THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The Legacy of Ernst Cassirer

Edited by
JEFFREY ANDREW BARASH

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Jeffrey Andrew Barash

INTRODUCTION

The eleven essays included in this volume examine the legacy of Ernst Cassirer's thought and reassess its significance for our contemporary world. In focusing on different aspects of Cassirer's wide-ranging work, in fields such as philosophy and history, cultural studies, ethics and politics, these essays seek less to impose unity and order on writings elaborated over the course of five decades, than to explore and interpret different facets of his work in its diversity. Presented sixty years after Cassirer's death in 1945, this volume does not intend to serve as an apology for his orientation; the studies that comprise it reflect a willingness to consider the criticism his work has generated, both among contemporaries and members of later generations. In keeping with this attempt to present a balanced approach to Cassirer's writings, the following introductory essay will consider the contribution made by his theory of symbolic forms in light of important criticism it has elicited.

CASSIRER'S THEORY OF THE SYMBOL

The title of this collection of essays indicates a primary concern of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy, namely the role for human understanding of the symbol in the constitution of reality. Cassirer's characterization of the symbol as "symbolic form," however, employs this term in a way which is neither usual nor universally accepted. Encompassing the primary symbolic form of language, as well as other cultural articulations such as art, myth, religion, and science, Cassirer's unusually broad definition of the symbol sharply contrasts with a narrower traditional usage in philosophy, where the symbol is said to mean something other than what it directly

represents, something that cannot directly correspond to its sensuous image. In view of the reception of Cassirer's philosophy, it is clear that this broad connotation he conferred on the symbol is surrounded by a certain paradox. Cassirer's philosophy, indeed, has generally been associated with Kantian idealism and with the neo-Kantian movement, with which he admittedly shared certain affinities. There are, however, key differences, and Cassirer's broad definition of the symbol manifests the dissonance between his thought and Kant's philosophy, as well as its distinctiveness in relation to more typical expressions of the neo-Kantian orientation. Indeed, one must ask whether the marked tendency to refer to Cassirer as just "another of those neo-Kantians," has not paradoxically obscured what is most original in his thinking.[1] This originality, as I will argue, comes to light above all in the unusual character of Cassirer's interpretation of the symbol as symbolic form.

Born in 1874 in Breslau, which at the time was part of Germany, Cassirer completed his doctoral dissertation in Marburg under the direction of Hermann Cohen, one of the leading figures in the German neo-Kantian movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cassirer's work manifests the inspiration of the neo-Kantian perspective, which constituted a main orientation of German intellectual life in the period extending roughly from the second half of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of the First World War. This orientation corresponded to a new philosophical direction, which strongly appealed to Cassirer, namely, the revival of the critical attitude espoused by Kant following the mid-nineteenth-century decline of German speculative idealism, and the concomitant rise of philosophical interest in the empirically oriented natural and human sciences. Cassirer, however, belonged to a later generation of philosophers sympathetic to the neo-Kantian perspective whose major work was elaborated in the years following the First World War, during a period when neo-Kantianism came increasingly under attack in the German universities. In the years following the Great War the orientations of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger or Karl Jaspers were particularly representative of a new climate in German academia, associated with the call to recast the theoretical and scientific preoccupations typical of neo-Kantianism in terms of a philosophy of existence. In this climate, the fact that Cassirer had been pinned with the neo-Kantian label helps account for the controversy which has surrounded the reception of his thought and which has all too often led to neglect of his ideas on their own merits.

This neglect was, of course, abetted by Martin Heidegger's polemical attitude toward Cassirer in the 1920s, expressed in Heidegger's course lectures, in a critical 1925 review of *Mythical Thought* (the second volume of Cassirer's major work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*), in his book *Sein und Zeit*, and in the celebrated Davos conference of 1929, which brought Cassirer and Heidegger face to face in a debate on the theme of Kantianism and Philosophy.[2] In these utterances Heidegger insisted that the neo-Kantian roots of Cassirer's thought accounted for what—in his view—was Cassirer's inadequate approach to the fundamental themes of human existence.[3]

Heidegger's lack of appreciation for the originality of Cassirer's work is perhaps not surprising if one remembers that the concept of the symbol—so central to Cassirer's philosophy—was of little interest to Heidegger. In Heidegger's major work of the period, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), he deals with the significance of "sign" (*Zeichen*) and "reference" (*Verweisung*), but symbols and symbolic interaction are hardly prominent themes in this or in his other works. Most important, Heidegger's book *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), which fueled his debate with Cassirer at Davos, focused on Kant's interpretation of the transcendental schematism by which the pure imagination lends structure to sensuous intuition, while Heidegger accorded little attention to that other means of conferring meaning on sensuous intuition—namely, comprehension by analogy—on the basis of which Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, had defined the symbol.[4] Precisely here, however, in Cassirer's reorientation of Kant's interpretation of the symbol, one begins to apprehend the originality of his concept of symbolic form.

Kant, we remember, had drawn a sharp distinction between the symbolizing activity of consciousness and its schematizing function. If by means of the latter the transcendental imagination lends intelligibility to sense impressions by placing them in a temporal structure ruled by general concepts, then symbols, operating by way of analogy, ascribe to sensuous contents a meaning which is not directly discernible in them. Symbols stand for a higher, supersensuous idea, which sense images can only represent. Hence, for example, in Raphael's painting, *Madonna of the Goldfinch*, the two trees that appear behind the Christ child are conceptually intelligible to us as images of trees since they are lent *schematic* unity over time by the imagination in accordance with general concepts; however, in the beautiful embodiment of the painted image, they also

symbolically elicit the double nature of Christ, human and divine, which no concept borrowed from experience can lead us to apprehend.

The originality of Cassirer's idea of the symbolic form lies in its fusion of these schematizing and symbolizing functions, which thus orients the supersensuous reference of symbols within the field of human experience. Far from representing the unseen by way of analogy, symbolic forms are identified with the schematizing functions that are themselves embodied in the myriad ways in which human beings construct reality through language, art, myth, religion, and science.[5] For Cassirer, schematizing form is not restricted to the pure intuitions and categories corresponding to the world of Newtonian physics which Kant sought to account for in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; rather, the formal constituents of experience—time, space, number—schematize inasmuch as they discern meaningful order in a heterogeneous, sensuous manifold through symbolic representation itself. Far from presenting a uniform intuitive or conceptual structure, the symbolic mediation of experience signifies that experience is articulated in a variety of ways in accordance with historically evolving cultural structures that lend it concrete coherence. Symbols are not merely representative of what is absent but are pregnant with manifold significations of human experience in its diversity.[6]

An important tradition of hermeneutic philosophy in Europe has directed sharp criticism at Cassirer's broad characterization of the symbol as symbolic form. Proponents of this tradition, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer or Paul Ricoeur, have argued in favor of the narrower definition of the symbol associated with Kantian idealism.[7] However, in the wake of Heidegger's critique of Cassirer's "Kantianism," it is precisely the tendency to take to task Cassirer's philosophy in light of its Kantian roots that has all too often coincided with a failure to recognize the deeper implications of Cassirer's "un-Kantian" insight concerning the symbolic elaboration of reality. It is hoped that the essays in this volume will redress the balance and contribute to a retrieval of this seminal feature of the legacy of Ernst Cassirer.

ETHICS, POLITICS, HISTORY: THE RAMIFICATIONS OF CASSIRER'S PHILOSOPHY

If one may speak of a distinct Kantian influence on Cassirer's philosophy, it is to be found less in his theory of the symbol than in presuppositions

concerning ethics and politics that are expressed in his depiction of the concrete engagement of symbolic forms in the process of history. Where Cassirer's idea of history in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* drew most directly on Hegel's thought, Cassirer disavowed Hegel's claim to provide absolute foundations for truth in the unfolding of the historical process itself. It is in the aim of securing universal and transhistorical moorings for truth, capable of withstanding the contingency of an historical process bereft of intrinsic absolute foundations, that Cassirer renewed a tradition culminating in Kant's practical philosophy.

In the preface to volume three of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, entitled *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, Cassirer characterized the central tendency of his thought as "phenomenological," taking this term less in the more current Husserlian sense, than in that originally employed by Hegel in his elaboration of an historically evolving phenomenology of the Spirit.[8] Throughout the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* this kinship to Hegel comes to light in Cassirer's conception of history as a process by which the human spirit progressively disengages its modes of understanding and of expression from the immediacy of a world of sense objects through an ever-deepening grasp of the ideal and spiritual source of the meanings it confers upon experience. In the course of this process, the earliest magical and mythical stages of consciousness, characterized by the immediate absorption of consciousness in the sensuous world, come to confront their own intrinsic limitations as ways of accounting for experience and of positing truth. This gives rise to a steady movement of interiorization, rationalization, and spiritualization of the sensuous realm (*Vergeistigung des Sinnlichen*), corresponding to the overcoming of the magical-mythical world-image and to the gradual advent of mythical-religious and modern scientific ways of symbolizing experience. And Cassirer aimed to demonstrate the momentous importance of this movement not only for the emergence of the modern scientific world-image, but also of a new ethical consciousness of humanity. Magical symbols might indeed have provided technical strategies for mastering hostile forces; in their subservience to these forces they had no intrinsic ethical significance. Ethical consciousness depended on the advent of a new awareness of the personal self in its spiritual autonomy and its ability to act freely in relation to the spontaneous processes of the sensuous environment.

In the Western world, the overcoming of the rudimentary magical world-image in its subservience to sensuous immediacy was made possible,

for Cassirer, by the double heritage of biblical prophecy and of Platonic idealism. The prophets distinguished the symbolism of the sacred from any form of magical-mythical appearance by identifying the sacred with a transcendent God. The books of the Prophets, like the New Testament that followed, confirmed the role of God as the basis of ethical goodness beyond the vicissitudes of the sensuous realm and as the source of commandments addressed to freely acting individuals. In another perspective, Plato's philosophy also presupposed the nonsensuous foundations of ethical goodness with the celebrated idea expressed in the *Republic* of the utter transcendence of the good, of the "good beyond being," positing the sovereignty of universally valid ethical norms which, beyond all modifications to which the world of sense data is subject, can be made intelligible to rational investigation.[9]

It would reach beyond the confines of the present introduction to provide a detailed examination of Cassirer's interpretation of history, as presented in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. We will limit our examination to his interpretation of the historical elaboration of the rationalist tradition that overcame the magical-mythical world-image, for this interpretation reveals both the ethical and political presuppositions underlying his theoretical orientation and the problematic character of this orientation for posterity. In his work of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Cassirer analyzed the renewal of this tradition that inspired the European Renaissance and was then reelaborated in the different philosophical perspectives of Grotius, Leibniz, and Kant. The analysis of different aspects of this tradition provided a prominent theme for works such as *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (1927), *The Platonic Renaissance in England and the Cambridge School* (1932), and *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932). Time and again Cassirer stressed the importance of theories of natural law in their attempt to provide rational foundations for ethics and for politics, so absolute that, according to Grotius' formulation they would be valid even if there were no God. No arbitrary will could modify fundamental laws to make what is intrinsically good, evil and what is evil, good. In what represented for Cassirer a retrieval of the Platonic notion of the "good beyond being," Grotius, and Leibniz after him, provided the most incisive elaborations of an orientation that Kant would later reinterpret in the critical perspective of his practical philosophy.[10] In each case, this heritage was reaffirmed to counteract the absolutist emphasis on the bare sovereign will—be it the will of the mortal sovereign or that attributed to

God—as the ultimate source of norms in ethics and politics. In view of the challenge posed during these years by political decisionism to all convictions concerning the rational foundations of ethicopolitical norms, it is highly significant that Cassirer explicitly drew upon the tradition inspired by the insights of Grotius, Leibniz, and Kant in his lively defense of the Weimar Republic presented in a speech of 1928, "The Idea of a Republican Constitution."[11]

This conviction concerning the role of autonomous, rationally intelligible ethical standards continued to influence Cassirer's ethicopolitical thinking even in later years, when the experience of the Hitler period and of the war dampened the optimism of his earlier philosophy of history. In the posthumously published work, *The Myth of the State*, he became convinced that the hold on modern humanity of archaic mythical beliefs and the emotions they fueled was far stronger and more politically dangerous than he had earlier realized. Because the thought and emotions characteristic of the mythical mentality serve to reinforce group identities and correspond to a social and political hierarchy in which the will of the individual is entirely subordinated to that of the group, ethical understanding and action must steadily resist this mentality, since ethics calls for individual autonomy and the ability to adopt a critical attitude toward group demands in light of rational analysis.[12]

In spite of the depth of Cassirer's concern with ethical themes, his work has met with severe criticism, and has been charged with deficiency in the ethicopolitical sphere. A particularly serious objection to Cassirer's thought in this respect has been raised by his former student, Leo Strauss. In a review of *The Myth of the State*, Leo Strauss rebuked what he took to be Cassirer's betrayal of moral philosophy. And Strauss, in still another text, cited this betrayal to account for what he took to be Cassirer's weakness in the debate with Martin Heidegger at Davos.[13] For Strauss, indeed, an adequate treatment of the political themes Cassirer addressed in *The Myth of the State* called for a "radical transformation of the philosophy of symbolic forms into a teaching whose center is moral philosophy, that is, something like a return to Cassirer's teacher Hermann Cohen, if not to Kant himself. Considering the criticism to which Kantian ethics is open, this demand is not met by Cassirer's occasional restatements of Kantian moral principles."[14]

Even if one sets aside the issue of the grounds for Strauss's critical attitude toward Kantian ethics, his still graver critique of Cassirer's thought

raises a crucial point. It not only highlights the problematic reception Cassirer's philosophy has encountered, but radically questions the ethical significance of the philosophy of symbolic forms which we are asserting. How might we account for this discrepancy and for criticism of Cassirer in the field of ethics, which Strauss's remarks exemplify?

Strauss's critical stance becomes understandable in light of his central premise concerning history and its relation to ethical and political truth. For Strauss, history hardly depicts a progression in the elaboration of symbols; rather, it represents a decline. He conceives modernity as an unhappy departure from the haven of premodern philosophy, and above all as an abandonment of the secure moorings for ethics provided by Platonic thought. Strauss believed moreover in the possibility of a return to premodern philosophy and embraced the conviction that "political philosophy involves a quest for final truth."[15]

For a philosophy of symbolic forms, however, final truth is forever precluded. As mediated by symbols, truth is given not as a fixed standard, but is attained through a process of elaboration expressed in the historicity of language, myth, religion, art, or science. This idea of an ongoing process makes it impossible to conceive of philosophical or religious orientations, whether of Plato, the Old Testament prophets, Grotius, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, or Immanuel Kant as more than moments in the ongoing symbolic elaboration of reality. With this insight, Cassirer's position distinguished itself most clearly from the Hegelian claim to have attained an all-encompassing idea of history and drew instead on other forms of historical reflection for which the resolute historicity of human consciousness precluded any all-encompassing grasp of the historical process as a whole. From this standpoint, inaugurated by thinkers like Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, the linguistic and cultural context of elaboration of human consciousness—which Cassirer places in the framework of symbolic forms—provides different points of view enabling a grasp of truth. Truth, according to this conviction, necessarily emerges in a plurality of perspectives elaborated over the course of historical development. To a thinker like Strauss, such a renunciation of the quest for final truth could only smack of relativism. With all of his insistence on the transcendence and autonomy of truth, precisely this tendency to dissolve truth into the process of historical becoming could only undermine the foundations upon which truth rests.

Here we come to the essential point: for Cassirer, the doctrine concerning a necessary plurality in the expressions of truth in no way condemns philosophy to relativism. For Cassirer, as for Herder and Humboldt, truths which are grasped in a limited historical perspective are not simply relative to that perspective. In spite of the contingent historical standpoint of human understanding, logical, aesthetic or ethical principles may be deemed true, not because they are definitive or "final," but because they are capable of attaining a universality which is valid beyond the finite limits of the perspective in which they emerge.

The profound ethical and political implications of this conclusion become manifest when one considers the insight Cassirer elaborated concerning universality and objectivity intrinsic to scientific rationality. It is this rationality which makes it possible to distinguish, for example, between Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's fanciful affirmations concerning racial superiority or inferiority and the scientific theory by means of which Armand de Quatrefages challenged these affirmations—a theoretical orientation subsequently confirmed and refined by later biology and genetics. In a different sphere, it is likewise the claim of reason which distinguishes the painstaking attempt by Leopold von Ranke to develop an impartial view of the past (however flawed this might seem to later historians) from the saber-rattling chauvinism of his younger contemporary, Heinrich von Treitschke, who believed that historical representation should promote national power politics. Cassirer convincingly argued in favor of the profound ethical significance of attempts to free natural science from mythical constructions and to separate historical representation from the partisan positions of religious apologetics or nationalistic propaganda.[16]

Cassirer's vision of a *process* of symbolic construction of reality led him to presuppose the fundamental historicity of truth. This presupposition drew him close to the German tradition of historicism.[17] The legacy of Ernst Cassirer, which the following essays examine in depth, must lead us to renew the question concerning the compatibility of his vision with an ethical universalism that he steadily sought in the inner coherence of the symbolic realm itself.

Jeffrey Andrew Barash
Paris, October 2007

NOTES

1. The apt expression is borrowed from Birgit Recki, "Der praktische Sinn der Metapher: Eine systematische Überlegung mit Blick auf Ernst Cassirer," in *Die Kunst des Überlebens. Nachdenken über Hans Blumenberg*, ed. Franz Josef Wetz und Hermann Timm (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 142. See also Birgit Recki, *Kultur als Praxis: Eine Einführung in Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004).

2. See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), 51–52, idem, "Das mythische Denken" (1928), appendix to *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, in Gesamtausgabe, 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991), 265, idem, *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1928–1929), Gesamtausgabe, 27 (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1996), 358–362.

3. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 289; Heidegger, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 358–362.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft, Akademie-Textausgabe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968), §59, 5: 351f.

5. Nelson Goodman's notion of the "ways of worldmaking" has productively related this idea to Cassirer's original insight. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassock: Harvester, 1978).

6. Cassirer's broad theory of symbolic forms drew on a number of sources. In attributing to language a central place among the symbolic forms, Cassirer extended and reinterpreted the turn from the critical philosophy of Kant to the philosophies of language of Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Herder had already attributed the task of Kantian schematism—that of organizing experience by lending conceptual order to sense particulars—to language; as Cassirer noted, Humboldt's philosophy of language presupposed precisely such an enlargement of the Kantian schematism to embrace the schematizing function of language, which Cassirer interpreted as symbolic form. Cassirer acknowledged the importance for his idea of the symbol of Goethe's references to the symbolic function of language. Beyond this inspiration, as Donald Verene has noted, the sources of his theory were both aesthetic and scientific. On the one hand, he elaborated on ideas of the symbol which, in the wake of Hegel and Schelling, F. T. Vischer placed at the center of his work on aesthetics; on the other hand, he also saw conceptions of the symbolic character of natural scientific theory, expressed in different ways by Marcus Herz and Pierre Duhem, to be of decisive importance. See in this regard Herder, *Verstand und Erfahrung. Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1955), 134; Ernst Cassirer, *Zur Einsteinschen Relativitätstheorie. Erkenntnistheoretische Betrachtungen. Gesammelte Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, 10 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001), idem, "Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 21 (1927): 295–312, translated into English by J. M. Krois as "The Problem of the Symbol and Its Place in the System of Philosophy," *Man and World* 11, nos. 3–4 (1978): 411–428; Cassirer, "Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften," *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 175,

idem, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 155–163, 198; and D. P. Verene, introduction, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935–1945*, ed. D. P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 27– 28. On the much-neglected question of Cassirer's reception of Goethe, see, above all, J. M. Krois, "Die Goethischen Elemente in Cassirers Philosophie," *Cassirer und Goethe. Neue Aspekte einer philosophisch-literarischen Wahlverwandtschaft*, ed. Barbara Naumann and Birgit Recki (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 157–172.

7. In *Wahrheit und Methode*, Hans-Georg Gadamer briefly criticizes Cassirer's broad concept of the symbol and argues in favor of a narrower interpretation which, in its reference to the symbol as "unsensuous," "infinite" and "unrepresentable" ("unsinnlich," "unendlich," "undarstellbar") is not without a certain affinity with the Kantian and neo-Kantian tradition. Where in later writings such as "Das Erbe Hegels" Gadamer ranges Cassirer among the members of the "declining neo-Kantian movement" (*der sich auflösende neu-Kantianismus*), the original aspects of Cassirer's understanding of symbolic form in relation to Kantian or neo-Kantian thought are not explored. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965), 146–147, 381–382; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Das Erbe Hegels," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, *Neuere Philosophie*, 2, 465. Paul Ricœur, after taking Cassirer's "Kantian transcendentalism" to task, goes on to question, in a cursory critique, Cassirer's broad interpretation of the symbol—or symbolic form—without, however, taking into account the dissonance between Cassirer's interpretation and the original Kantian understanding of the symbol. Notwithstanding Ricœur's allegiance to Husserlian phenomenology, and his attempt to distance himself from the Kantian and neo-Kantian transcendental perspective, the narrower definition of the symbol which he adopts is more akin to Kant's idea of the symbol in the *Critique of Judgment*, than is Cassirer's symbolic form. A certain proximity to Kant is indeed acknowledged at other points of Ricœur's analysis (38), although no place is given to a closer scrutiny of the challenge that Cassirer's philosophy of the symbol might present for the phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition. See Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 11–13. With regard to the question of Cassirer, Ricœur, and the psychoanalytic interpretation of the symbol, see John Michael Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 83–84. On the theory of the symbol in Cassirer and Ricoeur, see also my essay "Was ist ein Symbol? Bemerkungen über Paul Ricoeurs kritische Stellungnahme zum Symbolbegriff bei Ernst Cassirer," *Hermeneutik der Literatur. Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik.*, vol. 6, ed. G. Figal (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 259–274.

8. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), xiv.

9. Plato *Republic* 509b (*Collected Dialogues* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], 744); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 251–253, idem, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), 322–323.

10. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 237–242.

11. Ernst Cassirer, "Die Idee der republikanischen Verfassung," *Zum Gedenken an Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945). Ansprachen auf der Akademischen Gedenkfeier am 11. Mai 1999, Hamburger Universitätsreden*, Neue Folge, 1 (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 1999), 34–51.

12. See, above all, the final chapter of Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), "The Technique of Modern Political Myths," 277–98. For a discussion of the implications of Cassirer's analysis for contemporary technological society, see Donald Phillip Verene, *Philosophy and the Return to Self-Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 141–191.

13. Leo Strauss, "Cassirer, Ernst, *Myth of the State*," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 295, also in that volume, "Kurt Riezler," 246, Leo Strauss, "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism," *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 28.

14. Leo Strauss, "Cassirer, Ernst, *The Myth of the State*," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies*, 295.

15. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 31, idem, preface to the American edition (1964), *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), xv.

16. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 224–247, idem, *The Problem of Knowledg: Philosophy, Science, and History Since Hegel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 226–242.

17. On Cassirer's concept of history, see also his previously unpublished essay "Geschichte," in *Geschichte, Mythos. Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 3, ed. K. C. Köhnke, H. Kopp-Oberstebrink, R. Kramme (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002), 1–174; and Enno Rudolf, *Ernst Cassirer im Kontext. Kulturphilosophie zwischen Metaphysik und Historismus* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2003).

PART I

Foundations

ARTICULATIONS OF THE SYMBOL

ONE

Symbol and History

Ernst Cassirer's Critique of the Philosophy of History

ENNO RUDOLPH

The scholarly reception of Ernst Cassirer's work has long been influenced by the interpretation of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism—even though Cassirer himself had carefully and explicitly distanced himself from that philosophical trend. Only recently have scholars gradually begun to break away from that framework, making possible Cassirer research that is not determined by the neo-Kantian paradigm. During Cassirer's famous debate with Martin Heidegger, which took place in Davos, Switzerland, in 1929, Cassirer's reservations regarding Heidegger's characterization of neo-Kantianism were already apparent.[1] However, it was in his 1939 essay "Was ist 'Subjektivismus'" that Cassirer clearly expressed this distinction: "I myself," he writes, "have often been classified as a 'neo-Kantian' and I accept this title in the sense that my whole work on the field of theoretical philosophy presupposes the methodological basis that Kant presented in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. But many of the doctrines which are attributed to neo-Kantianism in the philosophical literature today are not only foreign to me, they are opposed and contradictory to my own opinion."[2] Cassirer is very precise here, stating that it is only in the field of "theoretical philosophy" that his philosophy "presupposes" the methodological tenets presented in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. To "presuppose" does not, however, entail succession; it is clear that Cassirer's philosophy, as a transformation of the "critique of reason" into the "critique of culture," intended from the outset to go beyond the limits of theoretical philosophy, thus leaving behind the dualism of theoretical and practical reason.

There is a deeper and more noticeable instance of Cassirer's distance from Kant, which goes beyond his stance in opposition to the neo-Kantian position; it can be reconstructed on three levels, that of his philosophy of

science, that of his philosophy of history and that of his philosophy of culture. On the first level, the distance from Kant is shown by Cassirer's use of Leibniz, whose theory of science forms the starting point of Cassirer's interpretation of the concept of space in the theory of relativity as well as in the concept of substance in quantum physics.[3] As for his philosophy of history, Cassirer distances himself from Kant by rejecting the kind of practical teleology that Kant used not only as a heuristic device in his teleology of nature in the *Critique of Judgment,* but also as an element of his interpretation of history as the development of moral progress. It is true of course that prior to his emigration, Cassirer too seems to have acknowledged a certain progress in the historical development of (European) culture—progress here understood as movement toward an increasing "self-liberation of man" but never as an advance along the path of a predetermined logic. The morphology of forms, which historically symbolizes the process of culture, in no way indicates a process in the sense of an irreversible teleological succession. And we learn from Cassirer's later analysis of the political and cultural events of his time in *The Myth of the State* that mythical thought remains forever hidden and alive, waiting to reemerge—even after the Enlightenment—in "modern political myths." We also learn what monstrous and macabre effects this reemergence has on contemporary culture.

In the first section of this essay I shall clarify Cassirer's concept of history, in particular how it differs from—and is even opposed to—teleological models of history. I will then demonstrate how Cassirer, in his philosophy of culture and by means of his critique of the "deterministic" model of Kant's moral theory, distances himself from Kant. The moral law that is the basis of Kant's concept of morality ensures the moral progress of mankind in spite of the power of historical contingency. Contrary to those critics who accuse Cassirer of moral substantialism, I would argue that his functional concept of culture does not allow for such a metaphysical law.

PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE AS PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

"Out of paradise and into history"—with these words Gershom Scholem once characterized the expulsion of man from paradise, expulsion—if we continue Scholem's interpretation—taken as God's offer to respond logically to man's desire for autonomy. In logical terms, God had created man

and confined him to paradise. But in another sense this was not logical. In paradise, man came up against limits that made clear to him that it was not possible for him to live there in harmony with himself and with nature. "To hit upon limits," according to Hans Blumenberg, one of the most important Cassirer critics in German philosophy since 1945, "raises and provokes doubts as to whether there may not be greater things beyond that limit."[4] The Garden of Eden stands as the symbol of a limit to the human field of experience, and the tree, as the symbol of a limit to the natural need for knowledge. When God releases man into history after the latter's violation of the prohibition on eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he does not actually punish him, but rather takes him seriously: after all he had created man in his own image and thus should not have been surprised that man took him at his word and attempted to escape the boredom of paradise in order—like his creator—to fashion his own world.

Pico della Mirandola, who was for Ernst Cassirer one of the great heroes of the early history of European Enlightenment, tells the same story when he points out that God never intended man to inhabit paradise as it was, that is, a place in which everything was complete.[5] God wanted someone with whom he could enjoy his work of art, someone like himself. Indeed, the similarity to God was intended to be man's defining gift, the ability to create his own world, and this due to an autonomy that deserves to be called divine. Pico is unequivocal on this point, stating that man has been made the custodian of his own destiny. Man's freedom consists in the capacity to realize his potential on his own strength, to either achieve happiness or fail in the realization of that potential.

The consequence of God's generous act of empowerment is that man cannot make anyone else responsible for failures along the path of self-fashioning. In breaking through the limits of paradise man is seeking to abolish the concept of theodicy—and God grants him his wish. 'Out of paradise and into history' thus means creating your own paradise, becoming the subject of your own culture. Space and time are no longer a matter of mere fate—that is, space with its limits and time without movement—as they had defined existence in paradise. They now become building material. Man has the freedom to productively organize his scarce time. For this, he has to learn to accept his own mortality. "Enlightenment means the loss of paradise," writes Hans Blumenberg.[6] Enlightenment affords insight into the reality of historicity and, linked to this, the deeper insight into the ineluctable finiteness of human existence. Perhaps this was

the knowledge granted man upon eating from the Tree of Knowledge, an insight that he instantly put into practice by using the expulsion from paradise as a departure into history. It seems that this knowledge entails insight into creation, which is the realization of one's freedom as the capital for one's own life design. When Adam makes Eve, the giver of life, mother of his children, he demonstrates that he is himself assuming responsibility for life.[7] It is this responsibility that Pico della Mirandola recalls in his *Oratio* which he admonishes man to assume. God has permitted man to take literally this divine likeness. In his capacity for history, man proves his capacity for an approximate likeness to God—precisely inasmuch as he, like God, performs a creative act.

Ernst Cassirer points out that even before Pico's time, Nicholas of Cusa had considered man's likeness to God in this sense when he interpreted the relationship between creator and man as one of "dynamic correspondence."[8] In other words, man is not simply an inferior copy of God but rather a being who imitates God's art—the art of fashioning life. Hermann Cohen, too, saw the essence of Genesis not as the will to preserve creation but rather as the act of a new creation—and here Cohen is likely making a critical reference to the relative depreciation of the so-called old creation by the Christian claim of a new creation. Cohen stresses that the real problem is not, as is often argued, the concept of *creatio ex nihilo,* or creation out of nothing; the real problem is the ongoing renewal of preservation—*creatio continua*, not *creatio finita*.[9] Such a view avoids the suffering caused by the unbearable difference between life span (*Lebenszeit*) and world time (*Weltzeit*); it sidesteps the *aporia* of a "two-world dualism," that is, the tension between the here and the beyond, as much as that between eternity and temporality. Knowledge of the meaning of life could be characterized as the understanding that a fulfilled life is not one in which eschatological or historically determined goals are met but rather one that has been most intensively and productively lived. The more fulfilled one's life is, the more bearable is the dilemma between anonymous world time and personal life span. What apocalyptists, eschatologists, and teleological historians project onto a plane beyond history is found in the Adam of Genesis—who (like the Adam of Pico and Gershom Scholem) understands the true nature of his likeness to God—in the autarchic dimension of his own life span. This life span, then, is understood as the opportunity for man to break through the anonymity of world time for a meaningful while.

The two postulates of a) the productive organization of scarce time and b) the acceptance of the finiteness of life can be seen as the key thoughts in Cassirer's conception of history. Of course, Cassirer did not develop an elaborated theory of history, his theory of history is available only in form of its applications: On the one hand, as a history of philosophy, that serves him as a guide in the development of a genealogy of culture, and on the other, as cultural criticism, which functions as a prolegomenon of a humanistic ethics. The history of culture, according to Cassirer, is the process of man's progressive self-liberation. There are numerous references in Cassirer's work that indicate that this process of self-liberation brings with it an increase in cultural complexity—which in turn is a precondition for social pluralism and needs to be accepted as such. But in addition, Cassirer's reconstruction of the historical development from substance to function can be read as the theoretical framework, or rather theoretical philosophy, which forms the basis for his practical philosophy in its actualized form as a critique of culture. The dissolution of the concept of substance is a process that has a cultural historical significance beyond its relevance in the theory, practice, and philosophy of science. Indeed, the increasing desubstantialization of worldviews, of patterns of interpretation, of parameters of world interpretations, and of leading scientific concepts can be taken as a historical symbol for what Cassirer understands as the self-liberation of man. Desubstantialization means to submit to a higher unity any reference to the plurality of phenomena, paradigms, world interpretations, or sets of values. This suggests why Cassirer's concept of culture can be understood as a brand of historical relativism and indicates why Blumenberg, in a remarkable commemorative speech in 1974, associates Cassirer closely with historicism.[10]

Blumenberg's observation can be summarized as follows, with emphasis on three particularly relevant points. First, culture, seen as nature created and shaped by man, takes on various historical forms: myth, religion, language, science, art. These are not hierarchically structured, nor are they the institutions of a closed world system, nor do they follow a developmental logic like in Hegelian dialectics. Cassirer does sometimes refer to these forms of culture as "organs of reality"—however, without seeing reality itself as an organism in the sense of a closed system. The symbolic forms do not replace one another, but rather interact, sometimes constructively—such as whenever they enhance the complexity of human striving for freedom—and sometimes destructively—as exemplified in

the political events of the twentieth century. Thus highly developed religions at one and the same time depend on and destroy their mythical traditions, while myths, taking on the forms of modern political ideologies, can develop into a powerful and dangerously effective force.

Second, this explains why Cassirer espouses a philosophy of history that—while retaining the conception of history as the result of human actions and of actions as the result of human freedom—nevertheless strips this morphologically orientated, cultural view of history of any teleological reading. History does not have a goal. Our actions, which can and usually do have goals, cannot reduce historical processes to a finalistic structure. History is neither evolution in Haller's sense of the word, nor morally determined progress in the Kantian sense. It is a process of inescapable contingency—a network of unpredetermined events to which Leibniz's system might be reduced if we took away the guarantee of divine providence. Such a view of contingency as the ultima ratio of historical interpretation is, therefore, ultimately incompatible with Kant's own understanding of history. For Cassirer, then, history could be described as the dramatic contingency of the partly constructive, partly destructive human use of freedom.

