Ibid., p. 3.

50. Ibid., p. 4.

51. See *ibid.*, pp. 7–17.

52. Quotations from *ibid.*, p. 21. With regard to actually "building" new worlds, Goodman remarks: "A broad mind is no substitute for hard work." (*ibid.*)

53. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

54. See, however, Cassirer's text on "'Spirit' and 'Life'" in the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, where he attempts to characterize the subjective "force" of spirit—in this following the late Natorp—as "life." Yet, also following Natorp's paradigm of "reconstructive" analysis, this characterization can never be direct in accessing subjectivity but only reconstructive in going back from spirit's manifestations in objective forms.