In this context, we turn to the third and final point, which deals with a particular aspect of Cassirer's concept of the symbol. The thesis of culture as a symbol of freedom, or the labeling of the various forms of world-interpretation and -fashioning (such as myth, religion, language, science, and art) as "symbolic forms," points to a very peculiar use of the term "symbol." In his usage, sign and significate approach one another in approximate fashion. The reader—the historian, for example—combines the two each time anew in the interpretative act. For example, a work of art—which for Cassirer is the symbol of symbols—contains as its virtual history both the freedom that made its creation possible, as well as any potential messages encoded within it. The work of art cannot be replaced, not even through the history of its interpretations, however much it depends on these. This observation can be applied in essence to Cassirer's concept of the symbol. The symbol cannot be replaced by significates or equivalents of substance, by a reality of which the symbols are, if anything, necessary indicators. Such alternatives between symbol and significate are, according to Cassirer, still part of a dualistic schematism of a metaphysics of substance. In marked contrast to practically all other similar semiotic models, Cassirer's symbols can be characterized as signs without any abbreviation. In this

he differs from Kant, according to whom appearances, which we perceive, point to something that determines their presence but itself remains imperceptible—the "thing itself." Cassirer's position also differs from Kant's interpretation of beauty as a symbol for morality, that is, as a moral reference to an ethics that has to surpass aesthetics. And finally, it also differs in that it does not have the sense of a historical sign that, as in the case of the French Revolution, justifies hope in a moral progress of history.[11] With his proposal for a symbolics of culture, Cassirer, unlike any comparable philosopher of history, replaces idealistic teleologies of history with the idea of historical contingency as *Freiheitsspielraum* (i.e., the scope or space for the exercise of freedom).

Kant's concept of sign is characterized by the tension between the signifier and the signified. For example, the sign in the sense of *Geschichtszeichen*, or historical sign is not independent of, but rather exclusively dependent on, that which it indicates. If we understand the whole history of mankind as a semiotic process of historical signs that "refer to," then history evaporates into a collection of indices indicating a moral state, which history aims at and ultimately achieves as its final end. Among the three meanings Kant gives to the term *Geschichtszeichen*, the most important is that of *signum prognostikon*, which indicates the future course of history and which is in no way comparable to Cassirer's understanding of history and symbols. Cassirer's understanding of history knows nothing of such predetermined and anticipated historical goals that function to direct the unfolding of history. Cassirer, like no philosopher of history before him, established the dimension of historical contingency as the condition of freedom and thus opposed the different versions of idealistic teleologies of history. According to Cassirer, symbols are signs through which we understand history; their meanings are neither transhistorical nor finalistic. Meaning and history cannot be separated from one another. This is why there are no metahistorical structures of meaning by which the course of history can be critically measured.

To what extent this teleological skepticism corresponds to the idea that history is an ambivalent process, which is in part constructive, in part destructive of culture, can be seen in the relation between myth and religion. On the one hand, the transition from mythical to religious consciousness is a process of increasing mastery over life and the world, a heightening of our ability to create a distance from the spells of fate and the force of myth. The theologies of monotheistic religions thus seem more refined,

more reflective than the polytheistic strategies of myths, which attempt to master the struggle of life by inventing more or less anthropomorphic gods. On the other hand, the historical transition from myth to religion is also characterized as a process of cultural impoverishment. The god of monotheism (symbolically represented by the sentence that is a religion in itself: "I am that I am.") is a god who by his very nature increasingly disappears from all phenomenological experience. The cultural form such religion takes, demonstrates a greater ability for abstraction but also results in a greater alienation from the world. We can conclude from Cassirer's diagnosis that the living complexity of culture can be reached and preserved only if the constitutive forms of the history of culture do not replace, but rather interact with, one another.

Accordingly, Cassirer differentiates "historical time" from other types of time in the third volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. His initial premise is that to have history and to know history are mutually determinative conditions. Cassirer argues for a reading of cultural time as historical time, that is, as the time necessary for that process we call history and know of only "because man continually generates it."[12] The generation or production of history is an act of practical reason, or of the will, which is not determined by reference to any ahistorical goal but has its own notion regarding the purpose of its actions. "Thus historical consciousness rests on an interaction of active force and imaginative force: on the clarity and certainty with which the ego is able to set before itself an image of a future being and direct all particular action toward this image."[13]

Further elaborating the concept of the "image," Cassirer refers to the symbol as "rushing ahead of reality." (Incidentally, he uses this idea critically against both Heidegger and Bergson, although he later claims that Bergson eventually discovered this feature of historical time and used it to modify his own past-oriented theory of duration.) Cassirer's model of a unity of "Bildkraft" (power of the image) and "Tatkraft" (power of action) as the focus on the production of history replaces classical teleologies of history, in which such factors function as external determinants of the human will. In so doing, he distances himself from Kant in marked fashion, although Kant's teleology of nature and teleology of history are ultimately only projections of the teleology of the individual subject's actions. However, these are projections that in turn justify a finalism, which—though meant to morally guide the decisions of the individual—ultimately goes beyond a finite being's immediate, foreseeable field of action. Blumenberg

may have been right: Cassirer is a constructive historicist: he uses the concept of culture as a privileged category of interpretation of history, but not as a finalistic determination of the process of history.

HISTORY WITHOUT MORALITY? A CRITIQUE OF A NORMATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Kant had already attempted a precise definition of the concept of culture at the end of his *Critique of Judgment* as well as in his writings on the philosophy of history. "Culture is the ultimate end, which we have cause to attribute to nature in respect to the human species."[14] The context in which Kant's statement appears shows that in his understanding—in contrast to Cassirer's—culture is not a process but an ideal of a finite state with a regulative function. This state is characterized by the way in which its own moral order puts an end to the reciprocal conflict of individual claims to freedom. In its political form this state is the civil society, where its constitution is a legal order based on morality. It is this interdependence of culture and morality that sets Cassirer apart from Kant; Cassirer essentially replaces this coupling by positing a morally nonstandardized interdependence of freedom and culture. This difference between Kant's and Cassirer's respective models can be substantiated through a close look at three central, albeit markedly different, preconditions underlying their respective philosophies.

According to Kant man attains his destiny only as a species, not as an individual. Furthermore, this destiny is only fulfilled through an uncompromising adherence to a law, which is formulated autonomously by reason, not in order to legitimize the autonomy of the individual in relation to the human species but rather to discipline the individual in the interest of the preservation of the species. Reason itself is not individual; those endowed with it are. Finally, a state that can be deemed without qualification as "cultured" is an ultimate state. "Culture" is for Kant a secular-eschatological, and in that sense, history-engendering (*geschichtsstiftend*) idea, but one that is in itself unhistorical—a *causa finalis*.

The corresponding antitheses of Cassirer's theory of culture can be presented as follows: For Cassirer the subject of man's history-engendering freedom is not the species but the individual. In this regard, he opposes what he identified in Kantian philosophy as the incapacitation of the individual with regard to the human species. Cassirer also reverses the

Kantian subordination of the individual agent to reason in the constitution of the moral subject (one might call this the Renaissance motif in Cassirer's philosophy). Finally, instead of an ahistorical use of the finalist concept of culture—culture as a state—he proposes, as mentioned, a historical concept of culture: culture as process. In his "Natural and Humanistic Foundations of the Philosophy of Culture," written in Gothenburg in 1939, Cassirer strengthens his position by distinguishing it in particular—and in a distinct fashion—from three recent history of philosophy positions—positions that he summarily referred to, and not unproblematically, as "historical determinism."[15] He expressly differentiates three subtypes of this historical determinism. A "physicalist" type for which he associates, among others, August Comte; a "psychological" one represented by Oswald Spengler, and a "metaphysical" determinism, which he attributes to Hegel.

Common to all three, according to Cassirer, is their "subjection of individual existence"—particularly of the human individual—to a generic systematic imperative. Each of these three approaches might be seen as an attempt to deal with historical contingency using an imminent logic that is subordinated to history. The first type does this on the basis of a principle of universal physicalism of the social world (Comte); the second, by referring to a general *Seelentum*—we might translate this literally as "soul-dom"—that determines the cultural development of mankind. The third approach refers to the effect of a "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*) by which the course of history takes on systematic properties while the individual is reduced to a mere puppet. In Cassirer's concise words, "according to Hegel the ruse of reason consists precisely in offering autonomy to individuals and seducing them with this offer without ever granting them real autonomy."[16]

Instead of presenting a systematic counterposition, Cassirer opts for the form of indirect communication and, as is his wont, tells a story—or rather—a history. Yet this story, or history, serves as the answer to what is, in my view, the key anthropological question of his theory of culture: "At which point in history do individual actions attain their independent value?"[17] The principal hero of Cassirer's history is not Kant, but rather Wilhelm von Humboldt. The name von Humboldt represents a historically developed program of cultural philosophy. In this respect he belongs to the lineage of thinkers who, from Leibniz through Herder, developed and raised to a new level the anthropological concerns of Renaissance

humanism. This program is unmistakably different from Kant's own, and certainly Cassirer's transformation of a critique of reason into a critique of culture in itself provides a new conception of these concerns.

These philosophers and historiographers represent an innovative attempt to fuse the idea of rational universalism with that of personal individualism without seeking either a hierarchical solution or an exclusive alternative to the conflict between both ideas. In the essay referred to above, this position, which Cassirer calls neo-humanism and which derives its content largely from Italian humanist philosophy, appears to be aimed as much against the proponents of historical determinism who are mentioned by Cassirer, as against Kant. For in this text Cassirer points to the high price exacted by moral universalism's victory over humanist individualism. This price includes a cementing of the dualism between (universal) reason and (individual) nature, the conflict that Kant attempted to solve in theory and in practice by subordinating the latter to the nomothetic authority of the former.

Anyone familiar with Kant will remember the role of reason as "appointed judge" over nature, or the categorically postulated precedence of duty over inclination. Wherein then lies the advantage of a synthesis of universalism and individualism over the types of historical determinism listed and over Kant's position, which, along the lines of Cassirer, could be characterized as "moral determinism"? Cassirer's self-imposed task of developing a new program on the basis of this hypothesis was not an easy one. After all, Kant's plea for an autonomy of reason was specifically tied to the condition that the universalization of reason could be attained only through the needle's eye (to use Kant's own metaphor) of the moral decision of a self-disciplining individual. By way of answering this question I would like to conclude by summarizing the original position that differentiates Cassirer's critique of culture from the critique of reason on the basis of three premises. These premises also mark the passage from a critique of culture to a philosophy of historical contingency.

The position that is termed "neohumanistic" introduces a more precise development of the theory of Enlightenment as was expressed in Kant's famous formula, namely, enlightenment as "man's exit out of the incapacitation for which he has only himself to blame." The sharpening of the position in Cassirer's theory involves the development of a real alternative. Whereas Kant's maxim appeals to man to replace the authority of heteronomous norms with the authority of reason as given generically to

all men, Cassirer's interpretation has the consequence *of making the integrity of the individual the central "norm" of Enlightenment*. In the history of ideas, the model of an individual universalism based on the irrepressible human right of the individual to integrity and productivity can already be seen in Leibniz's monadology—as Cassirer noted in his speech "The Idea of the Republican Constitution" (1928).[18]

The closer Cassirer moves to Leibniz, the greater his distance not only from Kant but even more so from the paradigm of neo-Kantianism. Monads, one may recall, are paradoxical figures. Leibniz calls them "repraesentationes mundi," representations of the world. Therein lies their universalist significance. However, they are equally individual *kat exochen*, "windowless," unique and irreplaceable. The monadic world of Leibniz is held together by the principle of a preestablished harmony. Anyone who rejects all metaphysical determinism, as does Cassirer, is aiming for a liberated, monadic world. Taking the place of preestablished harmony, the unleashed contingency of history appears, while maintaining the concept of the individual, as a unique and irreplaceable microcosm.

In Cassirer's conception, the superiority of the neohumanistic paradigm lies in the readiness to take a risk, to endow the subjects of Enlightenment with more confidence than Kant had ever done. Kant's moral law determines the actions of the individual out of a concern for the free consensus of all citizens, but also out of fear of a Hobbesian consequence, according to which man must desire the imperative state (*Zwangsstaat*), because he accepts that, as compared with the state of nature, it is the lesser evil. I suspect that Cassirer sees Kant as insufficiently distanced from Hobbes's *Leviathan* or from Rousseau and his *contrat social* with its rigid demand for an imperative of freedom (*Zwang zur Freiheit*). Cassirer's risk consists not only in proposing a monadic model of undetermined individuality without any preestablished harmony, but also in allowing the possibility of a *civil society without a categorical imperative*. He seems to mean that true responsibility is evident in the ability to preserve culture, where culture is understood as a process of self-liberation from determinants that compromise man's autonomy. The morphology of cultural history developed in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* contains, in its systematic message, a plea for an increase in cultural complexity and against tendencies toward homogenizing cultural formations. These tendencies can be discerned just as much in the three types of historical determinism discussed above, as in Kant's finalist concept of culture.

Cassirer apparently sought, with this criticism, to take Kant at his word. This is particularly evident in the theory of practical reason he developed at Davos.[19] Beyond its reference to Kant as a plea for historical time, Cassirer's theory is developed in terms of a potential for an undetermined future, which confers meaning on culture by casting it as a symbolic manifestation of freedom but without assigning it a goal. Kant's own view of a historical future, on the other hand, was based on the eschatological reservation arising from the moral orientation of the course of history to an "end of all things."

Cassirer is a radical modernist. He goes beyond the moralism of the Enlightenment paradigm in order to give effective meaning to Bacon's phrase, *veritas est filia temporis* and to a deeper significance of the human right—stipulated in Renaissance humanism—of the integrity of the individual.[20]

NOTES

1. "Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger," in M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Gesamtausgabe, 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991), 27.

2. Ernst Cassirer, "Was ist 'Subjektivismu'?" in his *Erkenntnis, Begriff, Kultur* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1993), 201.

3. See E. Rudolph, "Substance as Function: Ernst Cassirer's Interpretation of Leibniz as Criticism of Kant," in *Philosophy, Mathematics and Modern Physics*, ed. E. Rudolph and I.-O. Stamatescu (Berlin: Springer, 1994), 235–242, and idem, "Raum, Zeit und Bewegung: Cassirer und Reichenbach über die philosophischen Anfänge des physikalischen Relativismus," in *Von der Philosophie zur Wissenschaft: Cassirers Dialog mit der Naturwissenschaft*, ed. E. Rudolph and I.-O. Stamatescu (Hamburg: Meiner 1997), 45–61.

4. Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 986), 74.

5. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio de Homines Dignitat / Über die Würde des Menschen*, trans. by N. Baumgarten, ed. and intro. by A. Buck (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), 4.

6. Hans Blumenberg, *Mathäus-Passion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 97.

7. The Hebrew word "chawwa" means "source of life." The decisive passage, Gen. 3:20, can be understood logically as a record of the success of emancipation, which man is carrying out by his exodus from paradise: being deprived of the absolute but timeless (and lifeless) perfection of paradise will be balanced out by the opportunity to form history autonomously and vitally.

8. Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 72.

9. Hermann Cohen, *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, in *Werke*, vol. 10 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1996), 47.

10. Hans Blumenberg, "Ernst Cassirers gedenkend bei Entgegennahme des Kuno Fischer-Preises der Universität Heidelberg," in his *Wirklichkeiten, in denen wir leben* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), 163.

11. Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, in *Werke*, vol. 7 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1917), 84.

12. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 3, *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), 211.

13. Ibid., 212. For an English translation, see *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 182.

14. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Werke*, vol. 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1908), §83, 431.

15. Ernst Cassirer, "Naturalistische und humanistische Begründung der Kulturphilosophie," in *Erkenntnis, Begriff, Kultur*, 242.

16. Ibid., 244.

17. Ibid., 245.

18. Ernst Cassirer, "Die Idee der republikanischen Verfassung. Rede zur Verfassungsfeier am 11. August 1928, gehalten von Ernst Cassirer," reprinted in "Symbolische Formen, mögliche Welten —Ernst Cassirer," *Dialektik* 1 (1995): 13–30. See also E. Rudolph, "Freiheit oder Schicksal. Cassirer und Heidegger in Davos," in *Cassirer—Heidegger: 70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*, ed. D. Kaegi and E. Rudolph (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002), 36–47.

19. Heidegger, "Davoser Disputation," 287, see also 276.

20. See Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 153.

TWO

Ernst Cassirer on Nicholas of Cusa

Between Conjectural Knowledge and Religious Pluralism

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Ernst Cassirer's unsystematic aproach toward and discussion of religious phenomena seems to leave an essential lacuna within his systematic analysis of human culture and its symbolic representations. Religion was not altogether neglected by Cassirer, but his discussion of the religious phenomena involved strong apologetic moments. This apologetic overtone on the one hand prevents religion as a research object from becoming a central cultural concept (such as language and myth) in Cassirer's thought. On the other hand, his approach ascribes to religion a special revealing force.

Here I will analyze Cassirer's concept of religion both generally as it fits within his theory and specifically in relation to the historical problematization of European secularization, the idea of enlightenment, and the political problem of tolerance. I will start with Cassirer's notion of the "religious" as a rather unsystematic cultural symbolic system positioned somewhere between magical-mythical reality and abstract levels of scientific thought and political expectation. I shall then connect that notion to Cassirer's interpretation of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Central to the discussion is my reading of Cassirer's "Die Idee der Religion bei Lessing und Mendelssohn" (The Idea of Religion in Lessing and Mendelssohn), written in 1929, in which Cassirer's unsystematic approach to the phenomenon of religion fully comes into play. Last, the problem of secularization will be addressed through Cassirer's analysis of the religious vision of fourteenth-century cleric and philosopher Nicholas of Cusa. My goal is to demontrate the way in which Cassirer's broader interpretation of religion and the Enlightenment influenced his reading of Nicholas of Cusa, and in which the latter's philosophy itself had an

impact on Cassirer's attempt to articulate the tension between religion as such and the ineffable nature of its particular manifestations.

CASSIRER: RELIGION, MYTH, AND ENLIGHTENMENT

In *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (The Philosophy of Enlightenment),[1] Cassirer claims that more than any other phenomenon, it was religion that obliged the philosophers of the Enlightenment to confront the historical and temporal dimension in their thought.[2] This dimension comes up against intellectualism, which is committed to the eternal laws of the intellect and stems from an analysis of the concrete manifestations of the eternal intellect as expressed within the religious framework. Cassirer divides the chapter "The Idea of Religion" into three sections, the second and third of which address the question of tolerance and its affinity to the idea of natural religion and the relationship between religion and the historical dimension of intellect, respectively. I will examine these issues more closely, particularly as they are reflected in the analysis Cassirer offers of the religious and political ideas of Nicholas of Cusa. First, however, it seems necessary to touch briefly on a number of basic assumptions in Cassirer's writings concerning religion's position between the mythical-magical realm and the abstract scientific intellect. These assumptions in turn make it necessary to briefly examine the role of language as a wider phenomenon in which logic and myth are perpetually interwoven.

In his discusssion of myth in the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer makes a complex claim regarding the relationship between myth and religion. Religion, he maintains, grows out of myth and continues to be inseparably involved with it.[3] The process by which religion becomes separate and distinct from the mythical is presented by Cassirer as a process parallel to that which occurs as language moves from the mimetic to the analogous and finally to the symbolic realm.[4] Relative to other cognitive forms—particularly myth, science, and language—religion is subjected to a less rigorous examination by Cassirer; nevertheless, it constitutes a central axis of his discussion of forms of knowledge.

Although Cassirer sees religion as a distinct symbolic form, he does not envisage a situation in which it can rid itself of myth. Were it completely stripped of its mythical dimension, religion would remain as no more than a vapid abstraction.[5] Given that basic assumption, Cassirer's approach might be termed the "transformation" of myth within the framework of

religion. For in his view, it is precisely here that the historical dimension of religion becomes crucial, as it leads human culture from one level of understanding the world to another: "Seen through the medium of the religious attitude, this world gradually takes on a new meaning."[6]

Addressing the existence of numerous religions from his perspective as a cultural scientist who is above all a philosopher of culture, Cassirer insists on the conceptual unity of the religious phenomenon. By way of a formula designed to express this unity, Cassirer on several occasions employs the well-known formulation of Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* (On the Peace of the Faith[7]), "una est religio in rituum varietate" (religion is one in a variety of rites).[8] At this early juncture we may already note the appeal this formula holds for a philosopher such as Cassirer. To him Nicholas of Cusa represents a perspective that gives pride of place not only to a particular "religion" defined as "ritual," but also to the abstract and general notion of "the religious"; at the same time, Cusa takes into account the complexity of the question of individuation, which as we shall see, figures prominently in the most compelling parts of his work. In Cassirer's view, then, Cusa's perspective and insights afford a way of examining religion not only by comparing various religions but also by comparing religion to such fundamental phenomena of the human spirit as myth, language, and science.

In the absence of a clear boundary between myth and religion, however, Cassirer associates the emergence of the religious from the mythical-magical realm with the birth of individualism, and sees this development as a harbinger of the creation of the philosophical mind. "The belief in the 'sympathy of the Whole' is one of the firmest foundations of religion itself. But religious sympathy is of a different order than that of the mythical-magical kind. It gives scope for a new feeling, that of individuality."[9] Religious idealism, represented by the future-oriented messianic ideal, strives to release itself from the mythical dimension in order to create a more profound and meaningful religious experience, based not only on fear but also on the attempt to express a new and positive ideal of human liberty. "One of the greatest miracles that all the higher religions had to perform was to develop their new character, their ethical and religious interpretation of life, out of the crude raw material of the most primitive conceptions, the grossest superstitions."[10]

Just as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer saw the Enlightenment as maintaining a complex relationship with myth, so too did Cassirer see

"the religious" maintaining a complex, simultaneous relationship with both the mythical and the enlightened dimensions, in language as well as in history.[11] Language retains its special status in this discussion, since it serves as the glue binding the mythological and the religious. Language is the cornerstone of any cultural statement and any human description, while the basis of language itself is always logical and rational. "What holds for 'primitive' languages holds also for primitive thought. Its structure may seem to us strange and paradoxical; but it never lacks a definite logical structure."[12]

Within this structure of symbolic forms, then, we may determine that religion constitutes not a separate symbolic form but rather a developmental stage of myth, while language maintains an affinity with both. In contraposition to myth—defined, in opposition to rationalism and scientific thought, as the personification of collective wishes and a refuge from fear—we find religion, which in its most sublime form strives to mold the collective by situating the future. Religious messianism represents this supreme level of religiosity—a level that is quintessentially intellectual. By way of a criterion for distinguishing the different forms of religiosity, Cassirer presents the dimension of time as a marker of the intentional import of the religious phenomenon. He distinguishes, on the one hand, between religion that looks to the past (myth) and religion that is subsumed in the present and, on the other, between both of these and religion that looks to the future.

A clear expression of this important distinction is found in a paper presented by Cassirer on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, "Die Idee der Religion bei Lessing und Mendelssohn" (The Idea of Religion by Lessing and Mendelssohn):[13]

> There are, as it were, three different fundamental conceptions of temporality itself, three entirely divergent temporal aspects facing one another. The orthodox system sees all religious certitude in light of the past; Mendelssohn sees it in light of the present; Lessing, however, is the first to apprehend it purely and exclusively in light of the future. The orthodox system seeks to lead us back to the sources of religious truth that belong to the beginnings of humanity. . . . Mendelssohn, on the other hand, no longer seeks religious certitude in something out of the past, that has been and become, but rather in something that is constantly being, in that

> light of Reason, which, according to Spinoza, illuminates both itself and error . . . Here, however, Lessing dares to go one step further. For him, the light of religious truth does not surge forth from an unknown and unfathomable depth of the past. . . . He who believes he possesses it has already lost it; for it exists only because it generates itself ever anew in humanity.[14]

Although not specifically referred to as such in the above passage, it is the religious that creates an open and dynamic ideal of enlightenment as a requirement to be fulfilled. Not only does religion pose no obstacle to enlightenment, it actually serves as its vanguard. The article on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn represents an attempt to describe the practical implementation of this ideal. According to Cassirer's description, both Lessing, the son of a Protestant clergyman, and Mendelssohn, the descendant of Maimonides and the Talmudic sages, find themselves in pursuit of a shared reformist ideal. In considering the solutions offered by both, one should take as the starting point Leibniz's distinction between metaphysical and contingent truth.[15] The key question is, which of the two types of truth is religion supposed to represent: absolute and eternal truth or relative and temporary truth? According to Cassirer, both men saw religion as ultimately belonging neither to the realm of the eternal nor to the realm of the temporal, but rather as representing the attempt to read the eternal into the temporal, that is, to individuate it.[16] This, in their view, was precisely the function carried out by revelation. Within a religious framework, such revelation may be translated into religious enlightenment (future orientation) or religious dogmatism (past orientation).

Lessing's main concern, particularly as expressed in his essay "Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts" (The Education of the Human Race), was to explain and develop the manner in which the eternal is revealed and developed within the temporal.[17] It is Mendelssohn who had reservations regarding the historical and progressive dimension in Lessing's works. While religion teaches truths, it teaches them not to humanity as a whole but rather to the private, concrete, historical individual. History creates a cruel and arbitrary framework within which the individual human being is obliged to act. Human activity constitutes a struggle to establish the autonomy of intellect and morality within this framework, rather than an attempt to replace the framework itself. Mendelssohn believed in

the education of the private individual through the community but not in the education of humankind. People learn, but humankind as a whole does not. The individual, directly confronted in his educational development with the abstract realm of eternal truth, does not need the mediation of "humankind"—whatever meaning that word may have.[18] Cassirer claims that whereas religious orthodoxy identifies the religious dimension with the past, Mendelssohn limits the sphere of human religious expectations by placing it in the present. In contrast, Lessing has his gaze fixed on the future. This allows him to develop a kind of intellectual messianism, which strives to change the character of the historical arena and simultaneously enables him to develop a model of tolerance based on respect and modesty. Cassirer does not accept the simplistic view, which identifies the concept of revelation (as the heritage of medieval theology) with Lessing's concept of education. Education does not replace revelation but rather represents a slow and ongoing process of error and doubt through which humankind constantly creates itself by creating its image of God as an absolute metaphor.[19]

Cassirer compares this process with Mendelssohn's idealism and particularly with the medieval roots which he identifies therein. He refers to Mendelssohn as "the classicist of rationalism," and presents the latter's messianic idea as a form of intellectual, religious idealism. Cassirer adopts here Hermann Cohen's interpretation of Maimonides in order to point out a continuous tradition—beginning with Maimonides, progressing through Mendelssohn, and reaching its most significant and systematic formulation in Cohen's "Religion der Propheten." Since Cassirer perceives this intellectual religion in Cohen's work as the religion of the future, and since he depicts Mendelssohn as continuing this line of thinking in this respect, he eventually returns to an idea that is close to that of Lessing.[20] While this is one of the rare instances in which Cassirer deals directly with three main figures of the Jewish tradition—Maimonides, Mendelssohn, and Cohen—it is important to note that it is the Protestant, Lessing who created the explanatory framework in which the full range of their thought can be interpreted. It is only through such an anachronistic reading of Maimonides as a truthful representative of medieval enlightenment that Cassirer can turn Mendelssohn back into a full participant in the project of enlightenment. From that point of view then, it should be noted that the Jew Cassirer has submitted himself totally to that German-Protestant picture of enlightenment.[21]

A few years later, in his larger work *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (The Philosophy of Enlightenment), Cassirer essentially repeated the same descriptive move.[22] Again he begins with Leibniz's differentiation between eternal, necessary truths, on the one hand, and temporary, accidental truths, on the other. Again he emphasizes the basic disagreement between Lessing and Mendelssohn concerning the notion of history, quoting the same paragraph of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*.[23] But without mentioning Maimonides or Cohen, Cassirer reaches a different conclusion regarding the significance of that difference. He sees Mendelssohn and Lessing as representing two distinct streams within the Enlightenment and differing in particular in their respective notions of history and truth. Although both thinkers were deeply influenced by Leibniz, Mendelssohn is described here as one who, in his epistemology, still belongs to the tradition of Christian Wolf.[24] Cassirer suggests that it is Lessing who proposes a new notion of man and history based on an original synthesis of ideas taken from Leibniz and Spinoza. Here individual man is taken to be a unity that reflects an immanent God as well as a monadic cosmos. History thus becomes an arena in which a new type of "reason" reaches its eternal end. Lessing's "education of mankind," then, is based on a dynamic and synthetic notion of reason.[25]

However, it is in his short, earlier, "Jewish" article that Cassirer explicitly points to the political-theological vision he discerns in those Enlightenment ideas. This line of thinking is closely connected, as noted above, with the hermeneutical move of reconciling the thought of his two great predecessors: "The celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Lessing and of Mendelssohn that we perform this year, will be a genuine and fruitful commemoration of the two only if we constantly keep ourselves aware that we should see neither of them as figures of mere historical greateness, some greatness of the past. Rather we should regard and honor them as harbingers of a spiritual future."[26]

Cassirer places various ideals of progress and modernity in contraposition to this future religious ideal, especially in his two late works, *The Myth of the State* and *An Essay on Man*.[27] In those ideals the religious element seems to have been removed or at least stripped of its unique content. In the absence of this religious element, the cultural world faces the grave danger of succumbing once again to the embrace of myth. Thus, in the concluding lines of his last great work, *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer chooses to recount once again for his reader the Babylonian myth

of the creation of the world. "Marduk, the highest God, before he could begin his work had to fight a dreadful combat. He had to vanquish and subjugate the serpent Tiamat and the other dragons of darkness. He slew Tiamat and bound the dragons. Out of the limbs of the monster Tiamat he formed the world and gave it its shape and its order."[28] In the modern world—a world in which science and *ratio* have surrendered to myth and become instruments in its hands, man's long-enduring quest for wisdom and order seems to evaporate in the face of basic chaotic forces. Cassirer suggests that in the face of these destructive powers, we should struggle one last time to shape the image of religion in its future-oriented messianic form, to enable it to become once again a moving force, a means to free humanity from the grip of myth.

NICHOLAS OF CUSA: BETWEEN MEDIEVAL AND ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT

Replete as they are with medieval elements, Nicholas of Cusa's works present modern readers with a refreshing speculative philosophy that often seems to herald later ideas. It is not by chance that his works have attracted the interest of many scholars in the twentieth century, including Cassirer himself, and more recently, Karl Jaspers and Hans Blumenberg.[29] Jaspers composed a monograph on the medieval thinker,[30] while Blumenberg, in his *Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Legitimacy of the New Age), also devoted a central section to the "Cusaner."[31]

In the last section of his book, Blumenberg includes an analysis of the thought of two philosophers, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno. Without entering into the details of this discussion, we may note that Blumenberg's objective is to place these two thinkers on either side of the *Epochenschwelle*, that period of time extending from the late medieval period through early modernity.[32] Despite certain elements of his work that might seem to represent the philosophical and scientific foundations of modernity, Nicholas of Cusa is firmly rooted in the cultural soil of medieval pre-Copernican times. This is the context in which he works, and this is the context in which one must read his ideas. According to Blumenberg, on matters of astronomy we may place Nicholas of Cusa alongside neither Bruno, who makes himself a martyr to modern times, nor Copernicus.[33]

From the historical perspective offered by Blumenberg Cassirer indeed might be condemned for chosing to anachronistically read back into the

thought of Cusa, a member of the conservative ecclesiastical establishment of the fifteenth century, political ideas that only began to develop in the eighteenth century. But unlike Blumenberg, however, Cassirer was determined to free Cusa of the medieval label. He already attempts this on the basis of an epistemological discussion in his early work *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, then again in *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy), as well as in *Der Philosophie der Aufklärung*, and finally in the *Essay on Man*.[34] In all of these essays, and in reference to the various fields discussed, Nicholas of Cusa is depicted as the pioneer of modern thought. Cassirer's view is that Nicholas may, and perhaps even must, be placed alongside both Bruno and Copernicus. This need to unmoor Nicholas's thought from its medieval context is related, inter alia, to a limited and stereotypical view of medieval thought—a perspective difficult to justify even in the context of what was a fledgling research field in Cassirer's time.[35] With this as his foundation, Cassirer then developed a structure that contrasts the heteronomic, collective, and revelation-based thought of medieval times with the philosophies of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Within this historical scheme, the latter philosophies are seen as having succeeded in preserving the religious dimension by elevating it to an individual and autonomous sphere.

And yet Cassirer does share a common interest with Blumenberg, that is, a basic intention to create modern identity by opposing modernity to its medieval—and for the most part negatively painted—background. The difference between the two thinkers lies in their respective concepts of modernity. Blumenberg, as a historian, strives to perceive modernity in all its complexity as a cultural phenomenon in the broadest sense, although he sometimes fails to provide a consistent description of that culture. For the most part, Cassirer associates modernity with a development in which the ideas of the Enlightenment became reduced to a "philosophy of the Enlightenment"—which is in fact the title of his great survey. It almost seems as if he himself sank into the same problematic mire from which he strove to rescue the philosophers of the Enlightenment, namely, the neglect of historical consciousness. As noted above, it was Cassirer's own claim that the philosophers of the Enlightenment found their way back to history primarily by reflecting on the problem of the religious phenomenon, a sphere in which the transcendental and the temporal are diffused into one another.[36] One could very well claim that he failed to

implement a similar principle, namely, that of reading the eternal into its temporal-historical manifestation when dealing with medieval culture and instead disconnecting it completely from its historical setting.

To understand Cassirer's approach, in contrast to that of Blumenberg and Jaspers, we must appreciate that despite the fact that he positioned himself as a historian, Cassirer essentially remained a philosopher occupied with a neo-Kantian discussion of epistemological questions. The central axis of his research was not one of linear and temporal development, one that can be grounded in a careful scrutiny of the emergence of writings and ideas. The true, extratemporal and cyclical development is that described in the previous paragraph, rooted in the changing relations between such fundamental—and sometimes opposing—elements as language, myth, religion, and philosophy. Cassirer's approach to the history of philosophy is a hermeneutical rather than a scientific one. In his systematic analysis of the subject,[37] he begins with a definition of the historian as one who is closer to the linguist than to the scientist.[38] Later he suggests that human works, the subject matter of historical research, are subject to both physical and mental destruction. "Their reality is symbolic, not physical; and such reality never ceases to require interpretation and reinterpretation. . . . In order to possess the world of culture we must incessantly reconquer it by historical recollection."[39] Gaining historical awareness, the historian wins a deeper hermeneutical understanding of himself and of his own culture. "History is included in the field of hermeneutics, not in that of natural science."[40] Yet this approach derives considerable validity precisely from the scientific perception of a man who discussed the history of science in depth. Cassirer argues that only a mathematician can write the history of mathematics, and in so doing he will be essentially committed to the corpus of mathematical knowledge of his own time. The hermeneutics of thought as a historical phenomenon is based primarily on a recognition of its results, namely, on the writer's awareness of his place in the history of thought he is describing.

What is it about Nicholas of Cusa that makes Cassirer see him as such as modern thinker? Cassirer's answer is unequivocal: Cusa is the only philosopher of his time who made an attempt to fathom all the fundamental problems from a single methodical principle: "Cusa is the only thinker of the period to look at all of the fundamental problems of his time from the point of view of *one* principle through which he masters them all."[41] The single principle Nicholas brings from each of his fields of research

relates to the epistemological sphere. Each issue with which he grapples, whether in cosmology, theology, politics, or metaphysics, eventually returns to a single epistemological question. This question is connected to the intuition that any act of human inquiry returns to measurement- and hypothesis-related activities, and that these require a single and fixed standard.[42] Accordingly, any inquiry eventually becomes reduction, and any reduction reflects the absolute as its essential and basic assumption.[43] Thus a two-stage process takes place, based on a shared notion of "the absolute." In the first stage we base any science directly on the absolute—in the "pantheistic" immanent sense of the affinity between the *complicatio* and the *explicatio* as divine realms. In the second stage we realize the severe limitations of human knowledge that is based on this type of process, since by definition the absolute—as transcendent—is never grasped by our consciousness. Accordingly, at the end of the reduction, all fields of science eventually bring us back to the unknowable base. This double process is not the final word, however. Our momentary discomfort leads us to the insight that the "scandal" inherent in recognizing the limits of consciousness also facilitates recognition of the eternal and uncontainable nature of human knowledge. Not only does this not negate the possibility of science; it actually frees science from the chains of dogma, enabling it to soar to new speculative heights.[44]

If one considers the variety of opinions surrounding thirteenth-century debate on the intellect, it is easy to see what seemed to Cassirer so revolutionary in those ideas of Nicholas of Cusa. The neo-Aristotelian scientific worldview shared by philosophers of high Scholasticism seemed to be static on the one hand (in its dogmatic reception of a stable and near Aristotelian cosmos that is adequately grasped by the human mind), and equivocal on the other. This equivocation derives from a cosmological dichotomy, which in turn is reflected in human anthropology: a dichotomy between the worlds "above" and "below" the lunar sphere (reflected in the classical Hellenistic dichotomy of body and mind). It is against this scholastic background that Cusa develops a univocal and at the same time dynamic notion of science.[45] Taken in its generality, this interpretative move is typical of Cassirer, who always seeks to locate the conscious unity underlying the range of works and ideas of any particular thinker or, indeed, of entire philosophical traditions.[46]

My particular aim is to trace Cassirer's analysis of the political and religious elements in Nicholas of Cusa's thought. This is a topic in which

Cassirer's interpretative method is stretched to its limits and, indeed, aroused extensive opposition. The central focus in Cassirer's political-theological discussion is *De pace fidei*, one of Cusa's last works, written after the fall of Constantinopole in 1453.[47] The essay presents a dialogue between the adherents of various religions, with the aim of developing a metaphysical and theological formula that will provide a common framework for the particular religious experience of each, in order to create that "one religion in a variety of rites" (*una religio in rituum varietate*).

Cassirer returns to this essay many times in his various writings and is convinced that he is addressing the essential and most interesting aspect of the work. He ignores—and one can only assume that he does so consciously—all those parts of Cusa's essay—and they are numerous—that fail to support his understanding of the text. The ease with which Cassirer totally ignores these sections of Cusa's text reflects his firm conviction that he has found the interpretative key enabling him to separate the wheat from the chaff and to distinguish the philosophical line of thought from the established rhetoric that was inevitably used in addressing such a sensitive area. This interpretative key is based on a view of Cusa's thought as revolving around a single central axis. Once it is clear that we can and must apply this central idea over the entire range of the subject matter, we may then apply it to the specific case before us, however complex or charged this may be. Cassirer's analysis of *De pace fidei* in his *Individuum und Kosmos* is located between his description of the epistemological content of *De docta ignorantia* and *De conjecturis* and his account of the personal, religious (as well as epistemological) speculation of *De visione Dei*. Cassirer suggests that all these works, which represent different stages in the life of Nicholas of Cusa and deal with different topics, still provide us with one systematic idea rooted in a consistent system of thought.

How does Cusa phrase this idea in the interreligious context? According to Cassirer, Cusa's point of departure is the attempt to explore the possibility of knowing God through the structures provided by language and logic. To the extent that it is possible to encompass the absolute, such thought must inevitably transcend the confines of logic. Yet to whatever degree it does transcend these confines, such thought must never pass over into the realm of mysticism. The Cusanian process is never rooted in the world of feelings and emotions but solely in the intellectual love and desire for God (*amor dei intellectualis*). However, in aspiring to the absolute, this intellect inevitably finds itself in the paradoxical borderland

between *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) and *visio intellectualis* (intellectual vision). The modernity of Nicholas of Cusa's thought, and the very element that makes him an early representative of Renaissance thought, is seen precisely in the tendency to return to mathematical and dualistic Platonic concepts while willing to forgo both the Aristotelian world and the Neoplatonic blend of Aristotelian and Platonic theories. In contraposition to the kingdom of certainties, Cusa cites the realm of human consciousness as the location of the uncertain conjunctures (*coniectura*). The implication is that on both the physical and cosmological levels, as well as on the theological level, there can be no hierarchy of truth. Both the earth as a physical entity relating to the other heavenly bodies, and any human theory as it relates to other theories, are equidistant from the (divine) absolute, which alone is defined as the center and the circumference. The principles of faith themselves then become *coniectura*. Thus one may see such essays as *De pace fidei*, *De visione Dei*, *De concordantia catolica*, and *De docta ignorantia* as based on a single epistemological principle. This approach provides complete moral justification for the essential state of difference in the empirical situation of a world governed by religious plurality, since each physical or mental entity approaches the transcendent insofar as it addresses its inner self.

As noted, many scholars have, each in turn, convincingly attacked Cassirer's interpretation of Nicholas of Cusa, in particular his hermeneutical approach rather than any concrete argument. An examination of those critiques, then, may provide an interesting way of considering the viability of Cassirer's interpretive method in general. Jaspers attacked Cassirer's understanding of Nicholas of Cusa's ideal because Jaspers himself interprets Cusa's project as based in an imperative of unity that precludes any possibility of true freedom of thought—and promotes an ideal of a single truth that the intellect must acknowledge.[48] This imperative is grounded in an essentialist perception of the human as a homogeneous entity. Jaspers considers Cusa's tendency to draw a distinction between *religio* and *ritus* to be a crucial mistake. As an existential humanist Jaspers cannot accept the metaphysical differentiation between a high-level universal religiosity and (what is perceived as) a lower realm of religious rites and habits.

In an interesting way this argument parallels a more ancient one: the philosophical debate that Yehuda Halevi, the Arab-Jewish theologian living in twelfth-century Spain, engaged in with his contemporaries. In

his famous work, *The Book of the Khazars—Kuzari*, Halevi describes a dialogue between the king of the Khazars and the representatives of the three monotheistic religions.[49] Before the Christian, the Muslim, and the Jew appear on the stage, Halevi presents a conversation between the king and a philosopher. The philosopher proposes to the king an approach that at first glance might seem similar to that of Nicholas of Cusa. According to that Aristotelian ideal, the king should submit himself to the rational principles of metaphysics and morality as the final human perfection while adopting arbitrarily some kind of religious ritual or neglecting existing religions altogether. On the basis of his personal religious experience, the king for his part, refuses to accept that philosophical imperative. An angel appearing to him in his dreams had told him repeatedly that his intentions were good but his ritual deeds were wrong; this religious experience underlying his quest. An attitude that rejects the ritual aspect of religious life in favor of some intellectual framework is thus unacceptable to him.[50] For the purpose of our discussion, the similarity between the critique leveled by Halevi at the principles of the Aristotelian philosophy of religion (with which he was familiar from contemporary Arab Aristotelians), and Jaspers's critique of Nicholas of Cusa's religious thought is striking. The point where Jaspers (or Halevi) and Cassirer part ways lies in their different interpretations of the philosophical nature of the solution provided by Cusa to the problem of the multiplicity of religious truth. As we shall see, Cusa, according to Cassirer, does not share the same attitude as that shown by the Aristotelian philosopher in Halevi's dialogue. Cusa is proposing not an undifferentiated attitude toward particular rites as a nonessential aspect of religious praxis to be contrasted with the one absolute religious (i.e., philosophical) truth, but rather a new notion of absolute transcendental unity, which is at the same time—as Cassirer repeatedly emphasizes—the most immanent feature of every single ritual and belief.

Jaspers moves on to develop a further argument, claiming that the peaceful scenario described by Cusa is one that can be achieved by the participants only when they detach themselves from all earthly experiences in order to meet their fellow man in some translunar angelic sphere. As such this is a solution that again requires a total disregard for the daily existential problems of being in the world. Earthly, everyday difficulties become much easier to deal with the moment one considers them from a divine perspective.[51] This, as I will suggest below, is again quite a simplis-

tic view, if one takes into account the epistemological framework of the Cusanian discussion in its entirety. To conclude his discussion Jaspers argues, in line with many other researchers, that the actual religious unity, as formulated in Nicholas of Cusa's dialogue, is ultimately and absolutely Christian in character. The latter's proposal conceals an unconscious lack of tolerance.[52]

What is interesting in Jaspers's critique—which, as noted, is more severe than most—is that it is based on an interpretative approach that differs little from that of Cassirer. Jaspers's critique is consciously rooted in the conceptual system of his own times, and he justifies this anachronism by claiming that each individual is essentially committed to his own values in moving beyond time to judge a philosophical system of the past.[53] Jaspers claims that one should never use historical distance as an excuse for suspending ethical or political judgment. Against Cassirer's consciously anachronistic philosophical approach Jaspers presents us here with a (not less consciously anachronistic) ethical existential perspective.

On the other hand, with regard to Jaspers's claim about the hidden Christian motive behind Nicholas of Cusa's religious pluralism, one must admit that a long line of researchers share his view that, in its details, the universal religion proposed by Cusa is actually identical to Roman Catholic dogma and as such represents no more than the utopian vision of a Christian believer. The question that arises, then, is to what extent was Cassirer indeed misled by the careless use of an arbitrary interpretation in a way that led him to ignore the obviously Christian, particularistic nature of Nicholas of Cusa's argument? To answer this question, a brief analysis of the argument of Cusa himself is needed. According to Cusa, the resolution of religious conflict is based on two essential actions: first, the division of the religious world into two spheres sequentially facing two distinct human faculties—that of knowledge and discourse, and that of loyalty and habit as this stands in affinity to ritual; second, the systematic use of the Neoplatonic principle (as formulated by Proclus) of unity beyond the indeterminable dialectics of the physical condition and human language.

Concerning the first point, one should note the "dynamization" and "temporalization" of the concept of intellect as presented in the preamble to the dialogue. The placing of this process in such a clear historical context is reminiscent of such thinkers as Lessing;[54] the similarity and the difference between Nicholas of Cusa and Lessing are determined by the

manner in which each understands the concept of revelation, which both thinkers use in this context of *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*.

Since Cusa, as the author of the inter-religious scenario described in *De pace fidei*, is a Christian, it is hardly surprising that the universal stratum of faith presented therein is colored by Roman Catholic dogma. One could suggest that Nicholas of Cusa's right to use Christian narrative to describe his universal vision of religion derives from his parallel willingness to reformulate his Christian belief through philosophical universal notions. Naturally, this endeavor must itself be based on the second assumption noted above, namely, that any knowledge or definition of the divinity is on the one hand of a necessarily particular nature, and on the other hand is sublime and open to eternity. In the case of an intellectual thinker such as Nicholas of Cusa, the medieval context of the interreligious question is that of a philosophy clothed in religious garb—garb that cannot be removed. The relation between "essential" and "accidental" within the religious realm is identical to any individuation process in the physical world, which—and Nicholas's views on these matters are very close to the Aristotelian nominalist ones—requires matter that may not be separated from form. But the Cusanian move is more radical. In incorporating the Christian dogma of the Trinity and Incarnation within his universal religion he pushes this dogma far beyond its traditional limits.

Those who are inclined to reject the pluralistic pretensions of Nicholas of Cusa's essay see the inclusion of the concepts of the Trinity and the Incarnation as the main obstacle to the foundation of a natural religion that might represent a true search for a sufficiently broad common denominator. These scholars tend to consider the proposals included in the dialogue aimed at the formulation of agreed religious principles as a covert missionary attempt—conducted in a manner similar to that of Ramon Lull—to recast Catholic theology for its adversaries in the guise of natural religion.[55] One should note in this regard that to forgo the Trinity in the circumstances described in the essay, in order to create a uniform monotheistic discourse, would be tantamount to admitting that Christianity itself is a pagan religion, that it is, in this sense, not a "natural" one. Since such an admission would immediately exclude Christianity from the circle of monotheistic religions, the acceptance of the Trinity, as well as of pagan religions, is indeed a basic condition required of the participants in the dialogue.

Moreover, Cusa, following an existing stream in Catholic theology, sees the Trinity as a naturalistic expression of the cosmic face of divinity rather than as a theosophical mystery based on revelation. This understanding of Christian dogma is presented throughout his writing, helping him to reveal the philosophical (i.e., universal and intellectual) elements of his own religion. His line of argument constitutes what might be seen as an inversion of the later process, which is well known from Christian Kabbala. Such thinkers as Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin identify Christian elements in texts that they attribute to the earliest strata of Judaism, while they also find Neoplatonic structures in medieval kabbalistic texts.[56] In contrast, Cusa identifies the philosophical elements that have been built into Christian dogma since earliest times. His success in identifying the "philosophical" elements in the foundation of Christianity leads him to believe that he has identified the general and universalistic stratum underlying his religion. From here it is but a short step to the conclusion that this stratum is also the universalistic stratum of any religion per se. Thus, in deriving the principles that belong to the intellectual and panuniversal stratum, he draws on the specific core of Christian belief, namely, the idea that the Christian accepts the tenets of his faith precisely because its incredible nature requires a total leap of faith. Through intellect, a principle of division and distinction becomes an accessible and unifying element.

It may be useful at this point to recall the philosophical-theological confrontation of Halevi's *Kuzari*. Halevi's claim was described above as negating the possibility of interreligious dialogue because it denies the possibility that philosophy can create that neutral interreligious and areligious sphere in which a universal terminology and cosmopolitan religiosity prevail. In Halevi's view, such a philosophical attitude denies the basic structure of religious emotion and devotion. It leaves nothing but an empty shell. The manner in which Nicholas of Cusa's solution attempts to break through that traditional medieval barrier is now perhaps clearer. It lies precisely within that process, described above, of gathering the most mysterious and sacred elements of his particular religion into a new philosophical language—one that can handle the absolute *sub specie aeternitatis* and one that transcends the Aristotelian contingent logic in favor of a new "mathematical" and idealistic formulation of cosmos.

Moreover, by transferring the trinitarian principle from the realm of Christian dogma to that of a universal theory of the intellect, Cusa

is able to create a completely new notion of the human intellect. In the new philosophical-theological vocabulary the main problem of mediaeval monotheistic rival parties—the contradictory truth claims based on revelation—is genuinely resolved. Elevated to the sphere of cosmic, transcendental unity-beyond-Trinity, the human intellect qua "wisdom" (*sapientia*) takes on all the divine attributes, including the principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. It has very little—if anything—to do with that totalitarian and monolithic ideal of unity described by Jaspers.

De pace fidei, the complex essay addressed here, in many ways constitutes a summary of the different fields of scholarship dealing with Nicholas of Cusa. It relates to the political and ecclesiastical ideal that is indicated in his earlier essay *De concordantia catholica*, and in many of the letters and documents that reflect his activities as a papal legate, particularly in Germany. The basis of the essay is indeed the epistemological and theoretical foundation formulated by Cusa during his return from a visit to Constantinople—another ecclesiastical mission intended to forge political unity. This theoretical underpinning is also found in his first systematic essay, *De docta ignorantia*, which is best known for the principle of the unity of opposites. The notion is developed in epistemological terms in the essay *De coniecturis* and finds its further theological development on various levels in such essays as *De visione dei*, *De pace fidei*, and *De non aliud*.

I am by no means indicating that I concur with Cassirer's analysis of Nicholas of Cusa, although in my opinion Cassirer's consciously anachronistic treatment of philosophical texts is certainly more convincing than Jaspers's anachronistic analysis of Cusa's fundamental tendency. However, Cassirer's endeavor fails to explain what distinctions must be made between Nicholas of Cusa's thought and Enlightenment philosophy—a legacy drawn on and perpetuated by Cassirer. On the religious question, Cusa's views do not, in the final analysis, anticipate Enlightenment thought. As Blumenberg claimed, Cusa's thought is ultimately anchored in a medieval cultural reality but, contrary to what Cassirer believed, it is not on this account inferior to Enlightenment ideas.[57] It is true that Cusa's solution is essentially epistemological and in this respect differs from Enlightenment thought, since it was intended to solve the central dilemma of medieval times: the riddle of the pluralism of absolute truth—a pluralism that medieval man experienced as everyday reality. The question that must be addressed by a thinker such as Nicholas of Cusa is the extent to which one may entertain relative and

equally valid appearances of a single absolute truth. Or, in more radical terms, is it possible for mutually contradictory truth claims to coexist? Such a question was not faced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who experienced a simple, Eurocentric, and monolithic reality in which religions no longer existed alongside one another but were ordered along the lines of advancement and retrogression, according to temporal or value-based terms.[58]

In the final analysis, Cassirer himself remains a philosopher of the Enlightenment. This explains the one-dimensional nature of his theories. However, the intuitions that led him back to medieval philosophy were correct, even if his attachment to historical stereotypes caused him to see this period as a precursor of the modern age—its precondition, as it were—an era to be addressed and learned from. In any case, his encounter with thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa eventually enabled him to develop an admirable model for resistance and opposition during one of the least enlightened periods of human history.

NOTES

1. Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932); *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. by Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston: Beacon, 1951).

2. Ibid., 262: "The problem of history for the philosophy of the Enlightenment arises in the field of religious phenomena, and it is here that this problem first became urgent."

3. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 238f; see also Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 87.

4. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 237ff.

5. Ibid., 2: 239: "If we attempt to isolate and remove the basic mythical components from religious belief, we no longer have religion in its real, objectively historical manifestation; all that remains is a shadow of it, an empty abstraction."

6. Ibid., 2: 239.

7. See below, n. 48.

8. About the specific places where Cassirer deals directly with Nicholas of Cusa, see esp. his *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 166, and *Essay on Man*, 73.

9. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 95f.

10. Ibid., 103.

11. "Odysseus oder Mythos und Aufklärung," in M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1990), 50–87.

12. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (1946; New York: Doubleday, 1955), 15.

13. Ernst Cassirer, "Die Idee der Religion bei Lessing und Mendelssohn," in *Festgabe zum zehnjärigen Bestehen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1919–1929* (Berlin: Akademie, 1929), 24–41.

14. Ibid., 33–34.

15. Ibid., 24ff.

16. See Gabriel Motzkin's analysis of the idea of secularization confronting the problem of time as representing the same tension as that between "time and transcendence." *Time and Transcendence: Secular History, the Catholic Reaction and the Rediscovery of the Future* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992), 13: "From the point of view of an absolute transcendence, the problem of time is not the problem of the subjective experience of time. It is rather the problem of the transformation of non-time into time and of time into non-time, i.e., into eternity."

17. Lessing, "The Education of the Human Race," in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, selected and trans. by H. Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 82–98.

18. See Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, trans. by Alfred Jospe (New York: Schocken Books 1969), 67: "I, for my part, cannot share the view of mankind's education into which my late friend, Lessing, was misled by I don't know what scholar of history. . . . 'Progress' is a term that applies only to the individual, destined by Providence to spend part of his eternity here on earth. . . . That it could, however, also have been the intention of Providence to let mankind as a whole advance steadily and toward perfection in the course of time and here on earth, is some thing I cannot believe." Cassirer, "Die Idee der Religion," 31ff.

19. Cassirer, "Die Idee der Religion," 37. Jaspers similarly rejected that critique of Mendelssohn as a misunderstanding of Lessing's ideal of infinite development and criticized Mendelssohn as "naive and dogmatic." See *Hannah Arendt / Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel, 1926–1969*, ed. L. Köhler and H. Saner (Munich: Piper, 1993), 229, letter no. 134.

20. Cassirer, "Die Idee der Religion," 40–41.

21. In this sense Cassirer's description might be subject to the same criticism that Ernst Troeltsch directs against the main narrative of the German Protestant Enlightenment, namely, that it identifies a specific development of religious formulation typical of Protestant Enlightenment with the most general notion of "the religious" as such. This idea is criticized by Troeltsch in his essay *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (1929; Munich: Mohr, 1962), 33.

22. See Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 190–196.

23. Ibid., 194.

24. Ibid., 192.

25. Ibid., 195: "Reason does not exclude motion; it seeks rather to understand the immanent law of motion. It is reason itself that now plunges into the stream of becoming, not in order to be seized and carried along by its swirls but in order to find here its own security and to assert its stability and constancy."

26. Cassirer, "Die Idee der Religion," 41.

27. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, esp. chap. 7, "Myth and Religion," 72–108.

28. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 374.

29. It is worth noting that in 1904, two years before the appearance of Cassirer's first study of Nicholas of Cusa (see n. 35 below), Martin Buber submitted his dissertation, which was never published, to the University of Vienna under the title "Beiträge zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblems." In this work Buber analyzes Nicholas of Cusa and Jakob Böhme from the aspect of individuation, an aspect close to Cassirer's own interests, especially in his *Individuum und Kosmos* (below, n. 35). Buber's analysis differs in many details from that of Cassirer although he also considers Cusa "The first thinker of the new age"—a formulation quite similar to that of Cassirer ("Beiträge," 9). This correlation seems to reflect, more than anything else, a certain atmosphere in some German intellectual circles of the time.

30. Karl Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus* (Munich: Piper, 1964).

31. Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 558–638.

32. For the historical and conceptual usage of this notion see ibid., 532–557.

33. Ibid., 553; on the cosmological problem, see esp. 583–596. For a different attitude toward that cosmological discussion in recent historical writing, see A. Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: From the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

34. Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit* (1906; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 21–61; *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Rennaisance* (Berlin: Teubner, 1927), 29–32; *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 165; and *The Myth of the State*, 73.

35. For example, see Cassirer's discussion of medieval thought in *The Myth of the State*, 94–143. One finds claims such as: "The scholastic thinkers . . . did not read the classical texts in our modern way. They did not care for historical truth. They only knew and acknowledged a symbolic truth. They had no critical or philological standards of interpretation" (107). Or further on: "In the medieval system there was no room for our modern rationalism. . . . The 'autonomy' of reason was a principle quite alien to medieval thought" (116). See also J. H. Randall, Jr., "Cassirer's Theory of History as Illustrated in His Treatment of Renaissance Thought," in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. P. A. Schlipp, Library of Living Philosophers, 6 (Evanston: Open Court, 1949), 691–728, esp. 705, n. 30.

36. See also *Myth of the State*, 327: "In history the two factors of 'time' and 'eternity' are not separate the one from the other; they interpenetrate each other."

37. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 171–206.

38. Ibid., 177.

39. Ibid., 184f.

40. Ibid., 195.

41. Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, translated with an introduction by Mario Damandi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 7.

42. Ibid., 11.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 24f.

45. Ibid., 25–28. Cassirer is aware of Nicholas of Cusa's two main sources in medieval philosophy. These, the two main post-Aristotelian streams of the fourteenth century,

differ less in their basic assumption than has been generally assumed, coming together in late German Scholasticism. The first source is German mysticism, absorbed by Cusa especially through the writings of Meister Eckhart. The other is nominalism, constituting the *via moderna* of the University of Heidelberg; see *Individuum und Kosmos*, 34ff. For a recent discussion of these scientific developments, see Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*.

46. This methodology is most evident in his later research on Pico della Mirandola, a much less systematic thinker than Nicholas of Cusa. See Ernst Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Study in the History of Renaissance Ideas," parts 1–2, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1942): 123–144, and 3 (1943): 319–346, esp. 137; on the relation of Pico to the ideas of Nicholas of Cusa see part 1, 140ff.

47. Nicolai de Cusa, *De pace fidei*, ed. R. Klibansky and H. Bascour, Opera Omnia, 7 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1970). For an English translation, see J. Hopkins, trans., *Nicholas of Cusa's De pace fidei and Cribatio Alkorani* (Minneapolis: Banning, 1990).

48. Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus*, 180: "Cusanus opens the door to the possibility of a self examining human being, that his desire for truth is based solely on his freedom, but closes the door immediately through the assumption of one single truth, which the free will *must* accept as such" (emphasis in original).

49. Yehuda Halevi, *Kitab al-radd wa-l-dalil fi al-din al-dhalil, al-kitab al-Khazari* [The Book of Refutation and Proof on the Despised Faith, The Book of the Khazars—Kuzari], ed. D. H. Baneth (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977).

50. Ibid., 3–41; L. Strauss, "The Role of Reason in the Kuzari," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 95–141; and A. L. Motzkin, "On Halevi's Kuzari as a Platonic Dialogue," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 9 (1980): 111–124.

51. Jaspers, *Nikolaus Cusanus*, 186.

52. Ibid., 188: "the uncosciouss intolerance that derives from his own Christian belief."

53. Ibid., 181.

54. On Lessing's use of such a dynamic notion in his religious discourse, see M. Bollacher, *Lessing—Vernunft und Geschichte: Untersuchungen zum Problem religiöser Aufklärung in den Spaetschriften* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978), 3.

55. On Lulls's use of kabbalistic materials in general and within his missionary efforts in particular, see H. J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

56. On the connection between the thought of Nicholas of Cusa and that of the Renaissance and humanism, see Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos*, chap. 2. Cassirer's approach in this work was widely rejected, and he himself suggested corrections in his late article on Pico dela Mirandola. For a more recent discussion of this issue, see M. Seidlmayer, "Nikolaus von Kues und der Humanismus," in *Humanismus, Mystik und Kunst in der Welt des Mittelalters*, ed. J. Koch (Leiden: Brill, 1959); and K. Flasch, "Nikolaus von Kues und Pico Della Mirandola," *Mitteilungen und Forschungsbeiträge der Cusanus-Gesellschaft* 14 (1980): 113–120.

57. See the Blumenberg quotations in n. 31 above.

58. On this move from medieval religious pluralism to the early modern notion of religious tolerance, see Y. Schwartz, "Zwischen Pluralismus und Toleranz: Zur Säkularisierung der Inter-religiösen Problematik im Übergang vom Spätmittelalter zur früheren Neuzeit," in *Einbruch der Wirklichkeit: Die Realität der Moderne zwischen Säkularisierung und Entsäkularisierung*, ed. J. Mattern (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2002), 73–99.

THREE

History and Philosophy in Ernst Cassirer's System of Symbolic Forms

FABIEN CAPEILLÈRES

Ernst Cassirer's philosophical status suffered an unfortunate fate. As the importance and significance of neo-Kantianism faded, Cassirer ceased to be regarded as one of the most preeminent German philosophers. In fact, he came to be seen as one of the last of a dying species, the German mandarin, his only real achievement being his work as a somewhat uninspiring—some might say painfully tedious—historian of philosophy. Symbolization, which was the conceptual core of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*),[1] was considered to be lacking in insight and comprehensibility.[2] The phenomenology of knowledge presented in his *Das Erkenntnisproblem*[3] (The Problem of Knowledge) was understood as a historical fresco,[4] and exoteric books such as his *An Essay on Man* and *The Myth of the State* ended up being confused by his critics with the systematic works.[5] Moreover, where the philosophical background necessary for understanding his works was lacking, it was also impossible to attain an adequate understanding of Cassirer's achievements in the field of history. Little tribute has been paid to his historical exegesis,[6] and indeed most of the studies dealing with his methods and philosophy of history have been carried out in the context of the rather recent rediscovery of Cassirer as a philosopher.[7] Even today, his philosophy of history receives relatively little attention.[8]

This state of affairs is paradoxical not only because of Cassirer's reputation as a historian but also because together with language, myth, scientific knowledge, and philosophy, history was a symbolic form to which Cassirer gave serious attention. Unlike technology or law, history was extensively investigated by Cassirer, and his work in this area should thus be compared to his practice as a philosophical historian.

Last but not least, Cassirer's treatment of the problem of the status and functions of history in the constitution of the *Kulturwissenschaften* (usually translated by "cultural sciences") offers an excellent basis on which to differentiate models of neo-Kantianism, in particular those of Marburg (Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, Cassirer) and Baden (Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert) and to assess their relation both to Wilhelm Dilthey and to the structural inheritance of Hegel.

It is therefore essential to analyze Cassirer's conception of history with the same meticulous attention that has been given to other areas of Cassirer's thought—in particular to his conception of science.

This article fully acknowledges Cassirer's achievements as a philosopher and addresses three questions. First, what is the nature of history as a symbolic form? According to the only explicit definition of symbolic form that Cassirer provided, understanding history as a symbolic form means that it is apprehended as "an energy of the spirit, by which a meaningful content is attached to a concrete sensuous sign and is internally imputed to that sign."[9] Here Cassirer designates the unity of an intellectual synthesis as an action, not as a given site of knowledge. This original synthesis denotes a relational structure that Cassirer describes in the general introduction to *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, based on two levels: the qualities of relation (space, time, number, objective connections—the Kantian categories, as it were) and the modality of relation (the more general "style" or specific configuration performed by the global synthesis). For example, time as a pure quality of relation structures myth as well as history and science. It is then defined as a simple relation of coordination, whose modality is distinct in each form. In myth, time appears as a sacred origin, which gives structure to its becoming by directing it, *a parte ante*, toward that origin and, ultimately, canceling it by including it in eternity. Thus, with modality, we achieve the configuration specific to each symbolic form—its specificity. One must therefore grasp the qualities of relation that constitute the form of "history"; that is, untangle the forms of space, time, number, and objective connections specific to the building of historical knowledge.

This leads to a second question, which concerns how history became a rigorous knowledge. In Cassirer's work, this structural and synchronic analysis of historical knowledge always relies on a genetic and diachronic study, its phenomenology of knowledge (in the Hegelian sense). The key here is to understand how history becomes autonomous objective knowledge by separating itself from myth and religion. The second part of this

article unravels the essential methodological and historical steps of the phenomenology of historical knowledge sketched by Cassirer, thereby circumscribing the modality of history, and untangles its qualities of relation (space, time, etc.).

The second part of the paper focuses on the methodology of history once it has gained its autonomous status and strives to produce an objective knowledge. It ends with an examiniation of the third issue: the function of this form within Cassirer's system. Once the essence of history is defined as a symbolic form, its function within the Cassirerian system needs to be determined. As Cassirer wrote, "The whole system of the *Geisteswissenschaften* [human sciences] rests on history as one of its grounds."[10] In describing his philosophy as an anthropology, he notes, "it seeks to determine the place of human knowledge in the organism of human civilization. . . . Art and history are the most powerful instruments of our inquiry into human nature."[11] The architectonic role played by history will be addressed in the third part of this essay. I will conclude with an assessment of the function of history in the final synthesis of the Cassirerian system—his philosophical anthropology.

THE SHAPES OF HISTORY IN ITS PHENOMENOLOGY

To understand history as a symbolic form, I will follow Cassirer's phenomenology of this form of knowledge and study the characteristic configurations assumed by its constitutive relations (time, space, etc.).

In volume 2 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and in the chapter "History" in *An Essay on Man*, Cassirer notes that historical consciousness is a late product of knowledge.[12] What does he mean by this? The two historical examples he presents clarify his remarks, though they remain somewhat enigmatic. First, according to Cassirer, historical consciousness, strictly speaking, emerged with the great Greek historians, specifically, Thucydides. The distance between Thucydides and Herodotus is what separates history from myth. The second reference is presented in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, in particular chapter 5, "The Conquest of the Historical World"; in the fourth volume of *The Problem of Knowledge*, which presents "Fundamental Forms and Tendencies of Historical Knowledge" in part 3; as well as in other passages from *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. All these texts present the eighteenth century as the start of the great period of historical consciousness. The writers of that period are placed in broader

perspective, of course (for example, Johann Gottfried Herder vis-à-vis Gottfried Leibniz and Montesquieu vis-à-vis Pierre Bayle and Giambattista Vico) but for the most part, the eighteenth century remains the characteristic frame of reference. Even so, due consideration had to be given to the gap of twenty-two centuries separating that century from the time of Thucydides as constituting the possible intermediate phases that would allow a practice of history to find its corresponding theory.

Despite his pronounced interest in the history of idealism and, hence, in Plato, Cassirer barely concerns himself with the Greek, Roman, and medieval worlds.[13] On the other hand—following Cohen's lead in this regard—Cassirer begins the majority of his historical-systematic genealogies with the Renaissance, and imbues them with a character specific to his practice of history. The question he asks of past epochs does not address its intrinsic essence but rather, how did we get here and how can we achieve the potential ideal that is taking shape? Three texts are critical to the beginnings of the genealogy of historical knowledge: the first and fourth volumes of *The Problem of Knowledge*, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, and his paper "The Concept of History during the Renaissance" (1941).[14]

Cassirer's work thus presents three key moments that characterize the genesis of history: fourth-century B.C. Greece, the Italian Renaissance, and eighteenth-century Europe. To explain the meaning of Cassirer's phenomenology of historical knowledge, I will deal separately with its two constitutive elements: the historical presentation offered by Cassirer and its systematic underpinning. The question now is, thus: What is the systematic basis of this three-part division, or, what do each of these periods contribute to the course of the autonomization of historical knowledge?

Myth and History

In characteristic contradistinction to Herodotus and to Homer, Thucydides represents the emergence of history from myth, holding a favored place for Cassirer in that he represents *logos* in opposition to *muthos*. Cassirer's interpretation is based on two sources. The first, clearly, is the passage from the *The Peloponnesian War*, in which Thucydides writes, "The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past and an aide to the interpretation of the future, which

in the course of human things it must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. My history has been composed to be a possession for all time, not the show-piece of an ephemeral hour."[15] With the elimination of the "fabulous," of the mythical as a narrative genre, historical narrative delivers a hard blow to mythical consciousness. Second, this attack itself presupposes as its condition of possibility an underlying interpretation. If the Greeks can address history in that way, it is because they possessed a method forged in the study of nature. Thus, Cassirer writes, "But the Greek conception of history was not only based on new facts or on a much deeper and more comprehensive psychological insight than had preceded it. The Greeks had also found a new method that enabled them to see the problem in an entirely new light. Before studying politics they had studied nature. In this domain they had made their first great discoveries. Without this preliminary step it would not have been possible for them to challenge the power of mythical thought."[16] Here we find an established hermeneutical principle, the legitimacy of which must be carefully examined—an endeavor that consists in studying, at one and the same time, the *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences). And as we shall see, the notion that the former serve, albeit in very diverse ways, as the methodological foundation of the latter, is also a matter that the Greeks articulated in conceptual form.

This second point reveals the ground on which Cassirerian interpretation is constructed; the "Greek spirit," as he refers to it, is constituted by the same focal point common to all research and such that, "it is as if the individual thinkers were following a preconceived strategic plan."[17] And, of course, it is the *logos*, a figure specific to rationality, that characterizes this spirit. Methodologically, it is clear that this ground is laid, as it were, only after the roots have taken hold. One must also note how the Cassirerian exegesis unfolds at four moments: 1) the individual work, Thucydides, 2) the various symbolic forms that surround history—here, primarily physics and philosophy, 3) the spirit of a period, and 4) its incorporation in an all-inclusive history, since from the Greeks we must move on to the medieval period, then to the modern and contemporary periods.

Based on this exegesis, what does this early phase of development of historical knowledge contribute from a systematic perspective? Cassirer does not specify, for two main reasons. First, he addressed the essentials of the systematic difference between myth and history in his *Mythical Thought*,

volume 2 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. But of course, the contrast here between Thucydides and the great archaic poets gets lost, because only Homer appears in this work—primarily to mark the difference between the individual's status in the epic (still close to myth) and in tragedy. The second reason was that the Greek spirit, from Cassirer's viewpoint, took history to be a minor form whose lessons would remain unheeded. In this regard, Cassirer wrote that the great Greek thinkers could not assess the full value of this new gain. Greek philosophy is interested in the structure of the physical world, of logical thought and of social life and human ethics. Physics, logic, ethics, and politics are the primary concerns of Greek thought. There was no place for an examination of history alongside these four branches of philosophical knowledge.[18] Cassirer explains that Plato, in denying becoming, leaves no room for history, while Aristotle, in the well-known passage of *Poetics*, prefers poetry because it deals with the general and not the particular, and so science, because it concerns the general, has no place there. Thus, from the perspective of the correlation between the historical exegesis of history's symbolic form and its systematic analysis, a lacuna exists at this initial level. Note that history is neither structural nor conceptual, but factual. On the one hand, to grasp the essential of the Greek *logos* historically, one need not be concerned with history. On the other hand, to systematically grasp the essence of the distinction between myth and history, one should focus on primitive rituals as forms of *Ausdrucksfunktion*, or expression, in order to understand myth in its process of formation. Here there is a very strong indication of the conviction that runs through Cassirerian analysis: a form of knowledge—in this case, historical knowledge—achieves its theoretical completeness and autonomy only through methodological self-reflection, for which philosophy plays a leading role. That is why Cassirer's phenomenology of history is focused mainly on the eighteenth century and achieves its culmination in the critical *philosophy* of history (and not simply because Cassirer has written a—philosophical—history of philosophy rather than a history of history).

This lacuna notwithstanding, and without limiting ourselves to a direct encounter between Herodotus and Thucydides, we must ask, what we can derive from the confrontation between myth and history?

Cassirer's argument may be summarized in one very simple point: history emerged from myth only to subject itself to religion. Beyond that truism, what, from Cassirer's standpoint, was the result of this emergence in

regard to the structuring that is specific to the process of symbolization? In what follows I shall elucidate the systematic articulation of Cassirer's conception.

First, the mythic form of history emerges in one of three kinds of genesis narratives: theogony, cosmogony, and anthropogony. By contrast, for later religious consciousness, theodicy will be the preferred form of narrative. Cassirer provides an interesting indication of the elaboration of the mythic figure of history. History, as such, assumes a constructed narrative. It appears in myth only in its developed forms, after myth passes through the initial, strictly affective levels of pure expression. Furthermore, Cassirer encounters there the three Kantian ideas (God, world, and soul) in imaginative and substantial form, in which the world is not a theoretical object for physics, raised to absolute unconditionality, but rather a living entity. Here we are thus dealing with the development of the two *Urphenomena*, a you and an I. With regard to "space," the following is key: Mythic space is, above all, a wholly sacred one; that is, a space that leaves no room for the profane. In its most all-inclusive or most universalizing dimension, cosmogonical space, like time, is established by an origin that is completely determinant and is based on an outline corresponding to a corporeal image. Examples of this include the totemic animal or the human, which will serve to configure the geography of that space, a geography both physical and social.[19] Furthermore, still in accordance with a corresponding temporal origin, spatial regions are divided by virtue of the affective values attached to the principles that structure them: day and night and their stars. This, thus, constitutes a substantialization of space, with its attendant affective content—the sacred or, for example, the frightening or the forbidden.

On the other hand, historical space must be a functional, not a substantial, space; it is delimited by the relationships that constitute historiography. The Mediterranean world under the rule of Philip II was not a "thing," but a particularly complex weave of political, commercial and artistic exchanges. However, we have not reached that point in this phenomenology of historical knowledge. The transition to religion is characterized, most importantly, by a loosening of the phenomenon of expression. In concrete terms, this means that a place is carved out, within that space, for profane sites.

With regard to "time," it must be noted that temporality seems to be the dimension favored by myth and history. "True myth . . . begins only when

a genesis, a becoming, a life in time is attributed to these figures. . . . only where human consciousness takes the step forward from the figure of the gods to the history, the narrative of the gods, only then have we to do with "myths" in the specific meaning of this word. And if we break down the concept of the 'history of the gods' into its component factors, the emphasis is not on the second but on the first factor, the intuition of the temporal."[20] How did the mythic narrative become a religious one? How did the mythic history of the gods become a religious history? In myth, temporality is annulled and it gives way to eternity by an original initiating action. This past initiating action has no why—it stands for the origin of everything else. Furthermore, the moments of time seem to be permutable and indistinct. For example, the present, considered as what we would describe as the past, does not differ from the past. The transition from myth to religion occurs as a transition from *muthos* to *ethos*.

The actual transition from mythic time to religious time involves a different orientation toward eternity. Mythical eternity is the eternity of origin; religious eternity is an eternity of the future. For Cassirer, Saint Augustine captures the moment of counterbalance. Origin is creation, but the fall leads to a comparison between the heavenly city and the human city. In a way, the fall is the birth of history and has meaning only with respect to this future and the return to the divine city. This, obviously, is the final stage introduced by prophetic monotheistic religions. Cassirer follows Hermann Cohen in this respect insofar as he sees the meaning of this future as messianism and its significance as ethical.[21]

Here, we come quite close to the transition to the critical temporality of history, because telos may be considered not as a metaphysical reality governing the progress of the human being, but as a gnoseological and ethical ideal regulating historical discourse and action, as in Kant's writings in the *The Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*.

For mythical consciousness, "number" conveys divinity; it is less quantitative than qualitative, and this quality possesses an affective value. Thus, it does not structure duration in purely operative or ideal fashion but marks historical becoming with the seal of the divine and attests that the latter is only the expression of the former. Calendrical cycles offer an example of such qualitative value, as do expressions like "the thousand-year Reich" in the context of the modern political myth. The transition appears, in particular, when cycles of time disappear. This allows duration to be

indeterminate, which is essential to an understanding of the end to come as an ideal.

With respect to "objective connections," I will only touch on the principle concerning historiography, that of causality. Mythical consciousness conceives of causality not as a defined and well-ordered succession between two distinct entities that share an ontological reality, but as the expression of a substance that spreads throughout every reality and whose emanations are, in some respects, interchangeable, based on the rule of *pars pro toto* or what Cassirer calls the law of concrescence. A historical causality follows, which essentially takes the form of destiny, a necessity to which we are blind and to which we are subjected, not as individuals but as a collective element undifferentiated from the whole. When historical causality is correlated with individuality, it clarifies the boundary with religious thought.

Indeed—and again, this is only a passing reference to the notion of individuality, though it is, of course, very important—the law of concrescence characteristic to mythical thought leaves no room for individuality. A particularity does indeed exist, but it is only the particularization of a universal that remains abstract because it is basically undifferentiated from this particularity. There is thus no individual responsibility, and the only agent of history is the universal substance in motion. To provide a few historical points of reference, in the Greek world, the transition from epic to tragedy marked the rise of individual responsibility, paralleling a religious, but no longer mythical, temporality. Here, Cassirer refers, on the one hand, to Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, in which the chorus responds to Clytemnestra, saying, "What man shall testify that your hands are clean of this murder?"[22] and on the other, to the temporality of the *Timaeus*. The second historical point of reference is the transition from the Old to the New testaments. This is somewhat complex in that the Old Testament is not, itself, wholly mythical. The book of prophets is already characteristic of this transition from myth to religion. The "new heavens and the new earth" are those in which "they will not say again, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge, but everyone will die for his own iniquity.'"[23] Here again, Cassirer relies on Cohen.

This is thus the first step in wrenching history from myth, revealing how far we remain from a scientific historical hermeneutic, since in the best case, we find ourselves in the prophetic religion. The second phase thus involves fluctuations internal to historical thought and specific to

religion, which will lead to the separation of the two forms of knowledge. In Cassirer's exegesis, this unfolds in the medieval world and then in the Renaissance.

History and Religion in Modern Times

Taking up a highly classical theme, Cassirer, in his conception of history, points to the doctrine of the incarnation as the linchpin of the transition between the Greek world and the Christian world. What grants history its importance is that God becomes man and incarnation is a historic event. It is thus no longer possible to hold the historical world, the world apprehended by the senses, as separate from the intelligible world and as insignificant—it must be considered as a whole. For Cassirer, Augustine is the meaningful figure. The status of history is resolved through the relationship between the city of God and the human city. But Cassirer lays this groundwork only to move beyond it in his conception of the Renaissance.

For Cassirer, there are three key historical approaches to the Renaissance: aesthetic, religious, and scientific. Petrarch introduced the aesthetic approach. He reread the ancients and, in particular, Cicero, whose codex of letters he edited, with an empathy based on criteria that were more artistic and stylistic than philosophical.[24] What interested Cassirer was this contact with the men of the past. The religious approach—that is, the dialectic internal to religion—is found in his presentation of Petrarch as a tug-of-war between Cicero and Augustine, but it unfolds more fully in the work of fourteenth-century cleric and philosopher Nicolas of Cusa. Cassirer seeks to show how historical knowledge gained enhanced value from the doctrine of the *docta ignorantia*. If I cannot know the essence of God, then I can know him only symbolically. But rather than being an obstacle to knowing God, the multiplicity of symbols constitutes one of its conditions. Nicolas of Cusa is a kind of Renaissance Lessing who, in his *De pace fidei*, manages to deduce the necessary expression of a single faith in a diversity of languages, symbols, and religions. The unity of the Revelation is its diversity, which is accessible only in history.

Finally, the scientific approach follows from Nicolas of Cusa's works, as well as those of Giordano Bruno, Galileo Galilei, Nicolas Copernicus, and Pico dela Mirandola. For Cassirer, the new cosmology's point of departure is, again, Nicolas of Cusa's *De Docta ignorantia* (1414), which rejects the spatial arrangement of the cosmos dating from Aristotle: the

Earth at the center and the center as the site of all heavy bodies. For Nicolas of Cusa, the universe has no preferred center. Cassirer wrote that for Cusa, the medieval universe is an undefined extension into space. In that undefined space, each point is, so to speak, on the same level as the others. No single, fixed, and immobile center exists. There is no center of the Earth around which the celestial bodies move. Imagining an infinity and a homogeneity of space brings about the same revolution in the concept of time and thus affects history, expanding its scope considerably. On the one hand, it is no longer necessarily directed towards an absolute end and, on the other, even as a history of Revelation, it can become a history of art, a political history (Niccolò Machiavelli) and a history of philosophy.

Historical Knowledge and the Philosophy of History in the Enlightenment

In Cassirer's reflections on eighteenth-century history, Dilthey is clearly in the background. As was the case for the Renaissance, Cassirer sees in "the eighteenth-century vision of history less a well-defined figure with clear outlines than a force acting in all directions,"[25] a force whose vectors he tries to analyze. Strictly speaking, the focal point of Cassirer's interest in the eighteenth century is less history as such, and more the *philosophy* of history. What underlies this reasoning is the notion that history achieves full consciousness of its essence as knowledge and, thus, mastery of its intellectual tools only through the critical reflection that emerges from the philosophy of history. It should be noted that this assumes that Cassirer does not intend "philosophy of history" to mean a metaphysical argument on the becoming of being but an epistemological self-reflection.[26]

The main purpose of the eighteenth century is to make history a science by separating it from theology (and no longer from religion as such; that is, from faith—a distance has been established). The tools were inherited from the seventeenth century, since it is primarily Cartesian reasoning that concerns us here. As a result, "from the outset the philosophy of the eighteenth century treats the problems of nature and history as a unity that cannot be arbitrarily divided up and examined in piecemeal fashion. It tries to face both types of problems with the same intellectual tools. It endeavors to ask the same questions and to apply the same universal methodology of 'reason' to nature and history."[27] While this constitutes a healthy break with religion and theology, it also adumbrates

a classic theme, the difference between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

In this regard Bayle, the first author to draw Cassirer's attention, constituted a landmark of sorts—most importantly in his love of fact and detail and in the associated critical will. The comparison with Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* led Cassirer to write that the author of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1696) was, mutatis mutandis, both the Galileo and the Copernicus of the historical world: Galileo, because of his insistence that physics be completely independent from the Bible in matters of interpretation of phenomena; and Copernicus, because, as Cassirer wrote, he performed a "Copernican revolution" through his return to the subjective sources of knowledge. "He no longer grounds the 'truth' of history on some dogmatically given objective content put in front of him by the Bible or the Church; he returns, rather, to the subjective origins and conditions of that truth."[28] Here, we may note in passing that Cassirer was, in fact, thinking of Kant, because Copernicus actually moved the subject away from the center and Bayle arrives at a "critique of historical reason." Bayle also anticipated the "idea of a universal history in cosmological perspective" and embodied it in its first classical exemplification and model."[29]

In this love of detail Bayle complements Montesquieu. Montesquieu was concerned more with kind and law than with particularity and individuality. This led Cassirer to believe that, strictly speaking, there was no conception of history here because there was no becoming. Furthermore, Cassirer achieved his typology only by limiting himself to the sociopolitical realm. What Cassirer is establishing here, concurrent with the improvement represented by the conception of the ideal type of governments for conceiving legality in history, is nothing less than the complexity of a knowledge that must grasp, simultaneously, the individual in the process of becoming, as well as the universal.

The Forms of History since Herder

Cassirer's phenomenology of historical knowledge ends with a new assessment of the problem with which it began—history's uprooting of myth and religion. The Enlightenment, which assigned reason a leading role, played a significant part in this, since it "built the distinctive *methods* of historical knowledge that later times only needed to develop."[30] Cassirer's

historiography is here governed by the effort to show the continuity of the autonomization of history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to this perspective Herder represents a complex link between the spirit of Enlightenment and nineteenth-century historicism.[31] There is an ambiguity here that also serves as a bridge. Herder's work highlights the gap between the two domains but at the same time eliminates that gap by linking the two shores. Herder seems to instigate a break with the Enlightenment by virtue of his denial of the supremacy of reason. His history is the history of mankind's inner life. That life should be sought not in the actual letter—or even spirit—of laws, not in pragmatic matters or political calculations, but rather in the dynamics of feelings. Feelings in this sense are not the opposite, but rather the complement of reason; they allow for a fuller and richer portrait of mankind.

Herder's relation to historicism arises through his influence on Leopold von Ranke. Kant stipulated that a person may not be considered only as a means, but should also always be considered as an end in itself. Herder's application of that principle to nations and epochs undermines a vision of history in which they are related as members of a teleologically oriented series, one being the end, the others, the means. This gives rise to a historicism in which "each possessed, rather, its own unique content and intrinsic meaning, and its own incomparable worth"; "all is identically *means* and *end*."[32] Herder's historicism does not claim a general relativism of values for he upheld a very consistent ideal of humanity. Rather, it signifies the equal distribution of value in all elements of history, a point that also marks a break from Romanticism's nostalgia for the Middle Ages.

From Cassirer's perspective, even Romanticism is credited with having had a remarkable part in the making of a new tool: "The instrument of *modern historical criticism* was created by its hands—and here, Romanticism worked hand in hand with this Enlightenment it so much despised."[33] The paradox that interests Cassirer in his exegesis is less that of a controversial interpretation than that of a new guise for an old problem: the confrontation with myth. The Romantics' love for the marvelous is on the side of myth. Yet in order to salvage the authentic forms of the marvelous, August Schlegel, for example, had to forge the tool that would make a sharp distinction between historical sources and legendary, poetical or mythical sources. For Cassirer, Barthold Georg Niebuhr provides another interesting example. "Just because Niebuhr understood the mythical so well, he was able to separate it clearly and definitely from historical reality. Thus

his sense of poetry and religion, due to Romanticism, became the point of departure from which he went on to discover a new form of historical interpretation."[34] It is not necessary to enter into a detailed treatment of this phenomenology here—some of its key elements will be discussed later.

The key achievement that is gained over the course of this history is the transfer of the problem of historical consciousness from the substantial metaphysical field specific to mythic and religious thought to the epistemological one. The issue is no longer that of the genesis of historical reality as such, but rather of the method specific to a given kind of knowledge. In concrete terms, this means that—concurrently with a similar development in scientific and philosophical thinking—the operators of historical knowledge are acknowledged in terms of their functional nature. Time and space, objective connections like causality, are functions of knowing. Time, for example, is no longer that transcendent ontological entity whose sources are necessarily mythico-religious and whose life—in the guise of "becoming"—devours its children. This is an ideal parameter that can be varied by the historian by means of both enlargement (variable duration) and orientation (past, present and future) in order to adequately delimit the object in question.

"HISTORICAL ACCURACY" (*AKRIBIE*), HERMENEUTICS, AND THE CONSTITUTION OF HISTORY

At the end of the long and meandering road of Cassirer's phenomenology of historical knowledge, the problem he addresses still revolves around a traditional core: What method allows history to become scientific knowledge? Or, in other words, what are the intellectual tools that determine truth in history? In one of his most fundamental texts, one that addresses the constitution of the *Kulturwissenschaften* and the philosophy of culture, Cassirer distinguishes three logical stages. "The authentically profound picture of culture opens up to us only once we have differentiated all these dimensions in order that, by virtue of this differentiation and on the basis of it, we may join them together again in the right way. There are three moments that it is possible to isolate here and that must be carefully distinguished. In all examination of cultural formations the *analysis of becoming*, which resides essentially in the study of cause and effect, contrasts with the *analysis of the work* and the *analysis of the form*."[35] Cassirer introduces the hierarchy present in these moments. "It is the analysis of work that constitutes the effectively supporting fundamental layer. For

before we can write the history of culture and before we can build a representation of the causal connections between its individual phenomena, we must have acquired an overall view of the works of language, art, and religion. And it is not enough that we have them before us as mere raw material. We must penetrate their meaning."[36]

This essential text is about the study of culture as a whole. It should be noted that history occurs at very different levels depending on its specific object and the level of generality of that object. A history of culture pursues the analysis of its "works"—including language, myth, art—because the individual phenomena of culture are the various fields that constitute culture. The works, in turn, are constitutive of these fields. Finally, what we refer to as a work in any of these fields is, itself, composed of individual works. For instance, in Cassirer's history of the philosophical spirit of the eighteenth century, this spirit is presented as an individual phenomenon of the culture of the period, as are the spirits of art and religion. In the spirit of philosophy as a form, there are two levels of what we refer to as "work," one of which is "German idealism." However, this in turn is divided into two other levels: the global work of each individual philosopher and—within this global work—each individual production (e.g., Kant's work in general and therein, his *Critique of Pure Reason* or *Critique of Practical Reason,* etc.).

History has an important function—at the level of the individual and particular work (Cassirer provides the example of Erich Adickes, who in the 1920s attempted to date pages of Kant's *Nachlass* by subjecting them to chemical tests and stylistic and lexicographic analysis) it seeks to make a historical phenomenon out of a natural phenomenon, then in turn to construct a more general work (for example, Kant's work, taken as a whole).[37] At this first level, the analysis of the works themselves presupposes the *history* of the works and this history is a part of the "complex hermeneutics"[38] of their meaning. In what follows I focus on this basic level of the history of individual cultural works; the role of history in Cassirer's philosophy of culture will be discussed in the third part of this article. With regards to all levels of the "work" of the spirit of philosophy the question remains, how is historical truth established?

Natural Phenomenon and Historical Phenomenon

It might appear that truth in history is ensured by a correspondence between historical representation and historical facts and events and that

the method that ensures this correspondence falls within the province of the natural sciences. Thus, for example, the historian dates remains of the past by using physical tests. In addition, these historical phenomena are themselves linked by a kind of causality that does not differ from the causality applied by the natural sciences.

Cassirer, however, challenges this notion:

> To define historical truth as "concordance with the facts"—*adequatio res et intellectus*—is, however, no satisfactory solution of the problem. It begs the question instead of solving it. That history has to begin with facts and that, in that sense, these facts are not only the beginning but the end, the alpha and the omega of our historical knowledge, is undeniable. But what is a historical fact? A factual truth implies a theoretical truth. When we speak of facts we do not simply refer to our immediate sense data. We are thinking of empirical, that is to say objective, facts. This objectivity is not given; it always implies an act and a complicated process of judgment. If we wish to know the difference between scientific facts—between the facts of physics, of biology, of history—we must therefore always begin with an analysis of judgments. We must study the modes of knowledge by which these facts are accessible.[39]

In this quotation Cassirer's fundamental philosophical background is evident. The only valid conception of truth is a theory of objectivity understood in its typical neo-Kantian guise and formulated in a Kantian vocabulary. The object (*Objekt*) is always a theoretical entity built through the self-constitution of knowledge. Sense data are not "objects" and are not even provided by "objects." Rather, they are a "something" (*etwas*) that is referred to a "thing" (*Ding*). Empiricity differs from materiality as (scientific) experience differs from raw sensory data.

Notwithstanding the identical mode of constitution shared by the object of natural sciences and the object of history, an essential difference exists. "The historian, like the physicist, lives in a material world. Yet what he finds at the very beginning of his research is not a world of physical objects, but a symbolic universe—a world of symbols."[40] Therefore, "ideal reconstruction, not empirical observation, is the first step of historical knowledge."[41] The methods of the natural sciences are necessary to the constitution of history, but they are not sufficient. As long as the historian is merely identifying his material by date, composition, and other aspects, he is working only as a physicist, chemist, and paleontologist. History

stands beyond this kind of research. The word "symbol" is not meant here in a specifically Cassirerian sense but simply signifies that one thing stands for another. Documents and physical objects are the witnesses—present, certainly, and for the most part identified—yet, still sparse and silent, with regard to that past that we seek to know. Cassirer thus writes, "in a certain sense, the historian is much more of a linguist than a scientist."[42] What Cassirer thus sets down is the unity of the synthesis specific to historical knowledge. Documents, of whatever nature, are, in themselves, natural objects. Stepping back from their random juxtaposition in order to see, first, letters, then words, then phrases, then a narrative with meaning and a specific unitary form and, finally, the evidence of the style of an epoch—all of this requires—apart from a specific intention—a specific interpretation technique, a hermeneutic for which the other sciences and forms of knowledge are the means.

Hence the question is, within the whole of knowledge, does history obey a specific "logic"?

We have already observed that Cassirer's phenomenology of history reveals an antinomy of historical knowledge, namely, the opposition of the particular (the individual, be it the actor, Caesar; his action, the crossing of the Rubicon; an epoch, the Empire; it can also be a style, the Baroque) and the universal (the law or principle) required if history is to be considered to be authentic knowledge. The epistemological study of history must solve this antinomy.

One of the more recent developments of this problem may be found in the distinction between a nomothetic principle and an idiographic principle, which was formulated by Windelband and worked out by Rickert and Erich Rothacker. "Modern philosophers have often attempted to construct a special logic of history. Natural science, they have told us, is based upon a logic of universals, history upon a logic of individuals. Windelband declared the judgments of natural sciences to be nomothetic, those of history to be idiographic. The former give us the general laws, the latter describe particular facts. This distinction became the basis of Rickert's entire theory of historical knowledge. 'Empirical reality becomes nature, if we consider it with regard to the universal; it becomes history if we consider it with regard to the particular.' But it is not possible to separate the two moments of universality and particularity in this abstract and artificial way. A judgment is always the synthetic unity of both moments."[43]

It is interesting to see how here Cassirer interweaves a Kantian theory of knowledge and a phenomenology of historical knowledge. Roughly speaking, in a theoretical judgment, there are two ways of conceiving the relation of particularity and universality. Either the universal is given and the particular is subsumed under it (we then deal with a determinative judgment) or the particular is given and we seek the universal (the judgment is then reflective). In addition, there are two kinds of universals: concepts (of understanding) and ideas (of reason). Historical knowledge is a theoretical knowledge that can only be reflective, for it is meant to begin with the study of "facts," the particular. But all its efforts consist in finding universals, the laws of the period that function as concepts that express rules, and the spirit of the epoch, which is an idea of reason. Once again, Cassirer sees in Ranke the realization of such a theory of knowledge in the field of history, and the solution of the antinomy. Paraphrasing Ranke, Cassirer writes, "all that the historian can apprehend is 'universal and individual spiritual life'; and, thus, the 'effective-spiritual' [*real-geistig*]. The formal is the universal, the real [*real*] is the singular, alive."[44]

As in the natural sciences, the use of ideas in historical knowledge is required to explain the dynamics of research that will present phenomena in multiple series of increasingly broader scope. Rejecting a determinative judgment helps obviate two errors. If the universal is taken to be a concept of the understanding, then history risks being reduced to the criteria of positivism (as is one of the tendencies of Hippolyte Taine).[45] If the universal is thought to be an idea of reason, historical knowledge would then become speculative knowledge (Hegel).

The universality of logic and the differentiated unity of knowledge preclude such a methodological distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*. If the difference between these sciences and the specificity of history cannot be derived from their methods, it should then come from their object. Cassirer directs his reader's attention to such a solution, notably in *An Essay on Man*. Before we examine this solution, we should note its paradoxical formulation. Strictly speaking, the "object" of knowledge is always the *result* of the objectification process that a specific method makes possible. So what is at stake here is both an exoteric formulation—characteristic of *An Essay on Man*—and the variety of levels of method. Logic and the opposition of particularity and universality are much too general. A more accurate formulation of the problem would return to the metaphor of language. Rather than a

"logic of history," the philosopher seeks a "grammar" of history, sets of rules that constitute the backbone of the possibility of a meaning that can be communicated universally.[46]

"Life" and "Spirit" in History

While it is the meaning of historical phenomena that is perhaps in question here, and not their simple mute physical existence, a principle for their underlying unity must still be found. In each case, the unifying principle is always both transcendent—insofar as it extends beyond any singular element—and immanent to the phenomenon insofar as it appears in it and fills it with its meaning. "Life" is one of the concepts that fills this function of unification. The challenge here is to understand different conceptions of life that are in opposition on the basis of the various conceptions of the historian's work.

By way of describing Ranke's methodological advance, Cassirer gives the example of the opposition between the romantic and rationalist conceptions of life as a unifying principle: "Whereas Leo declared that Guicciardini had succeeded in portraying the spiritual stir of life, and that in comparison with this it was of little import whether every line of his presentation were literally true, such a distinction between "life" and "truth" was incomprehensible to Ranke. He found genuine historical life only where he had succeeded in penetrating to historical truth, and devoted everything to the service of this one task. Only so could romantic aesthetics and metaphysics be overthrown and the writing of history established on a new and secure methodological foundation."[47] Here, the romantic conception gives preference to the aesthetic of the narrative, while the rationalist conception is that of the dynamic unity of the object.

One of the significant points with regard to the concept of life is its objective aspect. Life represents the unity of the object, in that the life of an epoch offers a synoptic vision of all the elements at play therein, both synchronically as diachronically. This follows from the "logical" structure as underscored by Hegel.[48] Life makes it possible to think of the unitary "becoming" as both shared and individualized from the elements. From Cassirer's perspective, however, there is a deeper anchoring commanded by the concept of life. This concept makes it possible to consider all the individual elements in the dynamic of their internal form and to consider them as energy, not as simple events. Thus, Cassirer sets out, in particular

in his 1941 lecture, "The Philosophy of History," how the gift of the great historian consists of reducing all simple events to their *fieri* (becoming), all products to process, all static things to these dynamic and creative energies in which they find their sources.[49] This return to a dynamic source makes two things possible, in particular.

First, it permits a hermeneutic that has Cassirer's aim—rather than the effective achievement of his project—as its focus. One of the typical examples of this hermeneutic in Cassirerian historiography is his reading of Herder:

> As a philosopher of history he never succeeded in establishing a unified and self-contained system. . . . What he wrote in history proper is of unequal value. . . . The picture changes immediately, however, when Herder is regarded from the point of view not of his *achievement* in the field of history but of what he was *striving* for, what he desired and claimed for history. His essential and incomparable merit lies in the novelty and in the unprecedented energy of this *claim*.[50]

In addition, that dynamic perspective makes possible the regulative introduction of a teleology, insofar as the exegesis can and must focus on the direction of these spiritual energies. As we will see later, the aim is, in one sense, a moral one.

It should be noted that Cassirer seeks to implement this kind of exegesis in his historical works, since *The Philosophy of Enlightenment, The Individual and the Cosmos* and *The Platonic Renaissance in England* also employ "the same approach to the philosophy of history, an approach whose aim is not to record and describe bare results, but rather to elucidate their inner formative forces."[51]

Finally, Cassirer's predilection for this dynamic, which first leads him to favor a specific historiography and then a philosophical critique of history (which is, in a way, the aim of the former), finds its origin in the transcendental method, as reformulated by Natorp (starting not from the *factum*, as Cohen said, but from the *fieri*), and is an integral part of that method.

The Historian as "Retrospective Prophet"

In his 1936 lecture at the Warburg Institute, "Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture," Cassirer referred to two kinds of recollection: that

practiced by Aby Warburg under the term *Mnemosyne* and the Hegelian *Erinnerung*. His concern was to suggest the correct way to move beyond a simply empirical and rhapsodic history. Here, Cassirer rejected the Hegelian integration of history insofar as it—in his view—assumed that temporality is absorbed into the eternal unfolding of the absolute idea. On the other hand, Cassirer praises Warburg and the guiding principle behind his perspective. "He aspired to create a recollection of living forms, especially of those forms that have been created by Greek culture, in Greek art, in Greek religion and mythology. These forms were considered by him to be a living force, a perpetual stream of energy that pervades the whole world of our modern civilization."[52] In this context, how from Cassirer's standpoint is the past recollected? How is the past form of a society's or a human civilization's moments reconstituted symbolically? According to Cassirer, "it is this 'palingenesis,' this rebirth of the past, which marks and distinguishes the great historian. Friedrich Schlegel called the historian *einen rückwärts gekehrten Propheten*, a retrospective prophet. There is also a prophecy of the past, a revelation of its hidden life."[53] Cassirer, in seemingly paradoxical fashion, does not subscribe to the classic rationalist position that seeks the historian's disappearance in the name of historical objectivity; just as the personality of the prophet is indelible, so too the historian stays in place. Emphasizing the difference between individuality and particularity, Cassirer affirms the need for the former and rejects only the latter. This individuality is important inasmuch as a personality is needed in order to breathe new life into a past form. To achieve this, the historian needs to have an "intellectual and imaginative, not emotional"[54] sympathy with this past. Particularity would arise from taking a stance based on emotions. "Intellectual sympathy" preserves universality and, thus, objective validity.

From this perspective, historical knowledge takes on a specific character that Cassirer refers to as "anthropomorphism." He writes, "stated in the form of a paradox, we may say that history strives after an 'objective anthropomorphism.'"[55] This point explains Cassirer's emphasis on the question of the object of history. "But the anthropomorphism of historical thought is no limitation or impediment to its objective truth. History is not knowledge of external facts or events; it is a form of self-knowledge."[56]

In this respect, the role assigned to the imagination is fundamental. But once again, a specific type of imagination is involved. Beyond the incorporating of events and all the rules of historical objectivity, "the last

and decisive act is always an act of the productive imagination. Cassirer refers to a conversation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann, in which he complained that there were few men that have an 'imagination for the truth of reality . . . It is the keen sense for the empirical reality of things combined with the free gift of imagination upon which the true historical synthesis or synopsis depends."[57]

To understand the philosophical underpinning of these words, one must return to the notion of productive imagination. For Cassirer this notion indicates the concrete unity of a transcendental synthesis that, on one hand, gives imagination a fundamental role, but, on the other, rules by the discipline of the understanding. From the perspective of transcendental philosophy, Cassirer partially revives the Romantic vision of the historian as genius (and, thus, of history as an artistic genre). But if historical judgment has to go beyond the theoretical sphere, it does not reach toward aesthetics, but morals.

That is the additional meaning of Cassirer's reference to the phrase of Friedrich Schlegel. For a student of Cohen, there is no authentic prophetism that is not a moral idealization. But how can a prophetism of the *past* convey a moral meaning attributed to a future ideal? The answer is that the recollection is not only based on "our present intellectual interests and our present moral and social needs,"[58] but also and, especially, on the consideration that this present reconstitution of the past is directed towards the future: "Man cannot mold the form of the future without being aware of his present conditions and of the limitations of his past. As Leibniz used to say, *on recède pour mieux sauter*, one draws back to leap higher."[59]

The Function of History in the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

Cassirer stands at the conclusion of the journey he has recounted. He is one of the actors in this history, whose ultimate determinations form the phenomenology of historical knowledge. Given the importance of history as one of the grounds of the cultural sciences noted in the introduction, a panorama of such great breadth is entirely appropriate. We must still understand this function of history, not in a general sense, but within the system of symbolic forms. To avoid an overly simplistic answer to this question, I will respond by tracing the process by which this philosophy is constructed, stopping at each phase that involves history.

The philosophy of symbolic forms seeks to answer the question: what is man? To do so, this orientation seeks to elucidate the diverse unity of spiritual acts by which the subject produces an objective plural world. To that end, and based on a journey that has been governed by a specific interpretation of the transcendental method (consistent with its revival by Cohen and, subsequently, by Natorp, a significant methodological reference point for Cassirer), it begins (1) by analyzing works—an analysis that treats them not as simple facts but as forces or, even, energies. Based on this hermeneutics of works, which makes minimal use of antiquarian history (that, in a way, provided the works) and the various sciences—both the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*—fundamental figures emerge that are organized into classes, governed by relations of order (space, time, objective connections and categories). Thus was born the concept of a cultural form. The philosophical investigation has reached the second step of its analysis, (2) "determining the 'what' of each individual form of culture, that is, the 'essence' of language, religion and art," and then examining the relations that unite these forms; and (3) "from the analysis of forms, a further step leads to that procedure we can describe as the *analysis of act*. . . . We are inquiring into the mental processes from which they have emerged and of which they constitute the objective expression." Thus, by means of a theory of culture (second phase), the philosopher must (4) "seek its conclusion in a 'philosophy of symbolic forms,' even if this conclusion appears as an 'infinitely distant point' that we can approach only asymptotically."[60] One may then (5) return to culture—which no longer appears as a rhapsodic blend of works and scattered fields, but as diversified energy, since the philosopher redirects the diversity of objects to a subjective principle of production in order, specifically, to write its philosophical history, in its various strata: the history of an individual work, which through the principle of *Lebensform* tends to grasp the unity of the creative process that rules the life of the individual and his work, the history of a specific cultural form (for example, theoretical knowledge or history) and, finally, *Geistesgeschichte*, seeking to define the state of mind, the unitary spiritual principle governing in a given epoch, itself defined by the rule of this principle, the collection of cultural forms. In the final phase, the philosopher may (6) move to philosophical anthropology.

These six steps of the analytic journey involved in constructing the Cassirerian system provide a sense of its concrete structure. If one acknowledges that the first level is the preparatory stage, which, as such does not strictly

speaking form part of the system but is incorporated into the second level, history is nonetheless essential in that it provides the material for study. This aspect was examined in the second part of this article, referred to as the "analysis of the becoming." There, history is a tool. In this sense, Cassirer asserts that it is one of the foundations of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. However, this material has to be submitted to a more spiritual synthesis, and history has to become, as it were, philosophical, in that it reaches self-reflection and a dynamic (as opposed to mechanical) conception of the *res gestae*.

The second step—the analysis of the form—lies at the heart of the system of symbolic forms. First, it defines the configuration of each cultural form. To achieve this, Cassirer analyzes the principle governing the three fundamental forms of unification of consciousness—space, time, and objective connections. For example, in seeking what is common to the spatial representations specific to myth, he looks at the way in which they unify the diverse; he examines by virtue of what order, principle, or global topological system the "here" refers to the "there" and the "over there." The same holds for time and the various categories. Once the rule of unity that applies to each of these principles of unification of consciousness is identified, one must understand the law that unites them in a homogenous consciousness or raises them to a higher level of unity. Carried to its conclusion, such an investigation identifies the symbolic form as such, insofar as it achieves, through the unity specific to it, a particular type of objectification that Cassirer summarizes as follows: "In all human activities and in all forms of human culture we find a 'unity in the manifold.' Art gives us a unity of intuition; science gives us a unity of thought, religion and myth give us a unity of feeling."[61]

What is the unity specific to history as symbolic form? This, it seems to me, is a unity of human life in the process of becoming, but I will return to this below. This journey also allows us to compare the forms by comparing the principles governing the different levels of unity: mythic space with artistic and theoretical space, the notion of causality in myth and science with that in other domains. Through the phenomenology of historical knowledge, Cassirer thus aims to identify the specific forms of historical space, historical time, etc. History is no longer a means here, but also an object of the philosophy of symbolic forms.

The third level—that of the analysis of the act that defines the psychic processes—reveals, on the one hand, the three moments of symbolization as such: the *Ausdruck* (expression), the *Darstellung* (representation),

and the *reine Bedeutung* (pure meaning); and on the other, with the two fundamental originating phenomena as foundation—the perception of an inert thing and the conferring of personality—it examines the acts of differentiation of phenomena, based on these two primary dimensions, in the progression of symbolization of expression toward pure symbolization. Thus in myth, where the function of expression dominates, perception of the "thing" per se does not yet appear. The figures of otherness are absorbed in the web of a living experience, excluding apprehension of the simple inert object; through and in expression, every being assumes a physiognomic character. The scission by which the individual represents himself to himself as such, by opposition to an otherness, occurs within a general sense of life. Cosmology is thus subsumed under cosmogony and, if a science in the modern sense is to emerge, one must wait for the otherness to assume the figure of a thing, distinct from that of a person or god. Here, history is the setting in which the functions of symbolization are concretely deployed. Obviously, it is here that the classic problem specific to every teleology—and, thus, to the Cassirerian phenomenology—arises: How does one move from one phase to the next? Is there a causal link and, if so, is it caught in a deterministic system? In the face of criticisms of the characteristic teleology of the historiography of the Marburg school, we have already noted that the succession of the historical phases is not governed by the category of causality but by that of the "condition of possibility" in order to unify an evolution, itself contingent, and the purpose of which is a moral requirement. Furthermore, the principle of continuity is a regulative principle.

With the analysis of the form (2) and that of the act (3) the philosopher can progress to the fourth level, the philosophy of symbolic forms, by embracing all the forms in a complex system, thanks to a common fundamental function, that of symbolization.

At the fifth level, one seeks, to no avail, an antiquarian history. The latter is, indeed, still rhapsodic, while Cassirer is aiming toward a unifying principle in his philosophical history. Indeed, for him, this still involves, on the one hand, pursuing the phenomenology established by the philosophy of symbolic forms and, on the other, preparing the ultimate synthesis of anthropology. Philosophical history possesses a character uniquely suited to that purpose. It extends temporal synthesis to the objective sphere (that of culture and philosophical anthropology), which, from the subjective point of view, enables the concrete identity of con-

sciousness. In a certain way, this synthesis is performed with the same totalizing character. In the same way that all that exists for consciousness is in time and the diversity of the temporal synopsis creates the richness of consciousness, likewise, human reality is constituted fully only in historical synthesis (as performed, in the end, by philosophy). On the one hand, as we will see, this synthesis is performed for every form and within each one (in Cassirerian terms, the analysis of becoming is internal to the form and involves a becoming toward the form);[62] on the other, it bears on all symbolic forms, that is, on the becoming of the whole of the symbolic forms first considered synchronically. This raises the question of how to know within which form this overall becoming is carried out. Is it within history or philosophy? Let us quickly illustrate this point, which is essential for an understanding of the anthropological expression of the philosophical system, what Cassirer calls the cosmos of the spirit.

The first point to understand is how a new "monument of the spirit"—that is, a great work—is produced individually. This involves conceptualizing the dynamic unity of life and the work, by returning the unity to the personality, the transcendental root of which is spontaneity. In this sense, this hermeneutic, which Cassirer applies specifically to René Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Cohen, is viable only in terms of the synthetic and productive unity of the subject that the philosophy of symbolic forms establishes. The second level seeks to determine the overall historical unity of a given problem it chooses to interpret, which is internal to or constitutive of a symbolic form; for example, that of scientific knowledge. The third level then brings us to *Geistesgeschichte*, which seeks the systematic unity of the intellectual source, that is unity of the formative forces, which transcend the individual and through which a single principle emerges and comes to govern the spiritual grouping of symbolic forms that leads this group to create a new epoch and new figure of the spirit. Among other works, Cassirer cites *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* and *The Individual and the Cosmos*,[63] to which we may add *Freiheit und Form* and *Idee und Gestalt*. Two points still deserve comment with regard to this level. First, we are dealing with the "analysis of the act" specific to philosophy being applied not only to the understanding of objective groupings, but also extended to an overall dynamic. Next, for a reason soon to be elucidated, *Geistesgeschichte* assumes the appearance of a "phenomenology of the philosophical spirit."[64] Finally, at the last level,

we must envision a uniting of these levels and periods. Without such a final "comprehensive survey," Cassirer writes, "these studies may be considered as mere building stones of whose fragmentary character I am fully aware. But I hope they will be utilized in the construction of a larger whole when the time has come for such an edifice."[65]

CONCLUSION

Philosophy's final moment is anthropology (6); it is in this last moment that history acquires its most essential meaning. How does Cassirer define this doctrine? "Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature but his work. It is his work, it is the system of human activities which defines and determines the circle of 'Humanity.'"[66] The philosophy of symbolic forms made it possible to offer a new definition of the human being: a symbolic animal. The symbolic brings about a distinct break from brute animality and establishes the unique character of this being. Furthermore, as we have already seen, the works and the entire site of culture are not defined as things but as actions, whose symbolic function is the principle. Anthropology may be conceived of from that point: "A 'philosophy of man' would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these activities and which at the same time would enable us to understand them as an organic whole."[67] Cassirer thus revives what Kant referred to as philosophy's world-concept (*Weltbegriff*). "Philosophy cannot be satisfied to ask about a form and structure of particular cultural regions, about the structure of language, art, law, myth and religion. The deeper it penetrates into this structure the clearer and the more urgent becomes the problem of the whole for it. What is this whole of spiritual culture? What is its end its goal, its meaning?"[68] The organic whole must be understood with respect to an aim; the system of symbolic forms as a totality will thus be understood teleologically. "If the term 'humanity' means anything at all, it means that in spite of all the differences and oppositions existing among its various forms, these are, nevertheless, all working towards a common end."[69] However, the purpose must be spiritual and is so since it involves freedom. "Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation."[70] The course of history is thus the scene of this liberation, while the historical narrative is, at one and the same time, both the chronicle or end product as well as one of the means.

Thus, anthropology is not distinct from the philosophy of symbolic forms. As Cassirer wrote in one of his manuscripts, while it is not all of philosophy, it nonetheless constitutes its furthest point because, as is the case with psychology in Cohen's system, anthropology here puts the finishing touches on the edifice. And its place and role in the system are unique in that regard. Although the philosopher is confronted with a specific object—the human—in anthropological philosophy, no new form or specific direction of objectification is added to the system. Insofar as all the elements the philosopher has identified in the morphology that he performs are parts of the system that make it possible to define the human; or to the extent that the philosopher only faces processes of human objectification, anthropology lies in the final synthesis of these elements. This synthesis involves producing the final configuration of the system rather than building a new section. The philosopher has revealed the system's subjective aspect (that is, the subject's spiritual actions) as well as its objective aspect (the morphology of culture). This distinction between the subjective and the objective is a category of philosophical thought that must be understood, fundamentally, as the differentiation of moments of the transcendental method. Anthropology conceives the dynamic of these two moments as a system of concrete activities. The spiritual cosmos as a unity of cultural forms is the object image of the subjective system of symbolic forms. Anthropology absorbs that duality by conceptualizing the concrete and dynamic unity of the two moments as a practical teleology: the unity of the subject (which the philosopher's reflection finds in a multiple *cogito* whose principle is not understanding, but rather productive imagination) ensures the unity of the *terminus a quo;* the symbolic function is the means of deploying this plurality and is the basis of the unity of culture, the site of objectification. Philosophical anthropology demonstrates the unity of the overall nature of the process. All symbolic forms, conceived of as diverse activities, seek the same goal—freedom. But the human is still not adequately defined in its concreteness. To achieve this, one must understand the way in which anthropological philosophy incorporates the final historical synthesis and how it accomplishes the recollection and actualization of the figures that humanity created in history. A transformation of the phenomenology of philosophical consciousness then occurs. First, if *Geistesgeschichte* can provide the different moments of the phenomenology of philosophical consciousness, it is because it belongs to the function of philosophy—specifically with respect to its ideal of concrete unity or embracing the various forms of externalization of the spirit.

Then, insofar as philosophy embraces, synchronically, the totality of forms, it designs—in cross-sections, as it were—the figure that humanity forges for itself in an epoch. By adding, diachronically, the deployment of all the historical figures throughout the all-inclusive history of these figures, philosophy grasps the total and concrete unity of humanity. Philosophical anthropology thus provides, in the figure of the human, the final form within which the synthesis of the other forms and their all-inclusive becoming occurs. This appropriation of the past in the present is, essentially, focused on the future. Humanity's progress towards freedom remains contingent—its realization is possible only through ongoing work, only if the ideal is kept securely in its sights.

NOTES

1. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 7th ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977). Unless otherwise mentioned, references are to this edition. Page numbers from the English-language edition, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1–3 trans. by Ralph Manheim, vol. 4 trans. by John M. Krois, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–1996), will be provided (not all emendations are indicated). The recent remarkable Meiner edition, *Gesammelte Werke*, 26 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998–2007) gives the German original edition, which is also indicated in the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft edition, in the running heads.

2. For instance: Susanne Langer, one of the very few "Cassirerian" philosophers, considered Cassirer's concept of symbol to be obscure (*Philosophical Sketches* [New York, Mentor Books, 1964], 56), as did Paul Ricoeur in *De l'interprétation* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 21, translated by Denis Savage as *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). In the only reference to Cassirer made in this book on symbolization, Tzvetan Todorov writes in *Théories du symbole* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977, 142; translated by Catherine Porter as *Theories of the Symbol* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1982]), "To quote a modern historian, . . .".

3. Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, 4 vols. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), quotation on 2: 189. Only volume 4 has been translated into English: *The Problem of Knowledge*, trans. by William H. Woglom and Charles Hendel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950). "Phenomenology" is here understood in a Hegelian sense, *Das Erkenntnisproblem* refers to the "figures" of knowledge, while *Substance and Function* and volume 3 of *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* offer the corresponding "moments."

4. The Italian translation (by A. Pasquinelli), which changed the original title to *Storia della filosofia moderna* [History of Modern Philosophy] (Turin: Einaudi, 1952–1959), provides an example of that understanding.

5. "Cassirer was rather a distinguished reflective scholar than a great speculative philosopher." B. Blanshard, "Review of *An Essay on Man*," *Philosophical Review* 54 (1945): 509–510. What B. Blanshard, a British philosopher teaching at Yale, sought is found in the first three volumes of the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, as well as in the then-unpublished manuscripts.

6. See *Philosophy and History:, Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), and the foreword to Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr., eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Petrarca, Valla, Ficino, Pico, Pomponazzi, Vives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

7. John Michael Krois, the scholar who has done more than any other scholar to revive Cassirer, published a landmark work, *Cassirer, Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Regarding the Cassirer "Renaissance" that led to the publication of his *Gesammelte Werke*, see M. Ferrari, "La Cassirer-renaissance in Europa," *Studi kantiani* 7 (1994): 111–138; and my "L'édition française de Cassirer," in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 4 (1992): 547–552.

8. For instance, one might expect a book such as the one by Muna Stipp entitled *Symbolische Dimensionen der Zeit: Ansätze zu einer Kulturphilosophie der Zeit in Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003) to include a chapter devoted to history. This omission in a dissertation only reflects a more general lacuna in Cassirer studies. For an exception, see Alexander Bertland, "E. Cassirer's Metaphysics and the Investigation of History," *Clio* 28, no. 3 (1999): 279–301.

9. Ernst Cassirer, "Der Begriff der symbolischen Form . . . ," *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* 1 (1921–1922). This article also appears in *Wesen und Wirkung* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1956), 175. See also *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 1: 27 (Manheim trans., 1: 36).

10. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 2: xii (Manheim trans., 2: 12).

11. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 206.

12. "What we call 'historical consciousness' is a very late product of human civilization. It is not to be found before the time of the great Greek historians. And even the Greek thinkers were still unable to offer a philosophical analysis of the specific form of historical thought. Such an analysis did not appear until the eighteenth century." *Essay on Man*, 172, see also 191–192.

13. The deletion of the chapter on the Greeks in the second edition of the first volume of *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, later inserted in Max Dessoir's *Die Geschichte der Philosophie, Lehrbuch der Philosophie,* Herausgegeben von Max Dessoir (Berlin: Im Verlag Ullstein, 1925), as well as the rather academic dimension of the manuscript lectures on Greek philosophy, offer evidence of this.

14. Unpublished manuscript (MS 11) French translation in Ernst Cassirer, *L'idée de l'histoire*, ed. F. Capeillères (Paris: Cerf, 1988), 103–104, 152–153 in *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, vol. 1.

15. Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, bk. 1, chap. 22. Unfortunately, Cassirer quotes from Richard Crawley's translation (Everyman's Library [New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1910], 15) where "romance" stands for "μυθώδες." Cassirer more accurately translates it as "fabulous," since "fabula" can correspond to a Greek literary genre, while romance

cannot. To properly understand Cassirer's point here, one should first remember that *logos* and *muthos* also designate two kinds of speech and that Thucydides' text is here constructed by opposing various narratives. Charles D. Morris's comments in his edition (*Thucydides* [Ginn & Company, 1886]) make this clear: "Having described his mode of composition Thuc. here characterizes his work as regards the two aspects of entertainment and utility . . . ἀχρόασιν and ἀγώνισμα (ch. 21, lines 5 and 19) refer to public recitation at festivals." Morris offers the following translation: "And it may well be that the absence of fabulous narration from my history will make it seem less attractive to the ear: but for such as shall desire to gain a true picture both of the past and of what is likely at some time hereafter . . . And so it has been composed rather as a treasure for all time than as a prize composition to please the ear for the moment" (note 14, 97). The distance between history and fabulous (μυθώδες) narration is produced by the historical *acribeia* that appeared several times in the same book (chaps. 20–21) and that Cassirer refers to, for instance, in *Philosophie der Aufklärung*, "die historische Akribie" (15: 233). For an English-language translation, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. by Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), not all emandations indicated; here, "historical scrutiny" (223). Thucydides' text appears in two works, *Myth of the State*, 53, and "The Philosophy of History" (1941) in *Symbol, Myth and Culture: Essays and Lectures of E. Cassirer, 1935–1945*, edited by Donald P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 138.

16. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 53.

17. Ibid.

18. See the conference of 1944, "The Philosophy of History," unpublished manuscript (MS 212); French translation in *L'idée de l'histoire*, 52.

19. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 2:112.

20. Ibid., 2: 129, 2: 104.

21. Ibid., 2: 146–147, 2:118.

22. Ibid., 2: 244, 2: 198. Cassirer quotes from Agamemnon in Aeschylus, *Griechische Tragoedien* (Berlin: Weidmannsche buchhandlung, 1899), quotation on 118, verse 1505.

23. "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7 (1944): 122. The Biblical quotation is from Jeremiah 31: 29–30.

24. "The Concept of History in the Renaissance," MS translated and published in *L'idée de l'histoire*, 106.

25. Cassirer, *Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 15: 207 (Meiner ed.; Koelln and Pettegrove trans., 197).

26. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 288.

27. *Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 5: 208 (Meiner ed.; Koelln and Pettegrove trans., 199).

28. Ibid., 15: 216 (Meiner ed.; Koelln and Pettegrove trans., 207).

29. Ibid.

30. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, 4: 225 (Meiner ed., 5: 253; Woglom and Hendel trans., 217).

31. Cassirer, *Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 15: 244 (Meiner ed.; Koelln and Pettegrove trans., 233). Part 3 of volume 4 of *Das Erkenntnisproblem* begins precisely and explicitly where the corresponding chapter in *Philosophie der Aufklärung* ends.

32. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, 4: 228 (Meiner ed., 5: 257, Woglom and Hendel trans., 220).

33. Ibid., 4: 234 (Meiner ed., 5: 265, Woglom and Hendel trans., 227).

34. Ibid.

35. Ernst Cassirer, *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften, Fünf Studien*, Göteborgs Högskolas Arsskrift, 48 (Göteborg: Elanders boktryckeri aktiebolag, 1942); translated by S. G. Lofts as *Logic of the Cultural Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 97.

36. Cassirer, *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften*, 97 (Lofts trans., 97).

37. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 203.

38. Ibid.

39. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 174.

40. Ibid.

41. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 175.

42. Ibid., 177.

43. Ibid., 186. Cassirer quotes Rickert's *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (Tübingen, 1902), 255. See also *Essay on Man*, 175–176: "Most writers looked for the difference between history and science in the *logic*, not in the *object* of history. They took the greatest pains to construct a new logic of history. But all these attempts were doomed to failure." See also *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, 36–37, and "The Philosophy of History," in *Symbol, Myth and Culture*, 123.

44. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, 4: 246–47 (Meiner ed., 5: 280; Woglom and Hendel trans., 240; the translation restores the meaning but not the specificity of the lexicon).

45. See Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, 4: 259 (Meiner ed., 5: 294; Woglom and Hendel trans., 252).

46. See Ernst Cassirer, "Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture," *Symbol, Myth and Culture*, 74–76.

47. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, 4: (Meiner ed., 5: 269, Woglom and Hendel trans., 231).

48. This refers to the concept of life as thematized by the *Logic* and implemented by *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, not to the Romantic concept of life that the young Hegel still used.

49. Cassirer, "The Philosophy of History."

50. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, 4: 218 (Meiner ed., 5: 254–255; Woglom and Hendel trans., 218; see also Meiner ed., 5: 327): "In order to do justice to Lamprecht's conception of history one must keep in mind the *principle* for which he contended."

51. Cassirer, *Philosophie der Aufklärung*, 15: x (Meiner ed.; Koelln and Pettegrove trans., vii).

52. In Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth and Culture*, 78–79.

53. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 178. Also quoted in "Philosophy of History" (1944).

54. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 191.

55. Ibid., 191.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 205.

58. Ibid., 178.

59. Ibid., 179.

60. The first phases are presented in Cassirer, *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), specifically 97–98 (Lofts trans., 97–98).

61. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 37. See also *Symbol, Myth and Culture*, 167, 187.

62. Cassirer, *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften*, 100.

63. Cassirer, preface, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, viii (Meiner ed., 15: x; Koelln and Pettegrove trans., vi).

64. Ibid., ix (Meiner ed., 15: x, Koelln and Pettegrove trans., vi).

65. Ibid.

66. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 68.

67. Ibid.

68. Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth and Culture*, 57.

69. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 70.

70. Ibid., 228.

FOUR

Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*
A Foundational Reading

GABRIEL MOTZKIN

The following is an attempt to extract a foundational philosophy from Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.[1] I will conclude that this attempt fails because Cassirer's account of the origin of language is incoherent on his own terms. However, I also believe that the model he uses to explain the relation between nature and culture is one of the few philosophically interesting designs that have been advanced for resolving this issue. Had he succeeded in his endeavor, his position would have been considerably stronger in his debate with Heidegger at Davos. It is well known that Heidegger seemed to be the victor in that contest. Yet Cassirer's argumentation, however incomplete, will perhaps prove to be the philosophically more fruitful one in the long run.

Since the early nineteenth century, different philosophies have confronted the issue of whether philosophy should be viewed as the basic discipline underpinning all forms of knowledge. Unlike earlier philosophies, which had not questioned this primacy of philosophy, modern philosophers began to consider the possibility that theirs was an auxiliary discipline to some other form of knowledge, or perhaps a stage of experience that would lead to some other higher form of experience. Philosophy was viewed successively as being secondary to art, to religion, and to natural science.

In contrast, those philosophies that continued to locate philosophy at the center of the knowledge enterprise had to wrestle with new problems that had not affected their forebears. Specifically, the issue of time was a basically different problem for modern philosophies than it had been for older ones. For all earlier philosophies, time was viewed in relation to eternity. Modern philosophies, on the other hand, increasingly intuited time—now referred only to itself—as the foundation of experience.

The issue of time raised the problem of whether the subject matter of philosophy had always existed or whether philosophy is a manifestation of consciousness confronting reality—in which case philosophy is also something that comes into being in time. If there is only one kind of rationality and the world is rationally ordered, and philosophy is a rational endeavor, then philosophy should be copresent from the beginning of time, or at least from the beginning of consciousness.[2] If philosophy is a form of human consciousness and also the highest form of that consciousness, then philosophy is only fully present at the end of time.

In turn, those philosophers who questioned the primacy of philosophy but who also believed that the human enterprise takes place in time (in contrast to those who would argue, e.g., that art is eternal), had no problem with the idea that philosophy develops in time, but they then had to show how philosophy had developed from some earlier human enterprise. The idea that philosophy can develop from something else required in turn an investigation of the mechanism by which one human enterprise can be transformed into something else. Any type of thought according to which philosophy can develop from culture requires this kind of genetic logic of transformation.

Such a philosophy of culture presupposes conceptions about two strata of relations: first, it presupposes an idea of how one way of acquiring knowledge can be considered as being similar or dissimilar to another way of acquiring knowledge. Second, it presupposes a conception of the relation between experience and knowledge. While it may have been obvious that ordinary, lived experience is somehow different from reflection about that experience, it is not at all obvious that an experience that could be termed a cultural experience is different from cultural self-reflection. The idea that one has a cultural experience entails the idea that one has a meaning-relation with one's culture; it may be that that meaning-relation itself contains the moment of reflectedness. However, once the inference is drawn that all cultural experiences are also reflected experiences, then the issue resurfaces of whether there is one or many rationalities. Is there only one type of self-reflection found in all cultural expressions, or are there as many types of self-reflection as there are types of cultural expression? The belief that there are different forms of rationality can easily mutate then into the belief that there are many worlds. Addressing this issue in the early twentieth century, Emil Lask, for example, felt compelled to posit three worlds, two "real" worlds (one real world of being and another

real world of truth or validity) and in addition another, virtual, quasi-transcendent world of meaning. In other words, being and truth are both rational and real; meaning is rational, but it is virtual.[3]

Ernst Cassirer adopted a more radical position: he believed both in plural worlds of meaning and in the possible infinity of such worlds. From his point of view, there is no a priori reason not to believe that another, quite different form of cultural expression will not be created tomorrow. For Cassirer, a principle of unity such as the idea of one rationality could not be educed by collapsing all cultural forms into one form. Instead, principles of unity are themselves constructs that emerge from the impulse for unifying different cultural meanings and the different kinds of knowledge that they contain. Hermann Cohen had anticipated this move in his *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*, in which he reconceived aesthetic consciousness as a consciousness of the unity of culture.[4]

Cassirer's focus on the dynamic of the knowledge enterprise led him to radicalize and make explicit Cohen's and Lask's interest in the experience of acquiring knowledge. The German Idealists had already grasped the importance of the experience of acquiring knowledge for deciding the issue of the relation between rationality and experience. They resolved this issue of the relation between rationality and experience by concluding that knowledge itself is world-creating. However, in their systems there is only one kind of rationality that can be experienced in different ways. In contrast, Cassirer thought that the different kinds of knowledge are different worlds. However, he then required some bridge between different knowledge worlds other than consciousness. If consciousness served as the bridge between different knowledge worlds, then his position would be the same as that of the Idealists. However, even if one could find a bridge between different knowledge worlds that is not consciousness, there would still exist the structural problem of what bridging might mean. Is the bridge between worlds itself a world of its own, or is it only a bridge, that is, entirely dependent on whatever contents exist in the different knowledge worlds? Kant was quite concerned to make it clear that the aesthetic is not a world of its own, unlike the physical and the moral, but rather serves as this kind of bridge between them.[5]

Heidegger detested the idea of a universal consciousness such as that implied by the notion that a reflective consciousness serves as a bridge between worlds, either in its strong Hegelian form (consciousness is itself a world) or in its weak Kantian form (aesthetic consciousness is a specific

bridging operation based on already existing contents). He concluded that a unified consciousness that would serve as a bridge between different spheres of human endeavor must be world-denying, for as a unified consciousness it denies the specificity of the different spheres of human endeavor. It is that specificity that makes them into worlds. There can be no bridge between different realms of meaning, because such a bridge is itself a realm of meaning; what then is the bridge between a realm of meaning and that bridge, and so forth . . . Moreover, a world that denies its specificity as "the world of . . ." or "this world" is world-denying because it denies specificity per se as world-defining (i.e., from the point of view of such a world, all worlds that claim to be specific worlds are not worlds at all). If such a universal consciousness were to exist, it would then at the same time claim that it is *the* world and that it is not *a* world at all (a universal consciousness must at the same time be completely determining and completely indeterminate: God is both the "world" and not a "world" at all).

Heidegger, unlike Kant or Lask, was skeptical that such a world could be virtual, that there could be a virtual universality that would not have the same ontological anchoring that is attributed to a real world. His objection was that the tendency to attribute the same traits to a virtual world that are possessed by the real world is ineluctable. He rejected Kant's notion that the virtual bridge disappears once the bridge from knowledge to morality has been crossed. For Kant, the hallmark of the virtuality of the aesthetic was this imputation of evanescence in contrast to the world of knowledge, which cannot dissolve into the moral world of reason. Thus despite the bridge of aesthetics, Kant's scheme presumed a perpetual distinction between knowledge and reason, the closed state of one rational world vis-à-vis another rational world. At the end of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant considered the possibility that knowledge blends into reason, and was all the more concerned to keep them distinct.[6] Lask made this closure hermetic: human beings, seeking to know the world, render impossible the transition from matter to truth by the very fact of their intervention. Man, in seeking to attain truth on the basis of his intuition of the material world, can only create a closed world of quasi-transcendent meaning.

Cassirer's leading idea, in contrast, was the securing of open-endedness, that is, designing different rational worlds in such a way that communication between them could exist without their collapsing into one world. He therefore conceived of the bridge between worlds as a bridge that exists before the spheres themselves do. The quality of making worlds is a

quality of the bridge, not of the worlds, and the bridge between worlds must have already been "worlding" at the moment of the first separation of consciousness from matter; it is that separation that is the precondition for the human creation of cultural worlds.

Cassirer posited language as that initial bridge. He therefore had to investigate the phenomenon of language with two questions in mind. First, what quality of language makes it possible for language to create worlds? Second, what is language's method of world creation? Positing language as the basis for any meaning-world makes it obvious that there can be no culture without language. However intuitive that idea may seem, most previous philosophy had based knowledge in perception, on the representation of what is seen. This claim that knowledge is derived from perception makes the origin of knowledge into something prelinguistic. Cassirer opposed this conception because it presumes a world that is there before knowledge. Even the Kantian model sets the assumption of an existing world as the basis for knowledge; only it makes clear that this assumption need not be proven for the activity of knowledge to occur.

Perhaps the need for a conception of knowledge as an active force arose from the relocation of the origin of the worlding-activity from God to nature. In a God-oriented model such as the standard Neoplatonic model, ideas proceed from a transcendent One, and then, through a process of immanentization, create first the intelligible world and then the sensible world. By the time this force encounters primordial matter, its original propulsive energy is exhausted. This diminution of energy makes it possible for the attractive pull of the One to reverse the flow, and the process of procession from the One is replaced by a process of return to it. This model had well-known problems even before nature was substituted for God. First, the process of return requires both the existence of the One and the previous occurrence of immanentization. It was never clear whether the process of return preserved the events of the process of procession, for if it did so, then those events would also be causes of return. Second, the determination of the direction of the drive (toward the One or toward matter) did not affect its nature; the drive itself is neutral. In that case, however, there is no difference between the way the world is accessed from what is beyond it, and the way what is beyond this world is accessed from this world. There may be a structural difference between seeking knowledge of nature and seeking God, but there is only one rationality.

Setting nature as the origin of the process of transcending—or getting beyond—this world, in contrast, imputes a heteronomy to the knowledge process: knowledge must have its origin in an original difference or separation that is fundamentally different from Neoplatonic procession. In Neoplatonic procession, there is no difference between the substance of the ideas and the substance of the One. Unless all knowledge is itself material, the assumption of its origin in nature raises the possibility that one kind of activity (knowledge) can develop from quite another kind of activity (nature) with which it shares very little. In previous models, effects preserved something of their causes, matter subsisted from one form to another. It is not clear how the heterogeneity of matter and spirit can arise on a basis of matter and not through spirit. Thus this model requires a fundamental discontinuity. Cassirer found this discontinuity in the event of language. Language alone makes possible worlds of representation and of culture. Transcending or getting beyond the world can only take place through language. Correlatively, every act of transcending is culture-constituting. Moreover, this process has no point of exhaustion since the point of heterogeneity has been placed at the beginning, rather than at the end, as in the Neoplatonic model. Since there is no point of exhaustion, the cultural process of transcending is infinite. Correlatively, there is no process of return to matter.

On this account, however, there would be no reason for many cultural worlds or even for many languages. One act of language creation would be enough to create a homogeneous process of knowledge acquisition. However, Cassirer opted for a different model, one in which the basic act of difference or separation is continually reenacted, so that different cultural worlds are constantly being created. The world created by the original language act is, from its inception, inherently subject to fragmentation, perpetuating in this way the original fragmentation that occurred with the exit from matter. This continuous process of fragmentation is one more reason why there can be no possibility of reintegrating knowledge worlds into the natural world.

Moreover, since fragmentation is an infinite process, if cultural worlds were not continually being created, each individual act would fracture into subacts, and eventually all that one would have would be an infinite set of nonaggregable individuals. Why then does this not occur? What is the difference between an individual speech act and the creation of a language-world? Inherent in any speech act is the nature-transcending goal of world-

creation: each speech act has a reference beyond that to which it refers directly. Therefore sets of individual acts cohere at different stages, creating in this way a set of multiple worlds. Each of these multiple worlds is based on the transcending drive, unlike nature. This double referentiality, to the individual and to the world, is accomplished by the process of symbolization; the symbol relates both to its system and to itself. In turn, this double pointing has a variable directionality. It can point beyond itself both to the world of nature and to the world of an additional cultural form.

If language were symbolic only with respect to nature, then there could be no further world beyond language; in other words there would be two spheres of language and of nature and there would be no possibility of positing a cultural form, or a cultural system of symbolization as a world. Moreover, such a linguistic system would be closed because all of its attributions to a world beyond language would be attributions to nature and would therefore all point in the same ontological direction. In such a closed system, if I am referring to water or to the law of the excluded middle, I must conclude that the type of reference is the same in both cases. In contrast, Cassirer's intuition was that language must have an inherent capacity to point to something beyond itself *in different ways*.[7] Thus, for example, science does not go beyond language by pointing to nature but rather goes beyond language because it views language as an "impediment and barrier" to its own "autonomy."[8] Science achieves this autonomy through the critique of language, thus seeking to emancipate itself from its substrate, which in this case is language. But science does not transcend language in the same way that myth or art do. Each of the latter relates to the substrate of language in a different way. Language may be the narrow defile leading out of the natural world, but that defile has more than one outlet.

However, a cultural form does not just seek autonomy from its substrate or from other cultural forms. Each cultural form also "seeks its concrete fulfillment in the sensory world" as its telos.[9] Paraphrasing Goethe, Cassirer discerned a "sensory imagination" in the cultural form. This sensory imagination is not a receptive faculty but rather a faculty for projecting and imagining a world. This world projected by a cultural form is in turn the matrix in which each cultural form exercises its spontaneity by forming symbols. Symbols are created for a sensible world by the mind.

Cassirer's idea of a sensory imagination is contrary to the traditional notion that the highest form of imagination is intellectual. If we were to

construct a model of an intellectual imagination that would function like Cassirer's sensory imagination, it would be an intellectual imagination that would not proceed from the intellect but would rather "imagine" the intellect on the basis of the senses. The sensory imagination is then the mind's imagination of a sensory world. Its imagining of the body, rather than of the mind, however, takes place in a mind-world that is structured by cultural forms. Culture is the possibility of imagining nature.

Yet this explanation is problematic, because it does not provide a sufficient characterization of the mind's capacity to imagine abstract entities such as numbers or equations. In an account such as Cassirer's, there would either have to be some capacity to distinguish between abstract and concrete before a body is fully symbolized, or else any mathematical act would first have to be embodied before it could be abstracted by detaching the abstract aspect of a symbol from its concrete aspect. The key point about Cassirer's notion of symbolization is that it has the capacity to endow the ideas of the mind with a body. If a symbol were, on the contrary, conceived of as being an intellectual operation with respect to an object, endowing the body with a mind, as it were, that would mean that a symbol must always be predicated of a body. While symbolization appears to presume the previous existence of objects, Cassirer's idea was that symbolization is a process of constituting objects.

What speaks in favor of Cassirer's point of view is the fact that the previous existence of bodies or objects raises a problem for a decent account of a faculty of imagination. How can a faculty of imagination be made to work within a realistic account of the constitution of symbols? A realistic account would require three levels: body, mind, and imagination, where the substrate for the operations of the imagination would be the mind, thus requiring two different kinds of mental operations. Economy has always been on the side of Idealism, although that is not a clinching argument for Idealism being correct. Moreover, such a realistic account of the imagination actually deprives it of its sensory content, since it limits its activity to its operations on what is already present in consciousness, making it, as it were, into a Kantian sort of intellectual imagination. Cassirer instead assumed that the mind has a spontaneous intellective power. However, the direction of its operations is not toward itself (garden-variety of Idealism), but rather toward the body. Cassirer's faculty of mind desires to return to the body. Therefore symbols are not really symbols of the body but rather embody the mind.

This theory, however, encounters difficulties when it tries to explain the relation between perception and representation. If we assume that perception is oriented to the world we see, the world of the body, is a representation then something other than a symbol, because it is a representation of the seen? Is a symbol then not a representation? Clearly, this account restricts perception, for one could not then speak of a perception of an incorporeal body, which in this system would be an act of the imagination. If a symbol is a projected embodiment of a mental act, it cannot be a direct representation of a perception. The symbol could even be qualified as belonging to a different world than that of perception. But then two assumptions have been made about any representations that could be the results of perceptions: first, that they would not be linguistic insofar as they would be representations of perceptions, and second, that such representations would not be the primary mental operations.

It then follows neatly for Cassirer that language must be logical before it can be representative.[10] The point to note here, however, is that such representations can only be language outputs. The primary mental operations are logical, and the representations must then first of all be representations of that linguistic logic. Consequently, Cassirer denies the possibility of nonlinguistic representations. He claims that the function of language is to convert impressions into representations. It follows that mental pictures and sense impressions are far removed from each other. Language forms representations on the basis of impressions in order to symbolize. These representations are already symbolic. Symbols in turn are a necessary precondition for the picturing activity. The picturing activity is a necessary component of the formation of culture. Thus language, while originally nonpictorial, must be capable of operating with pictures. It can only do so if it is symbolic. Without being symbolic, it could neither convert impressions into representations nor have a capacity for interpreting the pictures it produces.

This double function, the conversion of inputs (impressions) into outputs (representations) and the ability to construct a system of outputs (a cultural system), means that the grammar of symbolic forms must be capable of dealing both with impressions and with representations. The inference is that this symbolic grammar is a mechanism for transforming sense data in such a way that one cannot speak of a picture that is immediately given. The point of the argument is that the activity of language is aimed at producing cultural forms rather than pure value-independent

speech acts. "Here we no longer have to do with a sensible world that is simply given and present, but with a system of diverse sensory factors which are produced by some form of free creation."[11] It follows that the faculty necessary for the creation of symbols and pictures is the imagination rather than perception. Perception recedes; it is now only a physical substrate that facilitates imagination. In turn, a cultural system cannot be understood in terms of some theory of receptivity; a cultural system requires mental spontaneity (*Selbstätigkeit*).

Cassirer understood that this theory demotes space and time from precategorical givens to consequences of the language activity. Since space must be a representation in this system (for it does not presume prelinguistic intuitions), it is a consequence of language. Therefore there can be no space that is not a produced space. Put differently, space must be imagined, and there can be no representation of something imagined without language. The implication is that the sensory contents themselves depend on meaning-acts. "Consciousness *creates* definite sensory contents as an expression for definite complexes of meaning."[12]

Such a consciousness then creates both form and matter. This radical idealism is necessary to safeguard the primacy of language. However, whereas traditional Idealism was built on representations as the basic building blocks of consciousness—making the connection between what is thought and what is seen into the primary experience of consciousness—Cassirer's Idealism posits logically constructed meaning-acts as the basic building blocks, making the connection between the mind and its products into that primary experience of consciousness; these products of the mind, however, are themselves definite sensory contents. The problem with this account of consciousness is that the creation of the world is explained, but it is insufficiently motivated. For Cassirer, the motivating drive for the creation of culture was so obvious that it did not require explanation. When contrasted with either Hegel's notion of the drive of consciousness as the impetus to integrate self and world, or Heidegger's idea of consciousness as the panicked flight from its own nothingness, Cassirer's view of consciousness seems tepid and undramatic. But again, the idea that the temperature of consciousness is lukewarm is not untrue just because extreme temperatures have a more immediate effect.

The point about Cassirer's world, unlike Hegel's or Heidegger's, is that it does not have to be. For Hegel, the world has to be because otherwise there is no consciousness (and vice versa); for Heidegger, the world

doesn't have to be, but while we are in it, it has to be for us. In Heidegger's and Gadamer's systems, the symbolic activity is replaced by the Kantian idea of free play. But for both of them consciousness is not generative: its meaning system does not generate definite sensory contents. Hence, like Kant, they require no theory of symbolization. Instead their concepts of interpretation play analogous roles to that of Cassirer's conception of symbol. Cassirer seeks to explain the generativity of consciousness, the idea that consciousness creates many different possible worlds. He uses the notion of symbol to explain how different possible worlds can coexist simultaneously.

The question we would put to Cassirer is, what does consciousness not create? There must be something that it does *not* create; otherwise we could not speak of impressions impinging on consciousness. There are two possibilities here: either a division must be made between untransformed matter and transformed matter, or perhaps that which is uncreated is in some way form. On Cassirer's account, it would be incoherent to speak of untransformed matter, since his point about any impressions that reach us is that they have already been culturally transformed. Therefore once we function with language we never encounter untransformed matter. Therefore we need to consider the possibility that some aspect of form is uncreated (which would be another departure from standard Idealism). As we shall immediately see, consciousness for Cassirer is intimately bound up with sensation. Therefore we could say that the problem for consciousness is the creation of form. In other words, what consciousness cannot do is create a *form* such as those postulated of an external world.

What could this counterintuitive notion mean? Consciousness creates representations, or images, as definite sensory contents. In order to do so, it has to create forms. But these forms are in no way the same as the forms of the physical world; they are symbolic, that is, cultural forms. Cassirer's assumption was that, unlike in the physical world, once consciousness is separated from nature, sensation is transformed from a cause for consciousness into its consequence. The order is not no sensation, no consciousness, but rather no consciousness, no sensation. The chasm between a linguistically restructured consciousness and nature drives consciousness to create its own sensations. If consciousness were reflexive, its reflexivity would be sensory rather than ideational (as it is for Hegel). In turn, form becomes a creative analogy to the external world on the basis of created sensations, rather than an analogy derived from

an external world. Form is an externalizing projection onto an external world on the basis of an internal sensation, and not the reverse.

It would be facile to conclude that Cassirer's account is a pure meaning account, but then we would have to explain why sensory content plays such an important role in his thinking. One way of evading the problem would be to conclude that there is no sensory content without meaning. But then the qualification of a content as a sensory content would be superfluous, since there would be no particular for that content to be a sensory content. What then is the importance of qualifying a mental content as a sensory content, apart from the pious wish to see sensory contents as necessarily culturally permeated?

Cassirer's point is that one must first be able to create a sound before one can endow a sound with meaning: the meaning does not create the capacity to make sounds. The sound is not mere matter, nor is it the attachment of form to matter; rather, the person speaking creates the matter while forming it. Endowing the sound with meaning, engaging in a meaningful form-giving, as it were, is then a differentiating rather than a replicating activity. Thus in any utterance, in the first utterance ever made by any human being, spiritual consciousness and sensory consciousness are already differentiated. Again the comparison with Hegel may prove illuminating. Hegel also works with a model of differentiation, but one in which matter and form are continually reintegrated. An original difference is only preserved through one moment of an iteration being set as the opposite of a previous moment of that iteration. In contrast, for Cassirer, there is no process by which the spiritual dissolves into the sensory or the sensory into the spiritual. Because no integration can take place, for example, the sound and the meaning are preserved as ontologically different components of the same act, there is no one unified process of integrating form and matter. Since all form giving subsequent to the original act of form-giving (the first utterance ever spoken by any human being) preserves this original difference, what is produced by the linguistic process is not one metaform but rather many forms. It follows that a plurality of forms is cogiven with the origin of that form that is created by humans.

Yet, according to Cassirer, form giving could not have arisen without some previous awareness of a definite sensory content; if forms are necessary for a creation of definite sensory content, then the idea of wanting to create such a content must have been present—language could not have developed without the desire to speak. Yet what could it mean to want

to speak before the availability of language is a given? On the one hand, Cassirer's account of the symbol requires the presence of form. On the other hand, how could one characterize the idea of a potential speech consciousness? Maybe Cassirer should have distinguished more precisely between concrete sensory contents and spiritual consciousness. Spiritual consciousness is a prerequisite for the creation of definite sensory contents, but there can be no definite sensory contents without a spiritual consciousness. Moreover, even if one were to posit a desire to speak, on what basis could one conclude that that desire could find fulfillment? Either that desire can be immediately fulfilled (I want to say something, so I just do), or there are some intermediate stages between wanting to speak and actually speaking (e.g. formulating a grammar, having someone who understands you, etc.) that remain obscure in Cassirer's account. We can see why he thought language—once it exists—is essential to consciousness, but his account of the origin of language is ultimately incoherent. Therefore his philosophy of symbolic forms ultimately provides no foundational philosophy such as I have been trying to extract from it.

The consequence of this ambiguity between spiritual consciousness and the definite sensory contents is that the symbol is assigned the task of mediating between the two ontologically distinct spheres of sensory consciousness and spiritual consciousness. From the point of view of spiritual consciousness, it must be form that first gives form to matter; but from the perspective of sensory consciousness, the possibility for form must first be generated out of a matter that has itself already been generated (from the point of view of an already existing language this is the same ambiguity as that characteristic of wanting to speak and speaking). In a way, this problem resembles the old problem of self-creation as a prelude to world creation. But the problem here is acute and threatens to collapse the whole system: namely, does the origin of language require the presence of some mental faculty such as the imagination or must one have a language before a faculty of imagination can develop, as could seem to be the case? If a potential speech consciousness is a prerequisite for language, if one needs to want to speak before speaking, then clearly some faculty like imagination must exist before language. This conclusion, however, already signals a departure from Cassirer's framework.

Nonetheless, Cassirer's point about representation must be taken into account, namely, that either a prelinguistic consciousness has no representations, or it must have representations that are not linguistically

generated but are amenable to "languization." The question would then arise whether this prelinguistic aspect of representation survives the development of language. Clearly, once language exists, there in some sense no longer exist any nonlinguistic representations, since representation and language are interwoven for someone who speaks a language. However, Cassirer believed in the continued existence of a sensory imagination, his position being that the drive for embodiment, which is essential in the formation of culture, could only be explained on the basis of a continued existence of such a sensory imagination. The sensory imagination is that faculty through which consciousness is specific, or "particular," as he terms it, and this specificity of consciousness is what potentially contains the whole, that is, it is what potentially makes it possible to generate a system of particulars. The function of the sign is to liberate and actualize this potentiality for the whole.[13] In contrast, perception as such "knows nothing" of these relations.[14] Thus the sensory consciousness makes it possible for language to replace perception, in turn distancing the cultural forms from perception.

Willy-nilly Cassirer was forced to conclude that "we are dealing with the revelation of basic spiritual functions in the sensory material itself."[15] In other words, we could not have definite sensory contents unless basic spiritual functions informed them. In addition, once language has developed, the definite sensory contents become the locus for the research of the basic spiritual consciousness. However, once language has developed, "we no longer ask whether the 'sensory' precedes or follows the 'spiritual.'"[16] There are two important aspects to this conclusion: first, it is no longer useful to disentangle the two, to go beyond language to its origin; second, in the linguistically represented world, form is in matter, and matter in form, in other words, there is no pure form or pure matter. Cassirer takes this conclusion further still, since he professes to find the drive to matter as innate in form and the drive to form as inherent in matter. The cogivenness of the spiritual and the sensory means then that there is a potential for form in matter, but also that forms "reveal a spiritual striving for certain fixed points or resting places."[17] The essential point here is not the propensity of matter to form—which is an old idea—but rather the propensity of form to matter, which is the idea to which Cassirer gives a particular twist.

Forms then tend toward matter because of the "striving for certain fixed points or resting places." That striving then is the striving to divide

the temporal flow of consciousness. From the perspective of the temporality of consciousness, forms appear as breaks, as buoys around which consciousness flows: "consciousness articulates itself around fixed centers of form and meaning."[18] It follows that the quest for definition is the opposite of consciousness, as can be seen both in the idea of definite sensory content and in the idea of the tendency of form toward matter. Implicit in such a notion is a linkage of form and death, but Cassirer did not take that turn, one that would have provided him with a kind of ontological response to Heidegger, that is, an ontological account of death that would have been different from Heidegger's. Instead, for Cassirer, form stays both detached and internal, both independent and represented. This detachment is not caused by symbolization; the symbol is rather its sign. Form's detachment rather shows that form is the consequence of consciousness acting upon its own sensations once it takes these sensations as being something different from itself. Yet this account of the genesis of form means that consciousness deprives the sensations of their temporal character (e.g., as in the metaphor of the break or the resting place) by seeking to form them. In turn, consciousness must then seek through form to refill the definite sensory contents with a temporal content, which, however, is then culturally variable. The symbolic forms cannot represent time as sensation. But the detachment of the symbolic forms from sensory content is not a real detachment, as we can read out from their trajectory: they are, as it were, sent outward from consciousness.

Cassirer was unable to resolve in his own mind the issue of whether we should seek origins, that is, the origins of either consciousness or language, or whether we should instead trace the multiform development of plural symbolic worlds.[19] Implicit in this state of indecision was the issue of whether these two questions can be addressed by one and the same discipline, or whether they are generically different. If the origin is prerational, then research directed at it could not be undertaken by a self-enclosed Idealistic consciousness for which its own reflection is its subject matter. On the other hand, it is not clear that tracing the development of different symbolic worlds is a purely philosophical concern. In some way, the need for philosophy has been eliminated at both limits of the symbolic process.

On his account, the first, original consciousness has no images, and because it has no images, there can be no knowledge of it. In contrast, the second, symbolic consciousness is dependent on the existence of images. It

is only after the development of this second consciousness that something such as knowledge can develop. Thus one consequence of the philosophy of symbolic forms is that the scope of knowledge is limited—limited not *to* nature but rather *by* nature. Such a conclusion sounds Kantian, but it is in fact quite un-Kantian. In Kantian terms, it would almost be like concluding that knowledge can exist only in the moral and aesthetic realms, not in science. In a way, this is similar to the young Heidegger's argument that the study of history is epistemologically prior to the study of nature. It is one thing to argue that science depends on culture, still another to argue that one can have no definite knowledge in any realm, and something quite different again to argue that definite knowledge does exist but that it cannot be knowledge of physical laws, since only culture (i.e., human production) can really be known.

If first consciousness is imageless, then its first task for the production of second consciousness is the production of images. Since Cassirer did not allow for the existence of a symbolic level before language, these images cannot be prelinguistic. It follows that the transition to language is much like the creation of a picture. Indeed, language does not aim to provide descriptions; it describes in order to create serviceable pictures. The operation of knowledge then takes place with respect to that picture. In that sense, all knowledge is fundamentally aesthetic. The question with regard to this model would be whether the act of creating a picture is an aesthetic act. The answer on this account must be negative. Creating a picture is rather a pragmatic, or even an ethical act: we want to speak the truth for pragmatic and ethical reasons. Knowledge presupposes the existence of truth, but the truth it is presupposing is then not the truth of nature, but rather the truth that is embodied in these linguistic acts. In turn, this presupposition of truth cannot make knowledge ethical, since the ethical is already incorporated in the speech act. Rather, knowledge functions like Kant's aesthetic consciousness, which presupposes the existence of the ethical.

Cassirer distinguished in this regard between knowledge and philosophy. Knowledge presumes that the process of the transformation from the prelinguistic to the linguistic has already occurred.[20] Cassirer assigned philosophy the task of seeking to get behind the image in order to trace the relation between primary imageless consciousness and image consciousness. As he well knew, assigning philosophy this task makes it difficult to tell the difference between philosophy and mysticism. How can

a philosophy that seeks to get behind the symbol be distinguished from mysticism? Cassirer viewed the philosopher's task as being the elucidation of the transformation of one process of consciousness into the other. In contrast, he thought that the mystic seeks to go beyond the symbol. The mystic seeks to transcend the symbol to a theological level, but in reality he is regressing to a prelinguistic level of experience. This prelinguistic level of experience is the mystic's substitute for God. The philosopher, in contrast, traces forward the development of secondary, symbolic consciousness from primary consciousness. His secularizing quest should be oriented to becoming a kind of historian of the generation of the human condition as opposed to an antihistorical mystic. Beginning with nature, the philosopher's task is to explain the evolution of culture from nature, whereas the mystic's quest is to transcend culture. It is that quest that makes the latter substitute God for nature. Cassirer perceived this troubling similarity between those different strategies for transcending the human condition. His solution was to substitute for God as creator, a creative principle of the human generation of culture. Thus, while the mystic substitutes God for nature, the philosopher substitutes culture for God.

NOTES

1. I will use as my basic text Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955). The original German edition is Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen: Die Sprache* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923).

2. For a recent discussion of this issue, see Karen Gloy, *Vernunft und das Andere der Vernunft* (Munich: Karl Alber, 2001).

3. Emil Lask, *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1911), and idem, *Die Lehre vom Urteil* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1912).

4. Hermann Cohen, *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1912).

5. For a recent discussion, see Birgit Recki, *Ästhetik der Sitten: Die Affinität von ästhetischem Gefühl und praktischer Vernunft bei Kant* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2001).

6. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 455.

7. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 81.

8. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 83.

9. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 87.

10. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 281.

11. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 87.

12. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 106.

13. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 108.
14. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 109.
15. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 110.
16. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 110.
17. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 110.
18. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 110.
19. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 112.
20. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 113.

PART II

Themes

SYMBOLIC FORMS AND PHILOSOPHY

FIVE

Cassirer's Metaphysics

DONALD PHILLIP VERENE

In the first article on Cassirer's philosophy to appear in an American journal, Iredell Jenkins compares Cassirer's critical idealism to logical positivism.[1] Jenkins claims that both methods avoid the question of whether there is a reality independent of the knower. This question, in various forms, has haunted Cassirer's conception of symbolic forms throughout its career. In his last years, while teaching a seminar Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism at Yale University, Cassirer concluded his seminar with a remark on the independent status of the object of knowledge; he noted that he had the impression that many of the participants had apparently thought that he had been defending a position of subjective idealism throughout the seminar. Cassirer then proceeded to clarify this point: "I think that the problems with which we were concerned here scarcely need these epistemological subtleties. They are to a very large degree independent of any metaphysical theory about the absolute nature of things. The metaphysical realist and the metaphysical idealist may answer them in the same way. For the fact of human culture is, after all, an empirical fact that has to be investigated according to empirical methods and principles. And all of us, I think, are empirical realists, whatever metaphysical or epistemological theory we may assume." Cassirer concluded: "The ego, the individual mind, cannot create reality. Man is surrounded by a reality that he did not make, that he has to accept as an ultimate fact."[2]

Cassirer is firm in his contention that man's making of his various worlds of symbolic forms presumes a reality, which is not made by man and which is present as an ultimate fact. Yet Cassirer at most points in his work prefers to deal with what we can accept insofar as we are "empirical

realists" and avoids discussing how that which man produces as *animal symbolicum* relates to that which man in principle does not and cannot produce, namely, that part of his milieu that is simply given. Cassirer could have said of himself what the phenomenology scholar Herbert Spiegelberg once said of himself, namely, that he was "metaphysics-shy." Notwithstanding doubts that any student of Cassirer may have regarding his interest in metaphysics, the text of a fourth volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, entitled *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*—which has recently been published from his *Nachlass*—must be considered.[3]

In this work Cassirer treats the question of a metaphysics of symbolic forms in terms of the distinction between *Geist* and *Leben*—spirit and life—as well as in terms of what he calls *Basisphänomene*, or basis phenomena; these comprise the "I," action and willing, and work (*Werk*) or human production—a threefold distinction that he takes from Goethe's *Maxims*.[4] In a fragment appended to this fourth volume Cassirer makes clear his view that philosophy is not a symbolic form, and thus he rules out the possibility that metaphysics can be explained or explained away as a type of symbolism or language use. Cassirer's position here sets his thinking apart from the approach to metaphysics of his colleague at Yale, Wilbur Urban,[5] or from the analytic view of Morris Lazerowitz.[6]

I wish to consider two questions: First, does Cassirer have a metaphysics in the sense of having a doctrine of being? Second, what does he mean by "the metaphysics of symbolic forms"? The contributors to the Library of Living Philosophers volume on Cassirer offer a range of opinions concerning these two questions. Although they had no knowledge of the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, they did have access to the translated essay that appears at the end of the Library of Living Philosophers volume, in which Cassirer develops the distinction between *Geist* and *Leben* that is central to his fourth volume.[7]

William Curtis Swabey explains: "As Cassirer uses the word, metaphysics is merely a name for certain bad habits of thought inherited from a crude and unenlightened past."[8] For Cassirer, Swabey notes, these habits are corrected by critical philosophy. Felix Kaufmann has claimed that Cassirer "rejects all varieties of transempirical metaphysics; philosophy is, to him, as it was to Kant, analysis of experience."[9] According to Robert S. Hartmann, "Cassirer's philosophy is neither metaphysics nor psychology; it is neither concerned with pure Being nor with pure Consciousness, but with the context and interaction of both."[10] Hartmann cites Cassirer's view

that, in Leibniz's philosophy, analysis of the real leads to analysis of ideas and this leads to the analysis of signs. Thus the symbol becomes the center of the intellectual world. For Cassirer then, the principles of metaphysics and those of cognition run together in Leibniz's thought. Hartmann maintains that "this very same characteristic can be given of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms; only that the form's metaphysical ingredients, by definition, are—as metaphysical—unknowable. His philosophy is thus, in a way frustrating; one would like to say, it is so by definition. The quest for a metaphysics 'behind' the symbolic form is invalid."[11]

Cassirer frustrates the metaphysically inclined reader because he himself was frustrated. He is caught between the Kantian critical philosophy, which served as the basis for his philosophy, and the Hegelian speculative philosophy—concerning the truth of the whole—which is the direction in which he would like to take his philosophy.[12] From the Kantian perspective he can do little more in regard to metaphysics than to make pronouncements in modern terms concerning the thing-in-itself, such as his assertion before his Yale seminar that, surrounding human productions, there is a world that man did not make and that must be accepted as an ultimate fact.

From a Hegelian perspective he endorses the speculative doctrine that the true is the whole, but he does not go as far as embracing the principle of the Absolute: he will not go so far as to endorse the complete dialectical totalization of the contents and forms of consciousness and thought. He criticizes Hegel for giving no account of the primary form of spirit in myth and of myth's basis in the primary phenomenon of life.[13] Hegel provides a complete *speculum mentis* but does not ground this in an apprehension of a truly first phenomenon. Without such an original grounding, the principle of the absolute invokes the dogmatism that Hegel had sought to avoid. Only the apprehension of an original unity can guarantee a final synthesis.

What, then, does Cassirer's system consist of? What is this metaphysics of symbolic forms that will allow him to pass between the Scylla and Charybdis of Kant and Hegel and complete his intellectual odyssey, his passage through the details of the various symbolic forms? Metaphysics is ordinarily a study of being in general, as well as of the fundamental types of being and reality. It takes its questions from the ontological claims already present in thought and language.

Cassirer does not engage in a theory of being or in metaphysics in the traditional sense, that is, in the way that it is pursued by rationalism or

empiricism. He claims that all earlier theories of metaphysics were faulty inasmuch as they took some aspect of reality and declared it to be ultimate, and as a result became one-sided. All past systems of metaphysics, then, offer us only partial truths. In explicating any area of culture as a symbolic form, Cassirer on the other hand speaks of discovering its "inner form." His pursuit of a metaphysics of symbolic forms requires him to discover the "inner form" of being—that one feature of being that encompasses all of the functions of the symbol discovered by Cassirer in his scholarly research on the different and distinct fields of human knowledge and culture.

The inner form of being is tied to the problem of the nature of the *given*. To discover what this "given" is, and how the given is itself given, is the key to a metaphysics of symbolic forms. This, at least, is my thesis. The question then, is what is Cassirer's doctrine of the given and how does it develop in his work?

Cassirer says that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* begins with "experience" that is "taken to be something immediately 'given' [*Gegebenheit*], yet this analysis is never directed toward this given as such."[14] Instead the analysis is directed toward the pure concept of experience as presented in the sciences of nature. The beginning point of "experience" is simply presumed or *given*, and thought is never truly brought to bear on it. The actual nature of the given, what in fact simply *is*, is only indirectly confronted by critical idealism in its notion of the numenon and in its metaphysics of the regulative.

Hegel begins with the question of the nature of experience captured in his description of his *Phenomenology* as the "science of the experience of consciousness." Experience, for Hegel, is the movement of consciousness between its apprehension of the object as it is in itself and as it is as an object for consciousness. This dialectical movement of consciousness in relation to itself necessitates—and indeed is what it means to have—experience. The ways in which this movement occurs are described by Hegel through the stages of the *Phenomenology*. In Hegel's account consciousness simply begins to have experience before one's eyes, as it were, as "sense-certainty." But Hegel does not pause long enough in his exposition to reveal the inner form of Being itself. Nor does he do this at the beginning of the *Science of Logic*, which presupposes the beginning point of the *Phenomenology* for the dynamic of its internal movement.

Cassirer begins his philosophical endeavor by replacing substance with function in *Substance and Function*. He finds in the logic of the math-

ematical concept of function the necessary advance over the abstract universality of classical substance-based logic. As he explains, "modern expositions of logic have attempted to take account of their circumstance by opposing—in accordance with a well-known distinction of Hegel's—the abstract universality of the concept to the concrete universality of the mathematical formula."[15] The functional concept provides us with a formally determinate representation of the inseparability of universal and particular, which Hegel attempted to portray dialectically in his conception of the "in-and-for-itself." In the functional concept the principle that determines the order of a series of variables is never in itself reducible to the series but is a universal element distinct from the individual variables; the variables in turn are without significance apart from that of the universal principle of their order. The variables are meaningful particulars only to the extent that they are something for the universal—which is the principle that establishes their position in the series.

In the first chapter of *Substance and Function,* Cassirer states something that has been overlooked, yet is obvious once stated. Like so many major discoveries, it is a matter of recognizing the significance of something that is already there. Cassirer realizes that the concept of the mathematical function shows with complete clarity what philosophy has long been seeking—the inseparability of the universal and the particular achieved through their mutual determinations. Cassirer found this on the highest level of intellectual thinking. This is what Kant had been looking for in the schematism—the connection between the universality of the concept and the specificity of intuition. To grasp this Kant posits a third thing, the schema, which is more concrete than either but which Kant also calls an art concealed in the depths of the human soul.

The mathematical function contains the secret of the inner form of the given and the secret of a new approach to being. This is the secret means by which Cassirer proposes to pass between the Scylla of Kant, with the many heads of critical philosophy, and the Charybdis of Hegel with the whirlpool of the dialectic.

From mathematical logic Cassirer moves to cultural semiotics and finds this bond of universal and particular within the phenomenon of the symbol. The symbol is at once something physical, a breath of wind or a mark on paper, and something spiritual, a meaning. The symbol is also something specific, yet it conveys a universal meaning. The symbol is further the universal medium of all cultural activity, and yet any symbol is specific to the

particular cultural activity within which it has its own meaning. The symbol is thus an analogue to the mathematical concept of function. The term "symbolic form" is Cassirer's own, but to highlight this as the leading idea of a total philosophy he connects it to the doctrine of "symbolic pregnance" (*symbolische Prägnanz*), a term that he takes from Gestalt psychology.

The symbol as the medium of forms found at the level of human knowledge and culture has no grounding in human experience as such. The basis of the symbol must be found in the object of consciousness. The symbol's internal dialectic of universal and particular can be grasped in the phenomenon of symbolic pregnance. Cassirer defines symbolic pregnance as: "the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents."[16]

Cassirer's analysis of symbolic pregnance takes the symbol back to the level of the "life-world," to use Husserl's terms. In Cassirer's sense of the life-world we can find the roots of all the forms of human culture. In Husserl's life-world we find only the basis of science and cognition. Cassirer claims that in Husserl's phenomenology the hyletic stratum is still separated from the noetic.[17] In it we have a dirempted given rather than the mutual necessity of the particular and universal in the formal concept of function.

In contrasting nature-concepts and culture-concepts, Cassirer regards the latter as containing a separation of universal from particular that is not present in the former. Nature-concepts in principle unite the universal and the particular in the manner of the pure mathematical function, the difference being that the nature-concept never perfectly encompasses the actual elements as they appear in nature. Culture-concepts achieve only an approximate integration of the particular into the universal. Thus in Burckhardt's concept of "Renaissance man" the specific figures it comprises, namely, Leonardo da Vinci, Machiavelli, Michelangelo, and others, only point in the direction of its ideal. The concept "Renaissance man" allows us to make sense of the particular figures of the Renaissance in terms of which one comes closest to the universal set of characteristics the concept enunciates, but does not offer us a fully determinate order of figures in which each figure finds its necessary place in the way that any specific material finds its place in, for example, a table of specific gravities.[18]

Cassirer penetrates the inner form of the given, first from the standpoint of the knower of the object. He then approaches the problem from

the standpoint of the reality of the object, which necessitates the concept of a metaphysics of symbolic forms. Cassirer moves between these two standpoints from the outset, but, as already noted, his concern with the reality of the object is always muted. Cassirer, however, is clear on how he regards the reality of the object. He says: "We begin not with the primordial fact of so-called Being, but with that of 'Life.'"[19] To his students in the seminar at Yale, Cassirer explained that "the fundamental reality, the *Urphänomen* . . . the ultimate phenomenon may, indeed, be designated by the term 'life.' This phenomenon is accessible to everyone; but it is 'incomprehensible' in the sense that it admits of no definition, no abstract theoretical explanation. . . . 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."[20]

Cassirer substitutes Life understood as process, for Being understood as substance. His objection to substance is that it has no inner form, no relation to itself. To use Alfred North Whitehead's term, substance is "vacuous actuality." Epistemologically, Kant's schema is what captures Cassirer's imagination, but what stimulates him metaphysically is Leibniz's monad, or the sense of the monad as having internal relations to itself, what Whitehead develops into the idea of an "actual entity." Cassirer speaks of this in terms of function. Just as he replaces substance-concepts with function-concepts in his system of theoretical knowledge, so too he replaces the substantial conception of Being with process, which he understands as a dialectic of Life and *Geist* in metaphysics.

Life is an *Urphänomen*, but the key feature of life is its constant transformation into *Geist*. This transformation into *Geist* is the continual process of life taking on form, a process that moves from the immediate to the mediate. Cassirer regards Plato's *eidos* as the origin of his doctrine of form, but considers *eidos* in Plato as tied to a doctrine of substantial being, which is only freed when the traditional concept of being is recognized as in fact life. The relationship of life and *Geist* is not one-way. It is bidirectional because *Geist* is continually in the process of reemerging from life. Life and *Geist* are held together as two necessary moments of a dialectic that is parallel to Hegel's in-itself and for-itself. Life and *Geist* are in a continual dialectic and life is not *aufgehoben*—literally, taken up—in *Geist*, as with Hegel.

The relationship of life and *Geist* is in Cassirer's view a functional one: life is to *Geist* as the individual variables are to the principle of the order of

their series. Cassirer's imagination never abandons the sense of the bond of particular and universal that is present in the concept of the mathematical function. Life and *Geist* as metaphysical terms mark a metamorphosis of this original sense of function's inner form.

Cassirer has a functional, dialectical, organic conception of the real. With his background in mathematical science and his insistence on the process of life and *Geist* he could have produced a speculative metaphysics similar to that of Whitehead. But he did not. Cassirer's focus is always on man, an emphasis he takes from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. But had he decided to formulate in detail the internal structures and functions of nonhuman realities, his metaphysics would in essence have been the same as that of Whitehead. Cassirer can be rightly described as a process philosopher in metaphysics. He is not a life philosopher, wishing to return the workings of *Geist* to the cosmic vitality of life, nor is he a *Geist* philosopher, regarding *Geist* as an alienation from life. Rather, he sees *Geist* as the fulfillment of life, which for its own vitality must always maintain its dialectic with life.

When Cassirer turns to these questions in detail he does not attempt a speculative reworking of Plato's *Timaeus*, as does Whitehead. Cassirer turns to the biology of the organism of Jacob von Uexküll. To Uexküll's view that every organism has its own environment or *Umwelt* organized around two poles of an effector system and a reactor system, Cassirer adds that in the world of man there is a third system, a symbol system. Reacting, effecting, and symbolizing are the three basic functions of the human organism, according to Cassirer.[21]

In his essay "Basis Phenomena," Cassirer distinguishes three phenomena that are underived and have no ground outside themselves. These are *life*, which is understood as a process and which Cassirer associates with the phenomenon of the "I" as the locus of life; *action* or the resistance and opposition we experience in the world in our attempts to effect the other by willing; and the sphere of "work" (*Werk*) in which something objective is produced. Cassirer, as mentioned above, claims to derive these three basis phenomena from Goethe's conception of life as an *Urphänomen*. But in addition to Goethe there appears to lie behind them the conception of the human organism that he derives from Uexküll. The "I" has a parallel in Uexküll's reactor system. It is a taking up of the movement of life itself. The phenomenon of action is parallel to that of the effector system in which the self attempts to act in relation to the world and to other selves.

Finally, the sphere of work is parallel to the symbol system in which something objective is produced—a *Werk*.

Cassirer is in the end a Socratic. As he asserts in the first sentence of *An Essay on Man*, self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophy. He is a Socratic because he believes in the basis phenomenon of "work" and he understands "work" to be not merely the product of "willing" or "action"—which would be to reduce "work" to the political or historical effects of its production—but something more. Cassirer claims that "there are 'works' whose content, whose meaning, whose 'sense' does not consist exclusively in their bringing about a specific 'effect,' in their making some physical or psychical changes in things, or in their inhering in the physical or psychical causal order."[22]

Cassirer says that self-knowledge is a call to the sense of truth that can be achieved in the work: "This call now means know your *work* and know 'yourself' *in* your work: know what you do so you can do what you know."[23] To give up on the Socratic project is to fail to recognize the basis phenomenon of work and the fact that the achievement of truth that transcends action and its world of effects, lies in work. Cassirer says: "The recognition of this purely formal value of truth 'itself in itself' is what distinguishes the 'philosopher' from the 'Sophist,' the 'dialectician' from the 'rhetorician' and 'eristic.' For the sophist and the rhetorician, 'truth' is exhausted by the sphere of action."[24]

In conclusion, Cassirer does have a metaphysics but it is only partially developed. He goes beyond Kantian critical idealism in his claim that the basis phenomena are embodiments of the real and as such are not regulative ideas. Cassirer is unequivocal on this point. But he stops short of entering into Hegelian speculative philosophy. He holds to a doctrine of reflection and does not provide an explicit account of the totality of experience. In principle, he advocates the view that all the symbolic forms can be understood in a synthetic fashion by philosophy, which means of course that philosophy itself is not an independent symbolic form. But he does not offer a full account in the manner of Hegel's dialectic, and he certainly does not endorse Hegel's "speculative sentence." Instead Cassirer advocates a view of dialectic that does not involve an all-encompassing totality and seeks to avoid the tendency native to philosophy to reduce all forms of expression to a logical order in the manner of Hegel's logic. Cassirer also does not engage in speculation after the fashion of Whitehead, namely, projecting an account of the various forms of reality and life that

are nonhuman developed from an analysis of the human. Instead he relies on Uexküll's biology of the organism and stops within its limits.

Cassirer's metaphysics is based on the dialectic between life and *Geist*. Where his doctrine of basis phenomena is connected to this dialectic it would seem that the ultimate fact of life is formed by *Geist* by means of the basis phenomenon of action; and ultimately this issues in the sphere of work that is the basis of human culture. Cassirer does not develop a full account of how these basis phenomena inhere in the dialectic of life and *Geist*, but the two sets of distinctions appear to coalesce to form Cassirer's doctrine of a metaphysics of function that replaces the metaphysics of substance and being.

Neither the principle of life nor that of action is especially original in Cassirer's philosophy. It is the notion of work that is original. It lies at the heart of his metaphysics. Work is the element in human affairs that is directly connected to the inner form of the given—the functional bond, as it were, of the particular and the universal. The sphere of work is the ground of what is true and of what is real for Cassirer, and it is what sets his philosophy apart from most of what has occurred in philosophy since.

NOTES

1. Iredell Jenkins, "Logical Positivism, Critical Idealism, and the Concept of Man," *Journal of Philosophy* 47 (1950): 677–695.

2. Ernst Cassirer, "Language and Art II," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 195.

3. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, trans. by John Michael Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), and idem, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, ed. John Michael Krois, vol. 1 of *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, ed. John Michael Krois and Oswald Schwemmer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995). The first full-length study of this work is Thora Ilin Bayer, *Cassirer's Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms: A Philosophical Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

4. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4: 127–131.

5. Wilbur M. Urban, *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939).

6. Morris Lazerowitz, *Studies in Metaphilosophy* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1964).

7. Ernst Cassirer, "'Spirit' and 'Life' in Contemporary Philosophy," trans. by Robert Walter Bretall and Paul Arthur Schilpp, in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston: Library of Living Philosophers, 1949), 855–880. This first appeared

as "'Geist' und 'Leben' in der Philosophie der Gegenwart," *Die neue Rundschau* 1 (1930): 244–264.

8. Schilpp, ed., *Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, 126.

9. Ibid., 206.

10. Ibid., 293.

11. Ibid., 317. See also Leon Rosenstein, "The Metaphysical Problems of Cassirer's Symbolic Forms," *Man and World* 6 (1973): 304–321; and Stephen Erickson, "Cassirer's Dialectic: A Critical Discussion," *Idealistic Studies* 4 (1974): 251–266. For an account of the various types of criticisms of Cassirer's metaphysics and their relation to the fourth volume, see Bayer, *Cassirer's Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*.

12. See my "The Origins of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Kant, Hegel, and Cassirer," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30 (1969): 33–46.

13. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), xv–xvi.

14. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4: 4.

15. Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, trans. by William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: Open Court, 1923), 20.

16. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 202.

17. Ibid., 3: 198–200.

18. Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies*, trans. by S. G. Lofts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 70–73.

19. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4: 225.

20. Verene, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*, 193–194.

21. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 23–26.

22. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4: 183.

23. Ibid., 186.

24. Ibid., 187.

SIX

The Limits of Order

Cassirer and Heidegger on Finitude and Infinity

MICHAEL ROUBACH

In 1929 Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger met in Davos for a debate that was centered on Kant's philosophy but involved their own respective philosophies as well. The Davos debate seemed to be a confrontation between two worldviews. Cassirer exemplified a humanist worldview deeply committed to the heritage of the Enlightenment. Important ingredients of his position were both the scope of human freedom and modern science. Heidegger's philosophy can be interpreted as undermining the scientific worldview. The subordination of the notion of time in physics to *Dasein*'s primordial temporality exemplifies, at least at face value, an antiscientific position. Although Heidegger's ontology included freedom as a fundamental issue, it is very difficult to tie his ontological freedom to any ethical position. Moreover, the debate was a confrontation between a Jew and a future Nazi.[1]

The characterization of the Davos debate as a clash between two worldviews is not totally unjustified. But this simplistic description masks the unique character of the debate. If it is characterized only as a clash between light and darkness then the specific content of the debate is lost. Furthermore, such a characterization blurs our understanding of the different intellectual options in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In this paper I would like to show that the intellectual link between Heidegger and Cassirer is much more complex because while on the one hand, there is an insurmountable gap between them, they do, on the other hand, have much in common. In one of the notes he wrote on his copy of Cassirer's review of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger exclaims, "[I]t looks like Cassirer had the central theme and yet *completely* passed it by!"[2] This note, I believe, encapsulates the debate. There is a constant move-

ment of ideas that grow closer, then drift apart. It is this movement, or at least some aspects of it, that I will analyze in this paper.

My focus is the different conceptions of finitude and the dichotomy between finite and infinite that were proposed by Heidegger and Cassirer. There are two main reasons for choosing this aspect of the debate. First, finitude and infinity play an important role in both positions and in their interpretation of Kant (though it plays a more important role in Heidegger's position). Focusing on the notions of finitude and infinity in Heidegger and Cassirer offers a good basis for comparing them and for pointing out the precise differences between them. Moreover, as the debate proceeded, the concept of finitude played an increasingly central role in the arguments presented. Even after the debate ended, the differences between their positions centered on their different understandings of finitude. This is clearly evident in Cassirer's review of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* and in Heidegger's remarks on it.[3] Second, an analysis of Heidegger's concept of finitude provides a useful basis for understanding his response to Cassirer in the debate. The answer in the written account of the debate is very brief: finitude is a precondition for the possibility of both ethics and eternal truths.

CASSSIRER ON THE TRANSCENDENCE TO THE SYMBOLIC LEVEL

In the Davos debate, Cassirer contrasted finitude with the absolute.[4] He explained that the finite is limited and relative while the absolute is not bound to a specific point of view. The absolute does not lie beyond the possibility of human knowledge but is within reach of human cognition. For Cassirer, then, that which is limited and relative is a starting point of human cognition but not an unsurpassable boundary. Cassirer makes use of the dichotomy in his remarks on *Being and Time* in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. He claims, for example, that Heidegger's analysis of spatiality is not incorrect but belongs to a presymbolic understanding of space.[5] In other words, Heidegger's notion of space consists of the *terminus a quo* but not the *terminus ad quem* of space. Furthermore, even if Heidegger's analysis of spatiality can be connected to a primitive symbolization of space it can never arrive at the mathematical level, which lies beyond the reach of the primitive Heideggerian notion. Cassirer's view thus seems to be in direct contrast to Heidegger's analysis of spatiality in *Being*

and Time. In Heidegger's account the metric science of space presupposes a phenomenal basis.[6] For Heidegger, the symbolic level presupposes the whole structure of "being-in-the world." The symbolic is a partial aspect of this structure and certainly does not constitute a transcendence of human finitude.

Cassirer's own account of the symbolic characterization of space is very different. Cassirer is offering a comprehensive account of space that includes perceptual, mythical, and mathematical aspects. These aspects are interconnected. According to Cassirer, "every act of spatial perception comprises an act of measurement and thus of mathematical inference."[7] Hence, the mathematical science of space reveals aspects of it that are relevant to the perceptual and mythical aspects of space as well. For example, his symbolic conception of space is closely related to Felix Klein's *Erlanger Programm*.[8]

Seen from this perspective Cassirer's critique of Heidegger seems totally justified and demonstrates that it is not clear how Heidegger's limited characterization of spatiality can account for all the symbolic forms of space. But it is important to note that Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of space should not be understood as giving the full characterization of space but only as delineating the horizon that every account of space presupposes. But how can Heidegger's account of space function as the horizon of every aspect of space, including the mathematical science of it? I propose to clarify Heidegger's position by applying, strangely enough, Cassirer's own position on the connection between different symbolic spheres.

FINITUDE AND INFINITY IN THE SYMBOLIC SPHERE

Although in the Davos debate Cassirer limited himself to one interpretation of the dichotomy between finite and infinite, there is another interpretation of this dichotomy that emerges from his writings, namely, that of the dichotomy between the bounded (*peras*) and the unbounded (*apeiron*) as he develops it in the chapter on the mathematical object in the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In this chapter Cassirer aims to explain the possibility of change in some area of symbolic form. Cassirer analyses the example of numbers, but I think that the analysis is valid for other cases as well, including space itself. In this chapter the problem that Cassirer faces is how to connect a new kind of number, for example, whole

numbers, with natural ones. This is a problem because for Cassirer the numbers as objects are constituted by the laws that govern them.[9] Consequently, Cassirer faces the problem of the identity of the notion of number following a change in the axiomatic system that encompasses them. In other words, if whole numbers demand a totally different axiomatic system, on what basis can we still call them numbers and consider them as an enlargement of the domain of natural numbers? Cassirer rejects two possible solutions to this problem claiming that whole numbers are neither included in our understanding of natural numbers nor totally alien to them. Whole numbers do not alter the meaning of number but "first bring it to its full development and clarification."[10] Cassirer already expressed this view in *Substance and Function*: "Thus the new forms of negative, irrational and transfinite numbers are not added to the number system from without but grow out of the continuous unfolding of the fundamental logical function that was effective in the first beginning of the system."[11]

Cassirer's position can be better understood if we see it in connection to his interpretation of Dedekind's explanation of irrational numbers. These numbers are defined as "cuts." A cut is constructed by separating the rational numbers into two groups that are mutually exclusive. For Cassirer, the philosophical significance of these cuts is that they show that it is meaningless to ask about the existence of the irrational number apart from the cut. This thus reveals something about all numbers, including the natural ones. The nature of number cannot be revealed on the basis of this or that specific example, such as asking what the meaning of the number 1 is and then generalizing it. The concept of a number can be revealed only through the whole series of numbers. Thus Cassirer applies Dedekind's account of irrational numbers to natural numbers as well in order to exemplify the change from a substance-oriented account of numbers to a functional/ordinal one.

In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer adds a new motivation for his approach to the addition of new kinds of numbers. Cassirer observes that both Brouwer's and Hilbert's approaches to the foundations of mathematics rest on some variation of the dichotomy between the finite and the infinite. Contrary to their position, Cassirer aims at an account of mathematics as a whole. The movement in mathematical thought, where an expansion is always "at the same time a return to its foundations" is supposed to overcome these dichotomies.[12] If mathematics is "the overcoming of the *apeiron* by the *peras*" then there is no place in it for strict dichotomies.[13]

The relation between different symbolic forms that overlap partially exemplifies a different relation between finitude and infinity. Contrary to the position that Cassirer adopted in the Davos debate, the infinite is not considered in terms of an absolute point of view since it contains an incomplete essential ingredient. At first this notion of the infinite resembles the Aristotelian one; the unbounded is the potential infinite. But on further examination the structure of this notion of the infinite is more complex. There is no clear dichotomy between the limited—in the sense of defined—and the unlimited or indefinite. The series of the domains of number is not constructed on the basis of the natural number, rather there is a constant return to the origin of the series. One can even say that this is a hermeneutic circle. We begin with natural numbers and then enlarge the domain of numbers to whole numbers, but this enlargement reveals the meaning of the beginning of the construction, in other words, natural numbers.

Cassirer's interpretation of the series of the conceptions of numbers shows a marked and profound resemblance to Heidegger's analysis of finitude. Finitude in *Being and Time* functions both as a horizon for all the possible interpretations of the meaning of Being and as a constraint on these interpretative possibilities. Heidegger's finitude is neither Aristotelian nor Cartesian. It is not a relative point of view compared to an absolute one, because there is no transcendence of finitude, no external point of view from which the finitude is conceived. On the other hand, Heideggerian finitude is not the definite either, because for Heidegger, the definite always presupposes an external framework from which the finitude as definite is defined, and there is no external framework to *Dasein*.

At this point it seems that not only does Cassirer not reject Heidegger's concept of finitude, but he in fact endorses it. The main difference between Heidegger and Cassirer seems to be over the constraints that exist concerning the framework. Heidegger's position is that the constraints on the horizon are the ontic condition of *Dasein*. This is unacceptable to Cassirer. One of the main underpinnings of Cassirer's thought is the belief that the symbolic sphere transcends the ontic level. For Cassirer, the thing itself places no constraint on the possible symbolic forms that relate to, or confer meaning on, the thing itself. Nevertheless, there is a clear tension between this demand and the connection between the different symbolic forms. If Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* had been completed it would have had a clear advantage over Cassirer's philosophy,

because it would have given the key to the relation between the different symbolic forms. For example, if we consider Cassirer's conception, it is not clear how natural numbers are only fully understood once we reach imaginary numbers. This claim can be justified only if the axioms of natural numbers do not exhaust their meaning. But it is difficult to conceive of this possibility without giving the numbers an ontological independence from the axioms that describe them. Moreover, natural numbers that are the *terminus a quo* of the series of the symbolic forms of numbers are not something that is left behind in the developments of new conceptions of numbers but on the contrary something that we always go back to. Hence, Cassirer's series of symbolic forms create a hermeneutic circle. Heidegger's account of the horizon that is anchored in the ontic level provides a possible account of a hermeneutic circle. In this sense, *Being and Time* offers a possible framework from which the complex relation between the different symbolic forms can be explained.

ORDER AND TIME

My interpretation of the relation between the philosophies of Heidegger and Cassirer can be illustrated by an example: the connection between time, order, and number. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer criticized Oskar Becker's *Mathematische Existenz*. In this book, which was published in the same volume of the *Jahrbuch für philosophische und phänomenologische Forschung* as Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Becker proposed a "Heideggerian" interpretation of the debate on the foundation of mathematics between formalism and intuitionism. Cassirer's critique focuses on the relation of number and time. Contrary to Becker, he does not think that the serial principle underlying numbers presupposes the notion of time. On the contrary, time presupposes the notion of order, and this notion can be fully characterized logically.[14]

This criticism applies to Heidegger as well. If time is understood through the serial principle and this serial principle does not presuppose time, then an essential part of Heidegger's claims in *Being and Time* is rejected. In particular, the primacy that Heidegger gives to primordial temporality over numbered time is rejected. Since primordial temporality is finite in Heidegger's sense, the primacy of Heidegger's finitude is rejected.[15] There is a possibility of transcending Heidegger's finitude since the principles of ordering do not presuppose it.

However, the temporality that underlies Cassirer's account of the change from one symbolic form to another cannot be embedded in a notion of order. Although natural numbers precede whole numbers in one respect, they can be understood only after their extension to whole numbers. One could even say that our understanding of natural numbers is the outcome of all the extensions, including those that are not known to us. Consequently, the relation between two conceptions of mathematics cannot be subordinated to an axiomatic elaboration of an asymmetrical relation. The temporality of understanding as it is shown in the series of extensions of domains of numbers does not transcend Heidegger's analysis of temporality, but is in fact part of it. Primordial temporality with its radical finitude is exactly this kind of temporality.[16] In one respect one could say that time presupposes order but in another, that order presupposes time.

THE LIMITATION OF *BEING AND TIME*

Although the philosophical project undertaken by Heidegger in *Being and Time* contains the possible ingredients for what could have been a framework for Cassirer's work in *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, it fails to accomplish it. The reasons for this failure are made clear both in Cassirer's critique of Heidegger and in Heidegger's own retrospective assessment of the limitations of *Being and Time*. In the lectures that preceded the debate in Davos, Cassirer addresses two concepts that in his opinion transcend finitude: space and language. In a lecture from the 1960s entitled "Time and Being," Heidegger claims that the problematic part in *Being and Time* was the attempt "to derive human spatiality from temporality."[17] Moreover, language played an important role in Heidegger's turn (*Kehre*). Issues pertaining to language and space are closely linked—even interdependent—in the philosophies of both Heidegger and Cassirer. In *Being and Time* Heidegger claims that "the whole stock of significations which belong to language in general are dominated through and through by 'spatial representations.'"[18] A similar connection exists in Cassirer's thought: "Thus for language as for cognition, the precise differentiation of spatial *situations* and *distances* represents a point of departure from which it proceeds to build objective reality, to define objects."[19]

How is Cassirer's critique of *Being and Time* related to Heidegger's own difficulties in bringing his project to completion? Cassirer argues that

Heidegger's philosophy makes no allowance for a transpersonal meaning that would not be a degeneration from the personal level.[20] Cassirer refers mainly to the role played by the "they" (*Das Man*) in the determination of *Dasein*. For Cassirer, language and space are two important examples of transpersonal systems of meaning. Hence, according to Cassirer's reading of Heidegger, space and language are merely a degeneration from the basic structure of *Dasein*, which is personal.[21]

Understanding Heidegger's self-critique is more complicated. Here I will deal only with one aspect of it. According to Heidegger, the meaning of being of space and numbers is "subsistence" (*Bestand*). Although subsistence is mentioned in *Being and Time*, Heidegger does not show how this meaning presupposes fundamental ontology. Later, he invokes the notion of "subsistence" as one of the main characteristics of modern technology's attitude toward things.[22] The centrality of this notion in Heidegger's writings in the 1930s shows that although subsistence was no minor issue for Heidegger, he had real difficulty in connecting it with his fundamental ontology.

The problem was that in the framework of *Being and Time*, Heidegger could not just add a meaning of being that transcends the framework established by *Dasein*. Heidegger said something similar during the Davos debate: "If in some measure we take this analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* collectively as an investigation of the human being and then pose the question of how, on the grounds of this understanding of man, the understanding of a formation of culture and a cultural sphere is to be possible—that if we pose it in this way, then it is an absolute impossibility to say something about what is under consideration here."[23] The philosophical change that Heidegger had to make in order to enter the notion of subsistence in the framework of the meaning of the being was no less than the rejection of the whole framework of *Being and Time*. Going by the similarity between Cassirer's critique of *Being and Time* and Heidegger's own self-critique one might have expected that the shift in Heidegger's thought would have brought their thought closer. But in fact it led them further apart. Between Heidegger's thought in the 1930s and Cassirer's philosophy there are no points of contact.[24]

In conclusion, it is clear that Cassirer wanted to abandon the notion of being in favor of a notion of order. In the pure theory of order the ordered thing vanishes and is replaced by a position in an order defined by an axiomatic system. Paradoxically, Cassirer's notion of order had its limits

exactly in his paradigmatic example, that is, in natural numbers. A connecting thread between Heidegger and Cassirer is to be found precisely in the limits on the possibilities of maintaining a notion of order that is independent of the ordered things. One could describe the relation of their thought as one of mutual containment: Cassirer's philosophy contained *Being and Time* as a partial symbolic form or as "life" in the life/spirit dichotomy that he developed. *Being and Time* contained Cassirer's philosophy since it suggested a way of accounting for the possibility of changing symbolic forms, especially in mathematics. This mutual containment and the Kantian roots that both Cassirer and Heidegger shared were the platform that enabled the Davos debate. But the problems raised by Heidegger's approach to the question of Being in *Being and Time* also set the stage for their total separation and for the estrangement of their philosophies.

NOTES

1. For an interpretation of the Davos debate from a political perspective, see Wayne Cristaudo, "Heidegger and Cassirer: Being, Knowing and Politics," *Kant-Studien* 82 (1991): 469–483.

2. Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. by R. Taft, 5th enlarged ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 210, emphasis in the original.

3. Following the debate Cassirer used the distinction between "life" and "spirit" in his interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy, but it can be shown that this distinction corresponds in many respects to the dichotomy between finitude and infinity. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, trans. by John M. Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 200–205.

4. Heidegger, *Kant*, 195.

5. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomonology of Knowledge*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 149n.

6. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 147.

7. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3: 145.

8. The purpose of the program proposed by Klein in 1872 was to classify all the geometries according to the groups that were applicable to each one of them. On Cassirer's use of Klein's concept of geometry, see Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3: 160.

9. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3: 370.

10. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3: 392.

11. Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, trans. by W. C. Swabey and M. Collins (New York: Dover 1953), 67.

12. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3: 398.

13. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3: 403.

14. A previous version of Cassirer's critique of the primacy of time over order is found in Cassirer's article on Kant and modern mathematics, "Kant und die moderne Mathematik," *Kant-Studien* 12 (1907): 34.

15. On the connection between numbered time and primordial temporality, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, division two, chapter 6.

16. Becker answered Cassirer's critique in an article entitled "Zur Logik der Modalitäten." His answer is based on the relation between intuitionistic and classical logic. Since intuitionistic logic is not a part of classical logic, Hilbert's foundation of mathematics cannot include intuitionistic mathematics. Moreover, intuitionistic logic presupposes modal notions, and these notions can be explained only through temporal notions. These are explained in the framework of *Being and Time*. The purpose of this argument is to show that temporal notions cannot be excluded from mathematics. This argument is problematic since Cassirer does not assume that intuitionistic mathematics is a part of Hilbert's account of mathematics. He thinks that his own account of mathematics enables a rejection (at least partial) of both Brouwer's and Hilbert's positions. Contrary to Becker, my account of the connection between time and mathematics does not presuppose Becker's argument. See Oskar Becker, "Zur Logik der Modalitäten," *Jahrbuch für philosophische und phänomenologische Forschung* 11 (1930): 497–547.

17. Martin Heidegger, "Time and Being," in *On Time and Being*, trans. by J. Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 23.

18. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 421.

19. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 203.

20. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4: 202.

21. Note that this critique of Heidegger is different from the one proposed in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. I think that this critique is more justified, and it points to one of the most important difficulties in *Being and Time*: Heidegger's dismissive attitude toward the transpersonal sphere. This attitude is part of the difficulty in proposing an ethics based on *Being and Time*.

22. Martin Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 17.

23. Heidegger, *Kant*, 210.

24. According to Dominic Kaegi, Heidegger's critique of representation in the thirties offers a critique of Cassirer's symbolic forms as well as of *Being and Time*. In this sense Heidegger's thought in the 1930s can still be related to the Davos debate and to Cassirer's thought. See Dominic Kaegi, "Davos und davor—Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Heidegger und Cassirer" in *Cassirer—Heidegger. 70 Jahre Davoser Disputation*, ed. D. Kaegi and E. Rudolph (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002), 67–105.

SEVEN

Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Myth

On the Ethico-Political Dimension of His Debate with Martin Heidegger

JEFFREY ANDREW BARASH

In his last book, *The Myth of the State*, completed in New York just before his death in 1945, Ernst Cassirer reexamined a central concern of his philosophical investigations of the 1920s: the interpretation of myth and mythical thought. Throughout his work, this topic posed a particular challenge to his overall philosophy of scientific rationality. "Of all things in the world," as he wrote at the beginning of *The Myth of the State*, "myth seems to be the most incoherent and inconsistent."[1] This paper investigates the coherence of Cassirer's *own* attempt to bring order to this "most incoherent and inconsistent" phenomenon. I will deal both with his initial investigation of myth in the 1920s, in the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, entitled *Mythical Thought*—where his analysis is principally directed toward myth in ancient and in contemporary non-Western cultures—and with *The Myth of the State*, in which he deals primarily with the role of myth in modern Western politics.

In keeping with my aim to examine not only Cassirer's theory of myth but also and above all the *coherence* of this theory in the early and late periods of his work, I will step beyond the framework of his own analysis in order to set in relief its underlying presuppositions. For this purpose, I will examine his theory in relation to the criticism directed at it by his most formidable philosophical adversary of the 1920s, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, it will be remembered, not only engaged in a famous debate with Cassirer at Davos, Switzerland, in 1929—a debate that clearly revealed the differences in their respective philosophical orientations—he also sharply criticized Cassirer's theory of myth in *Sein und Zeit*, in his review of Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*, and in his 1928–1929 Freiburg course lectures, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*.[2] In considering Cassirer's interpreta-

tion of myth in relation to Heidegger's critique, I show that, far from being limited to the theory of myth per se, Heidegger's criticism highlighted fundamental differences in their respective orientations to Western rationality. In so doing, Heidegger's critique permits us to bring into clearer view the underlying presuppositions that governed Cassirer's philosophy of myth in the period of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.

Beyond the clarification of fundamental presuppositions that a comparative analysis of Cassirer's and Heidegger's interpretation affords, another central issue comes into focus. The problem I address is raised by Cassirer's later extrapolation of his presuppositions concerning myth and their application to the interpretation of modern political society. Here, too, Heidegger's philosophy plays an important role for an understanding of Cassirer's thought. Given Heidegger's critical appraisal of Cassirer's theory of myth in the 1920s, it is not surprising to learn that Cassirer takes issue with Heidegger in the final section of *The Myth of the State*. In what follows, I shall argue that this late work may also be interpreted as providing a response to Heidegger's critique. Cassirer's later analysis of Heidegger is, indeed, all the weightier in view of his assumptions concerning the ethico-political implications of Heidegger's philosophy: As far as Cassirer was concerned, Heidegger's interpretation of myth in the 1920s not only had significant theoretical implications but also held a certain responsibility for the actual *propagation* of the most ominous expression of political myth in the modern period. And, in *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer related this responsibility not so much to Heidegger's official support of the Nazi regime during 1933–1934, as to the broad consequences of his philosophical orientation. In light of Cassirer's earlier theory of myth, his treatment of Heidegger's philosophy as the expression of a modern political myth is, as I shall demonstrate below, of particular importance insofar as it sheds light on the coherence of Cassirer's theory of myth as a whole.

Taking as my starting point Cassirer's interpretation of myth in the 1920s and Heidegger's critique of this interpretation, I examine the basis upon which Cassirer can claim to extend his theoretical presuppositions into the field of interpretation of modern political myths in *The Myth of the State*. In this manner I will place in relief the coherence of Cassirer's overall theory of myth in its application to premodern and modern societies alike, which serves as the basis for his later critique of Heidegger's philosophy.

I

Both Cassirer's theory of myth in the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and Heidegger's critique of this theory indicate that the *interpretation* of myth posed a problem for these two thinkers. This problem, as we shall see, concerned the relation between ancient or non-Western mythological systems and Western scientific rationality, which claims to elucidate these systems; the question was to what extent, indeed, scientific reason, operating on the basis of radically different assumptions from those of myth, could claim to grasp the "true" significance of myth, a significance inaccessible to mythical thought itself? Such a claim presupposes that, far from having no intrinsic connection to mythical thought, rational criteria—in their radical distinction from myth—might be capable of advancing a more "truthful" account of the world than myth itself might provide.

In the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, entitled *Mythical Thought*, Cassirer confronts this problem by taking up an issue that had emerged as a central concern in the contemporary human sciences: that of bridging the gap between the most rudimentary forms of "mythical-magical" belief systems, the "mythical-religious" beliefs of more developed cultures leading to the monotheistic religions, and finally the scientific rationality providing a principal orientation for the modern world-image (*Weltbild*). By placing analysis at the level of the world-image, from the most rudimentary to the modern, Cassirer was not only concerned with conscious reflection about the world but, first and foremost, with comprehensive configurations of the world as a totality, involving the fundamental assumptions according to which human beings in given periods and cultural contexts make sense of the world. In dealing with the question of all-encompassing world-images, the problem of interpretation necessarily raised the issue of the *commensurability* of radically different criteria of judgment employed in mythical and modern accounts of the world. For without a principle of commensurability, without an underlying continuity to bridge the gap between different criteria and to relate them to a common standard of judgment, the inescapable conclusion would seem to be that we are condemned to historical or cultural relativism. Without a principle of continuity to link different criteria, no standard of judgment could command validity beyond the horizon of the particular world-image in which it originates. In view of both the radical

modifications to which cultures and historical periods are subject and the transformations of the norms of judgment founded on them, it would seem that what was held to be "true" during a given epoch or in a given culture (i.e., in myth-making, religiously oriented, or scientific cultures) cannot but become incomprehensible to people living in a later period. And this same incomprehensible quality of truths affirmed in radically different contexts would account for their essential opacity to one another, rendering futile any claim to comprehend what truths affirmed in a radically different context might "really" signify. Deprived of a principle of continuity unifying the fundamental criteria of judgment, no epoch or culture would escape the confines of the limited horizon—however tacit or unacknowledged—of its own particular presuppositions and prejudices. Modes of comprehension radically foreign to a given culture's presuppositions and prejudices would thus tend to be misconstrued or go unnoticed. On what basis, then, did Cassirer establish the commensurability or underlying continuity between the criteria of judgment characteristic of divergent world-images ranging from the most rudimentary forms of "mythical-magical" to "modern-rational" interpretation?

In his book *Mythical Thought*, the world-images of mythical thinking and of modern scientific rationality are presented as corresponding to two different ways of making the world coherent, neither of which can claim to attain absolute, metaphysical truth.[3] As Heidegger noted at the beginning of his review of *Mythical Thought*,[4] Cassirer in no way attempted to *denigrate* mythical thinking in favor of modern modes of thought, since he attributed to each of these world-images its specific truth. In view of the fact that no world-image can ever provide a definitive metaphysical explanation of the phenomenon we term "world," each world-image has a frame of reference within which it may legitimately "objectify" the world—that is, constitute the world as its object.

It is this notion of "objectification" underlying each world-image that provides the first indication of how Cassirer conceives of the relation between the rudimentary mythical-magical, the more elaborate mythical and religious, and modern world-images. As Heidegger indicated in his review, Cassirer employed the term "objectification" in a Kantian or, more precisely, neo-Kantian sense, which he redefined in the context of his "phenomenology of symbolic forms." According to this usage, objectification signifies the constitution of a world in terms of the a priori intuitive and conceptual forms of experience; by means of these forms,

the *Formmotiven* or formal constituents of experience—space, time, and number—experience is structured as a coherent unity. Taking this refined neo-Kantian epistemology as his frame of reference, Cassirer established, for any possible subject, a necessary continuity in the pure forms of objectification of the world. The notion of the objectification of the world presupposes that all possible ways of constituting a world-image, mythical as well as modern scientific, are necessarily grounded in similar underlying intuitive and conceptual structures.[5] What distinguishes the variety of world-images over the course of the development of human perception and understanding are the modes of symbolic configuration of the world. Hence, for example, space, time, and number provide indispensable elements for the constitution of a world-image, whether mythical or modern; what changes in this constitutive activity, however, are the ways of symbolic configuration of time, space, and number in terms of which the subject, in the meaningful interpretation of its objects, lends them coherence by integrating them into the framework of a specific world-image in a given historical period or cultural context.[6] What also changes in this process is the specific way in which symbolic configurations are invested with emotions, with a specific *Lebensgefühl* or vital feeling, which—above all for magical and mythical world-images—must be recreated if they are at all to be understood.[7]

In the second chapter of *Mythical Thought* Cassirer illustrated this concept of the historicity of world-images through an analysis of modifications in the symbolic relation to time. If, in the Kantian sense, time is the condition of possibility of all human experience per se, a distinction nonetheless arises between the different ways in which the mythical and the modern world-images symbolically configure time. If one looks more closely at this key idea in Cassirer's thought, as well as at Heidegger's critique of this idea, Cassirer's presuppositions appear in a clearer light.

In his discussion of mythical and modern interpretations of time, Cassirer placed particular emphasis on what he took to be a key difference between them: whereas the development of modern scientific methodology resulted in a concept of time that became increasingly homogeneous, enabling ever more precise and comprehensive possibilities of quantification, magical as well as mythical and religious thinking comprehend time according to essentially *qualitative* configurations. In referring to religious belief, Cassirer did not intend to simply assimilate it to myth, even if, in his opinion, religion incorporates certain mythical elements—hence

his frequent reference to mythical-religious beliefs. In the process of cultural development religion continuously confronts the limits of magical and mythical attempts to account for the world. Cassirer's conception of an essentially qualitative approach to time admits of nuances and thus highlights a striking distinction he makes between mythical and religious beliefs—a distinction that must be kept in mind if one is to correctly evaluate the difference between mythical and modern world-images. To cite a single example, monotheism, which Cassirer situated among what he termed the varieties of mythical-religious thought, corresponds to a qualification of time that distinguishes it from the repetitive, cyclical cosmological time of natural events, which is the form of temporal configuration most characteristic of the more rudimentary types of mythical thinking. Thus, in the Old Testament, the quality of time invoked by the prophets may be distinguished from the repetitive time of natural phenomena in that the prophets orient time toward an essentially unique future. It is this new idea of time that, in contradistinction to that of the natural world, introduced the idea of temporal singularity, punctuated by events that do not repeat themselves but rather constitute a unique temporal sequence characteristic of human historicity. As Cassirer wrote in the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, "for the Prophetic consciousness the whole of cosmic, astronomical time disappears along with nature; in its place arises a new intuition of time which has reference solely to the history of mankind."[8]

In this manner, according to Cassirer, we observe great historical diversity in the modes of symbolic configuration of time: there is diversity, first of all, among the forms of qualitative configuration of time by magical and mythical-religious thought; secondly, between all such qualitative representations and the modern scientific world-image for which time becomes a homogeneous quantity.

In each case, however, Cassirer grounded this diversity of symbolic configurations of time in the presupposition that characterizes all of his theoretical work and to which we have already called attention, namely, the assumption of a fundamental unity of human consciousness—harking back to the Kantian and neo-Kantian "consciousness in general"—which, in terms of unchanging fundamental structures (*gleichbleibende Grundgestalten*) of consciousness, identify a formal unity underlying the diversity of symbolic modes in the temporal constitution of experience.[9] If, indeed, mythical and modern thinking might exist contemporaneously

in different geographical areas as well as in historically different periods, Cassirer's philosophy nonetheless presupposes a formal unity underlying all such manners of objectification. In other words, time, space, and number, conceptual understanding and rational reflection retain a formal identity in spite of all diversity in the symbolic configurations embodying them over the course of human history.

This presupposition is of crucial importance for our analysis of the world-images, above all with regard to the legitimacy of the modern claim to be able to make sense of world-images of the past, such as those configured by mythical and religious thought. If this thought has its own intrinsic truth, as Cassirer asserts that it does, by what right can one claim to clarify it in terms of the rational criteria of the modern world-image, which would seem to be radically foreign to it? It is in answer to this question that the key role of the presupposition concerning the fundamental unity of human consciousness becomes clear. For, even where the elaboration of the symbolic forms of mythical experience—their incorporation in language and ritual—is radically foreign to modern scientific thinking, a grasp of the pure forms that underlie them, as well as of the vital emotions rooted in these forms, is the source of the intelligibility of mythical thinking to modern rational analysis. At the same time, it is this unity in the pure forms of experience that accounts for the historical fate of mythical-religious thinking: it sheds light above all on the impasses that such thinking necessarily faced, since the modes of rationality present even in the most rudimentary forms of human consciousness gradually led to an awareness of the intrinsic limitations of myth as a means of providing a coherent account of the world. For Cassirer then, the historical development of humanity emerges not so much as a simple progression beyond mythical and religious thought by scientific rationality, but rather as a gradual development of conceptual capacities already implicit in the mythical image of the world.

Nowhere does this idea come to light more clearly than in Cassirer's treatment of what he designates as a fundamental form of mythical thought, which, as we will examine below, stood at the center of Heidegger's critique: the ways through which even the most rudimentary types of mythical thought—by means of words such as "mana"—distinguish the extraordinary and the sacred from the everyday (*das Alltägliche*) and the profane. As Cassirer noted, the depiction of the sacred by notions such as "mana" pervades mythical thought and serves as the basis for all forms of mythi-

cal conceptions of space, time, or number as distinct qualities. According to mythical interpretations, the sacred inheres in objects and is situated in the world as a quality of things. The immanent movement of mythical thought, as the process by which it encounters its own intrinsic limitations in making the world intelligible, leads to a progressive tendency to separate the sacred from sense objects in the world and to interpret them as originating in an ideal and transcendent source.[10] Here it could not be a question of "overcoming" belief in the sacred per se, but rather of transcending the ways in which mythical thinking interpreted it as an immanent, thing-like quality. The gradual metamorphoses of mythical thinking were at the same time of momentous importance for general cultural development. Whereas mythical approaches to the sacred as a thing-like quality do not have any necessary relation to ethical imperatives,[11] the progressive idealization of the sacred brought to light its fundamental independence from the sway of concrete things; in the course of this development, the interpretation of the sacred revealed an intrinsic affinity with the idea of autonomous action essential to ethical norms. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this aspect of Cassirer's thought in any detail, we note here the outlines of Cassirer's general philosophy of history, according to which the more rudimentary magical forms of myth give way to scientific rationality and to the ethically centered religions compatible with rational principles of social existence.

II

At the center of Heidegger's review of Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*, as in his debate with Cassirer at Davos, stood the Freiburg philosopher's vehement rejection of the presupposition of an underlying formal unity of consciousness, the idea of "consciousness-in-general," which Cassirer had appropriated from the Kantian and neo-Kantian epistemologies. Thus, in his review, Heidegger explicitly challenged the presupposition according to which "all 'reality' should be considered valid insofar as it is a construct of the constitutive acts of consciousness" (*alle 'Wirklichkeit' als Gebilde des gestaltenden Bewußtseins gelten soll*).[12]

In this review Heidegger criticized above all the idea that in the forms of pure temporal and spatial intuition and of pure concepts, an unchanging fundamental structure of consciousness underlies the acts of objectification that give rise to all possible world-images. It was the possibility of

presupposing this uniform model of consciousness that Heidegger questioned, first in *Sein und Zeit*, and then in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (on which Cassirer wrote a critical, and seldom-cited review).[13] To Heidegger's mind, the Kantian and neo-Kantian model of consciousness was above all incapable of accounting for the fundamental role of *time*.

Heidegger did not deny the possibility of interpreting time in relation to symbolic forms in Cassirer's sense, according to which temporality may be approached either in an essentially qualitative aspect, as in mythical-religious thinking, or in its quantitative aspect, in harmony with the modern scientific world-image. However, time conceived as a symbolic form hardly exhausts the possibilities of interpretation. On the contrary, for Heidegger it stems from the ordinary or "vulgar" comprehension of time, in other words, from "being *in* time" (*in der Zeit sein*).[14] And, since Cassirer's analysis focused on the objectification of phenomena *in* time, it could not discern what was, from Heidegger's perspective, truly fundamental, namely, the temporal *finitude* of *Dasein*. Far from denoting intuitive or conceptual forms in terms of the different symbolic configurations, time, interpreted as the temporal finitude of *Dasein*, configures being-in-the-world. According to Heidegger's well-known argument, it is not consciousness in its formal unity but rather a *polarity* in the ways of being-in-the-world that ultimately provides the basis for *Dasein*'s possibilities of meaningful interaction. Only in terms of this polarity is it possible to interpret *Dasein*'s capacity to confer meaning, not only on present "objects," but also on the possibilities of existence in the distant past—"authentically," where guided by comprehension in light of *Dasein*'s finite being, and "inauthentically," where *Dasein*, in its attempts at comprehension, discounts, neglects, or denies the significance of its own finitude in the structuring of meaningful interaction in the world.

This is not the place to examine the implications for the human sciences of the shift in perspective that Heidegger introduced with his ontology of finite *Dasein*, which is a theme I have dealt with in other writings.[15] I will limit myself to three comments that have immediate bearing on the problem of the relation between world-images, as Heidegger dealt with this problem during the period of *Sein und Zeit*. This term, to which—as I will have occasion to note—Heidegger referred in a brief albeit significant comment in paragraph 11 of *Sein und Zeit* (1927), played a more prominent role in two writings stemming from approximately the same period, "The Essence of the Ground" ("Vom Wesen des Grundes," 1929) and *The Fun-*

damental Concepts of Metaphysics: World—Finitude—Solitude, presented as a course at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau during the academic year 1929–30.

First, it is in terms of its finite temporal existence, grounding its ways of being-in-the-world, that *Dasein*, for Heidegger, configures a "world-image" (*Weltbild*). From this perspective, the world-image, far from comprising a totality of external objects constituted by a subject, corresponds to the ways of being of *Dasein*. And it is in this sense that Heidegger specified that *Dasein* is, in the "essence of its being," a "world-imaging" being (*Dasein ist im Wesen seines Seins weltbildend*).[16]

Second, if Heidegger challenged Cassirer's methodology—and, by the same token, that predominant in the human sciences—it was not because he doubted the possibility of identifying a principle of coherence linking up the different epochs of history that is capable of laying the groundwork for an interpretation of the past. In the framework of an ontology of finitude, the statement, *Dasein ist weltbildend*, or *Dasein* is a world-imaging being, presupposes that the finitude of *Dasein* is fundamentally constitutive of its temporal and historical modes of configuring a world; it is this finitude of existence that, irrespective of ethnological particularity or historical epoch, provides a basis of intelligibility for the implicit lines of continuity linking the different world-images. Heidegger explained in *Sein und Zeit*, following a critical reference to Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*, that the "ordering of world-images" (*Ordnung von Weltbildern*) requires an explication of the "idea of world as such" (*Idee von Welt überhaupt*)—that is, insight into the world-configuring structures of *Dasein*.[17] And on the basis of such insight, Heidegger proposed in his review of Cassirer's *Mythical Thought* that, in the interpretation of myth, the ontology of *Dasein* elaborated in *Sein und Zeit* might be substituted for Cassirer's neo-Kantian epistemology. Heidegger wrote in this vein that "the interpretation of the essence of myth as a possibility of human *Dasein* remains arbitrary and without orientation as long as it is not grounded in a radical ontology of *Dasein*, comprehended in light of the problem of being."[18]

Far more fruitful for the interpretation of the *Weltbild* than Cassirer's epistemology, are for Heidegger the *existentialia* underlying the polarity in the modes of *Dasein*'s finite being-in-the-world, such as the *Faktizität* (facticity) of *Geworfenheit* (being thrown), *Existenz*, and *Verfallenheit* (fallenness). Finite being-in-the-world, which constitutes the implicit lines of continuity that traverse mythical and modern ways of existence, thus

serves as the hermeneutic principle required to make sense of the mythical world-image as well as, more generally, of the world-images predominant in past historical epochs or foreign cultures. In this respect it is striking that Heidegger in his review, like Cassirer in *Mythical Thought*, did not draw any fundamental distinction between myth in contemporary non-Western cultures and myth in far distant epochs. Moreover, the presupposition concerning the interpretability of myth, albeit in terms not of a formal unity of consciousness but of finite *Dasein*, highlights his assumption in this period concerning the lines of geographical and historical continuity—hence a basis for commensurability—running through the most diverse expressions of human existence.

This brings us to our third consideration regarding Heidegger's critique of Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*. If both Cassirer and Heidegger posited the existence of a hermeneutic principle according to which the modern world-image might legitimately interpret mythical conceptions of the world, Heidegger's attempt to shift the foundation of this principle from the formal unity of consciousness to the finite structures of *Dasein* had important consequences for his assumptions concerning how these world-images are related. We have noted that, for Cassirer, the claim that mythical systems may legitimately be interpreted in terms of rational criteria presupposed a progressive movement in the development of mythical systems "toward" rational attitudes, which are capable of advancing a more "truthful" account of the world than myth could ever provide. Judging from Heidegger's notion of the historicity of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*, however, the "ordering of world-images" to which he refers in this work cannot accept the idea of advance or progression in Cassirer's sense. Nowhere does this come to light more clearly than in Heidegger's criticism of Cassirer in his review of *Mythical Thought*, particularly with regard to the use of the theme of "mana" as a designation for the mythical relation to the sacred, which I will briefly discuss before turning to the later period of Cassirer's thought.

In his succinct critique of Cassirer's interpretation of "mana" as a fundamental form of the mythical approach to the sacred, Heidegger drew an important conclusion from his rejection of Cassirer's model of consciousness. For this critique also entailed a rejection of Cassirer's idea of a "process" of mythical thought through which—notably in the mythical comprehension of the sacred as "mana"—the rational faculties implicit in the most rudimentary forms of consciousness encounter inherent limits that gradually lead to the overthrow of mythical modes of thought per se.

Whereas, from Cassirer's perspective, the sacred is gradually displaced in the course of this process, and is no longer centered on objects in the world but directed instead toward a transcendent and ideal source, Heidegger's critique raised doubts about the very significance of such a process. Far more fundamental from Heidegger's perspective was, on the contrary, *Dasein*'s tendency, in the context of *both* modern *and* mythical world-images, to interpret its own existence in terms of the world and thus to neglect the finitude of its being, which radically distinguishes it from the world with which it is preoccupied. Taken in this sense, mythical and modern ways of interpreting the world constitute two different expressions of how being is understood, rooted in identical existential structures of *Dasein* that involve two ways of being thrown (*geworfen*) into and absorbed (*benommen*) by the world. And, the modern world-image, far from having overcome the essential limitations of the mythical world-image—for example, its comprehension of the sacred as "mana"—simply engages different ontic expressions of the same ontological structures or, as comes to light in Heidegger's review, different articulations of *Dasein*'s "thrownness" that govern the modes by which it is absorbed in the world.[19]

In the final analysis, the essential difference between Cassirer's and Heidegger's respective orientations regarding the relation of mythical and modern world-images arises from their radically different presuppositions concerning human historicity. Instead of progression in the historical movement of the mythical process, Heidegger focused his analysis on repetition (*Wiederholung*) of authentic possibilities of existence implicit in the past, revealed through *Dasein*'s capacity for resolute decision in view of its being-toward-death.

Just before his critical allusion to Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*, Heidegger wrote the following in paragraph 11 of *Sein und Zeit:* "Since the positive sciences neither 'can' nor should wait for the ontological work of philosophy, the advance of research will not be brought about in terms of 'progress' (*Fortschritt*), but as repetition (*Wiederholung*) and a more transparent ontological purification of what has been ontically discovered."[20] If the broad orientation of *Sein und Zeit*, and the more specific critique of Cassirer's *Mythical Thought*, hardly elucidated what exactly such a purification of ontic discoveries might mean for the positive sciences, these works did illustrate just how radically Heidegger questioned the role of the positive sciences and Western rationality as a fundamental source of progress.

III

In the final chapter of the *Myth of the State*, entitled "The Technique of Modern Political Myths," and completed during the last months of the Second World War, Cassirer noted that contemporary humanity had learned a "lesson that is very humiliating to our human pride," adding "we have learned that modern man, in spite of his restlessness, and perhaps precisely because of his restlessness, has not really surmounted the condition of savage life."[21]

It was this conviction that led Cassirer, in his last book, to apply his theory of myth not only to far distant epochs and non-Western cultures but equally to contemporary Europe itself. At the very end of his *Mythical Thought*, Cassirer had already asserted that "even after they have been transcended, the productions of myth have by no means lost all meaning and force," and that even in the modern world religious representations hardly seem able to entirely dispense with the vestiges of myth.[22] In keeping with the conviction that modern man had not surmounted the condition of savage life following the experience of Germany in the 1930s and of the Second World War, Cassirer went a good deal further in *The Myth of the State*. He stated that the role of magic and mythology in primitive society "applies equally well to highly advanced stages of man's political life."[23]

Cassirer's affirmation here, however, raises anew the question asked at the outset of our analysis, regarding the principle of interpretation of different historical epochs and cultures and, above all, concerning the *commensurability* of the criteria of judgment that are applied to them. Is it, indeed, legitimate to apply the term "myth" to world-images as heterogeneous as those of preliterate societies and of modern Western cultures? Or is this term simply an abstraction that obscures at least as much as it reveals? These questions are all the more central to our discussion given the critical appraisal of Heidegger's thought that Cassirer provided in this later work, in highlighting Heidegger's responsibility in fueling "modern political myths."

At first sight, there is a striking difference between the modern political myths and the premodern expressions of myth as dealt with by Cassirer in his works of the 1920s. In his view, whereas the myths of preliterate peoples arise spontaneously as the "wild products of an exuberant imagination," modern political myths are "artificial things fabricated by very skillful and cunning artisans."[24] Moreover, in view of the rational-

ized world-image of modern man, these modern mythical fabrications do not draw upon the same kind of comprehension as that found among ancient or preliterate cultures. Modern myths feed on elaborate theoretical orientations—such as Thomas Carlyle's idea of hero worship or Joseph Arthur de Gobineau's speculation on racial inequality—which, Cassirer admits, are ostensibly of a highly sophisticated nature.[25]

This great heterogeneity of premodern and modern political myths admittedly presents a difficult obstacle for Cassirer's analysis, which he attempts to surmount in terms of a key philosophical assertion. This philosophical assertion, I will argue, finds its firmest support in the ethical and political considerations it entails, in relation to which Cassirer engages his analysis of Heidegger.

Cassirer's theoretical justification for his application of myth to an interpretation of modern politics extends and refines the fundamental presupposition concerning the formal unity of consciousness that provided the epistemological bulwark for his earlier philosophy of symbolic forms. We noted above that Cassirer's model of consciousness presupposes a formal unity of the pure intuitive, conceptual, and rational faculties underlying both primitive and modern forms of thought, which vary through symbolic elaboration in terms of divergent world-images. In *The Myth of the State* Cassirer emphasized more centrally than before—correlative to the general continuity in the underlying faculties of consciousness—a persistence of the basic human emotions that give rise to myth. For Cassirer these basic emotions have by no means disappeared in the modern world and, in extreme situations, even lead to the recrudescence of magical rites akin to those of the most primitive societies; and it is this continuity underlying human emotional dispositions that forms the basis for Cassirer's conviction concerning the legitimacy of identifying these modern beliefs as essentially "mythical" in character.

It is beyond the framework of the present paper to provide a detailed account of Cassirer's theory of modern political myths in their relation to other forms of mythical world-images. I will limit my analysis to what I take to be Cassirer's essential argument in this respect, namely, that the emotional dispositions that, in extreme situations, give rise to myth, aim in magical and ritual practices to completely subordinate the individual to collective modes of existence. According to Cassirer's analysis, the attempt by totalitarian regimes to completely draw under their control not only public life but also the private sphere by means of uniformly performed

rituals, magical incantations, and ubiquitous imagery, provides a fruitful illustration of the link between modern political myths and primitive expressions of myth, which likewise subordinate the individual to collective demands. Pursuing a forceful line of analysis, the criterion of commensurability for all forms of mythical world-image that Cassirer establishes is inspired by reflection deeply rooted in a long tradition of Kantian and neo-Kantian ethical and political philosophy. Nowhere does this current of his thought come to the fore more clearly than in his discussion of the modern recrudescence of ritual practices most typical of premodern societies: "The effect of these new rites is obvious. Nothing is more likely to lull asleep all our active forces, our power of judgment and critical discernment, and to take away our feeling of personality and individual responsibility than the steady, uniform, and monotonous performance of the same rites. As a matter of fact in all primitive societies ruled and governed by rites individual responsibility is an unknown thing. What we find here is only a collective responsibility. Not the individuals, but the group is the real 'moral subject'. The clan, the family, and the whole tribe are responsible for the actions of all the members."[26]

In the final analysis, the essential problem posed by the recrudescence of myth is the loss of individual moral judgment and individual freedom. In the Western world, according to Cassirer, the role of reason in the gradual process by which the mythical world-image overcomes its own inherent limitations bears witness to the close connection between the advent of scientific rationality and that of the individual's capacity to freely act in keeping with moral judgment. Indeed, Kant's conviction concerning the intrinsic connection between pure theoretical reason and pure practical reason finds a powerful later justification in Cassirer's theory of myth.

Following this cogent elaboration of his theory of myth, Cassirer's analysis of Heidegger at the very end of *The Myth of the State*, is nonetheless perplexing. Cassirer states that although Heidegger's theories did not necessarily have a direct bearing on the development of political thought in Germany, they do share responsibility for undermining the forces that "could have resisted the modern political myths."[27] And Heidegger's responsibility lies precisely in the elaboration of a philosophical orientation that roots all human understanding in the facticity of a particular condition into which *Dasein* is thrown (*geworfen*), and thereby leaves no place for universally valid truths, posited by reason, which are essential to

autonomous ethical action.[28] Indeed, Cassirer drew the surprising conclusion that this tendency to deny the autonomy of rational standards and to root *Dasein*'s understanding in the factical conditions into which it is thrown in Heidegger's thought is tantamount to historical determinism: "We have to accept the historical conditions of our existence," Cassirer wrote, referring to Heidegger's philosophy, "we can try to understand and to interpret them; but we cannot change them."[29]

This charge of historical determinism in Heidegger reaches to the heart of the divergence between them that I have been trying to draw out. If Heidegger did indeed sharply criticize the assumption of universal validity (*Allgemeingültigkeit*) of rational standards in the Kantian sense, this did not entail the kind of historical determinism that Cassirer attributed to Heidegger's orientation. On the contrary, in *Being and Time* and other contemporary writings of Heidegger, *Dasein* is presented as capable of freely choosing the mode of existence orienting its historicity; free choice in Heidegger's perspective, however, is conceived of not in terms of autonomous action founded on reason in the Kantian and neo-Kantian sense, but in terms of resolute decision in light of *Dasein*'s finite being-toward-death.

On the basis of this remark, it might seem at first glance that Cassirer's cursory interpretation of Heidegger in *The Myth of the State* presents an imprecise account of Heidegger's philosophy. However, Cassirer's interpretation becomes considerably clearer if one recalls the basis of Heidegger's earlier critique of Cassirer in his review of the latter's *Mythical Thought*. In that review Heidegger had challenged Cassirer's reliance on Kantian epistemology, while advancing the claim that a true understanding of myth must be rooted in the ontological interpretation of *Dasein*, which entails an analysis of *Dasein*'s existential structures, and in particular, of the facticity of being thrown (*Geworfenheit*). If Heidegger's analysis does in some way imply the "impossibility of changing historical conditions" it does not suggest, as one might wrongly construe from Cassirer's all too brief statement, that human beings cannot change *any* of the conditions of their historical existence, but rather that—as was shown in the first part of this paper—human historicity for Heidegger does not admit of "progress" beyond the mythical world-image in any fundamental ontological sense. For Cassirer, however, *only* such progress beyond the group constraints imposed by the mythical world-image can lead to freedom in any meaningful sense of the term.

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the fact that Cassirer, in *The Myth of the State*, throws back at Heidegger the latter's own earlier affirmation that only an analysis of the existential structures of *Dasein*, and particularly of "being thrown" (*Geworfenheit*), could provide fundamental insight into myth. In claiming in this later work that a philosophy that roots human understanding primarily in the facticity of "being thrown" can only result in historical determinism, Cassirer was stipulating by implication that Heidegger's existential philosophy, far from providing the key to understanding myth, had itself come to glorify the very loss of freedom that is the primary danger inherent in the mythical world-image Heidegger himself had purported to explain.

Of course, as Cassirer himself acknowledged during the Davos debate, his disagreement with Heidegger did not ultimately admit of any resolution on the basis of purely logical premises. In the final analysis, the divergence between them rested on presuppositions grounded in a decision concerning the very *meaning* of philosophy itself or, as Cassirer summed it up, citing a particularly appropriate aphorism of Fichte: "What philosophy one chooses, depends on what kind of a person (*Mensch*) one is."[30]

NOTES

1. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 37.

2. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), 51–52, idem, "Das mythische Denken" (1928), appendix to *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Gesamtausgabe, 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1991), 265, idem, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, Gesamtausgabe, 27 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1996), 358–362.

3. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2, *Das mythische Denken* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 78f; in the English-language edition, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 60f.

4. Martin Heidegger, "E. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 2. Teil: *Das mythische Denken*" (1928), in *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, 255.

5. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*. vol. 1, *Die Sprache* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1953), 22; the English-language edition is *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 89. In this context Cassirer writes: "In the symbolic function of consciousness—as it operates in language, in art, in myth—certain unchanging fundamental forms (*gleichbleibende Grundgestalten*), some of a conceptual and some of a purely sensory nature, disengage themselves from the stream of consciousness; the flux

of contents is replaced by a self-contained and enduring unity of form." See also Cassirer, "Das mythische Denken," 78f (Manheim trans., 60f).

6. Cassirer, "Das mythische Denken," 22–35; Cassirer, *Die Sprache*, 3–41 (Manheim trans., 73–105). For Cassirer it is precisely this symbolic representation that in the history of Western thought accounts, for example, for the distinction between Euclidean and Einsteinian interpretations of mathematics. Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Zur Einstein'schen Relativitätstheorie: Erkenntnistheoretische Betrachtungen* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1921), 101.

7. Cassirer, *Das mythische Denken*, 89 (Manheim trans., 69).

8. Cassirer, *Das mythische Denken*, 147 (Manheim trans., 120).

9. Cassirer, *Die Sprache*, 22 (Manheim ed., 89).

10. Cassirer, *Das mythische Denken*, 100–103 (Manheim trans., 79–82).

11. Ibid., 100 (Manheim trans., 79f).

12. Heidegger, "Das mythische Denken," 265. In his 1928–1929 Freiburg course lectures *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, Heidegger, referring both to Cassirer's *Das mythische Denken* and to his own review of this work published a few months earlier, criticized what he took to be the inadequacy of Cassirer's interpretation of myth as the expression of a determinate "attitude of consciousness" (*Bewußtseinshaltung*) for understanding the truth of myth (*Wahrheit des Mythos*). He stipulated that in this regard Cassirer's "specifically Kantian standpoint had prevented him from seeing this problem." Heidegger, *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, 362.

13. Ernst Cassirer, "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik," *Kant-Studien* 36 (1931): 1–26.

14. Heidegger, "Das mythische Denken," 259.

15. Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), and idem, *Heidegger et son siècle: Temps de l'Etre, temps de l'histoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995).

16. Martin Heidegger, "Vom Wesen des Grundes," *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1967), 55, idem, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik:Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit*, Gesamtausgabe, 29–30 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983), 261f.

17. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 51–52.

18. Heidegger, "Das mythische Denken," 265.

19. Ibid., 267–269.

20. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 51.

21. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 285–286.

22. Cassirer, *Das mythische Denken*, 291, 296 (Manheim trans., 243, 247–248).

23. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 279.

24. Ibid., 282.

25. Ibid., 281.

26. Ibid., 284–85.

27. Ibid., 293.

28. This critique of Heidegger's philosophy in view of his attempt to ground rational faculties in the temporalizing modes of *Dasein*, already came to the fore in Cassirer's comments at the Davos debate and in his review of Heidegger's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. In this review, he criticized Heidegger's interpretation of Kant as being

unable to account for the Kantian moral philosophy based upon the idea of free action in accordance with universally valid rational standards. For this reason, Cassirer accused Heidegger of proposing, not an *ontology* in the true sense of the word, but rather a relativistic *anthropology*. Cassirer, "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik." I have dealt with this theme in greater detail in *Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, 236–242.

29. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 293.

30. Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, "Davoser Vorträge" in Heidegger, to *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, appendix, 292.

PART III

Ramifications

SYMBOL, HISTORY, POLITICS

EIGHT

The Myth of the State Revisited

Ernst Cassirer and Modern Political Theory

JOSEPH MALI

I

In her memoir *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer,* Toni Cassirer recalls an incident that occurred in Hamburg in June 1922—the first occasion on which she encountered anti-Semitism in its new, nationalistic guise.[1] One day, while she and her father were sitting in their garden, their neighbors' seven-year-old son came out and began to disturb them. After some polite but futile attempts to get him to leave Toni Cassirer finally raised her voice and sent the boy back home—whereupon his father came out and protested angrily. When Toni Cassirer replied that she had merely reacted to the boy's provocation, and, moreover, that they, the Cassirers, had never disturbed their neighbors, the latter retorted with these words: "Do you really believe that you don't disturb us?! . . . Just the sight of you!"—and then added, "Sie gehören ja alle nach Palästina!" (You all belong in Palestine!). When Ernst Cassirer heard of this he was deeply shocked. And yet, in the letter that he sent to the neighbor, he kept his anger under control: though he used very strong terms he protested only against the improper actions—not the words—of the neighbor, namely, that he had dared to approach a lady to whom he had not been previously introduced or that he had transgressed the "boundaries of neighborly relations."

Cassirer's reaction in this case is characteristic: it attests to his undying serenity and propriety, to the fact that in his life (and work) form preceded and set up the norm. It was the same heightened attention to formal improprieties in social and political affairs that eleven years later enabled him to realize before most of his fellow German intellectuals, the dreadful meanings and implications of the new Nazi ideology.

When he read in the newspaper an official declaration that "Recht ist, was dem Führer dient" (Law is what serves the Führer) he said that if by the next morning all German jurists did not rise up against this new regulation, Germany was doomed. When no one protested he resolved to leave Germany immediately, and so he did. On March 12, 1933, he departed from Hamburg, knowing—and warning his friends—that much worse things were yet to happen. According to Toni Cassirer, it was during those days that Cassirer conceived of the notion of *The Myth of the State*, a work that he eventually completed shortly before his death in April 1945.[2]

However, considering the circumstances in which Cassirer acted in 1922, his reaction to his neighbor's charge also reveals what he was unable or unwilling to recognize: the popular anti-Semitic sentiments in Germany that were then already galvanized by the mythical-ideological aspiration to purify Germany of its Jews. This obliviousness is all the more significant when we recall that during those days Cassirer was working at the Warburg Library on the phenomenology of myth. Here, then, was a scholar immensely learned in all notions, theories, and manifestations of myth, who would not recognize a myth, or at least a particular kind of myth, when he encountered it, namely, the political myth. Furthermore, Cassirer was as oblivious to the German political myth as he was to the Jewish political myth, so poignantly—even if maliciously—expressed by their neighbor: that the Jews belong in Palestine. The Cassirers' honest protestation to this allegation—"Unser Vaterland war Deutschland" (Our fatherland was Germany) writes Toni Cassirer, whereas Palestine was the country of those Jews who were bound to the "religious tradition" or of Polish and Russian refugees who sought "to find there a new Vaterland"[3]—also enhances the impression that, at that time, Cassirer was not yet aware of the significance of political myth—to his life as well as to his work. As I shall argue in this paper, this initial incomprehension of political myth was not accidental, nor was it merely typical of German Jews at the time; rather, it betrays a basic intellectual disposition—a certain kind of German Jewish *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment)—that may have made Cassirer immune, for better and worse, to the power of myth.

This inadequacy is evident in Cassirer's theoretical—all too theoretical—works on myth, most notably in his last work, *The Myth of the State*, and precisely because in this work Cassirer seems to have become acutely aware of that problem. Toward the end of his book Cassirer admits that

in it he had sought to rectify the fallacies of his earlier work on myth, fallacies that were typical among the liberal intellectuals, or *Vernunftrepublikaner,* in Weimar Germany: "When we first heard of the political myths we found them so absurd and incongruous, so fantastic and ludicrous that we could hardly be prevailed upon to take them seriously. By now it has become clear to us that this was a great mistake. We should not commit the same error a second time. We should carefully study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of the political myths."[4] In what follows, I would like to inquire whether, and to what extent, Cassirer fulfilled the task he had set for himself and for modern political theorists. For Cassirer's urgent queries still resound in the debate over the origins and functions of myths in the modern polity. His seminal contribution to this discussion has been duly recognized, even though (as we shall see) his actual theories, let alone auguries, about the fatalistic meanings and implications of political mythology in modern civilization have lost much of their original cogency. Thus, in his study *Political Myth* Henry Tudor writes, "The theorist who, more than any other, has drawn attention to the use of myths in contemporary politics is Ernst Cassirer. Indeed, as a study of political myths, his *The Myth of the State* has yet to be superseded."[5] These compliments notwithstanding, Tudor goes on to raise some doubts regarding the accuracy of Cassirer's observations and interpretations of modern political mythology, and principally regarding his apparent puzzlement that this mythology is still so viable in this age of reason. These fallacies, Tudor argues, stem from Cassirer's inadequate conception of myth as essentially a "primitive" kind of consciousness. This conception, which Cassirer developed already in his studies of myth in the 1920s, ultimately led him to conceive of any "modern" form of myth-making as some kind of "sudden" mental "aberration" or "reversion," and thereby caused him—as Tudor put it—"to complicate and mystify matters which prove, on inspection, to be perfectly straightforward."[6] All the more so because, as Tudor would have it, "myth-making is characteristic of culture as such and is no more a reversion to 'the first rudimentary stages of human culture' than are dancing, painting and architecture."[7]

Contrary to what Tudor implies, Cassirer was not so oblivious to the ubiquity of myth. Unlike the more radical proponents of the Enlightenment, Cassirer maintained that "Myth is, in fact, not only a transient but a permanent element in human culture. Man is not exclusively a

rational animal, he is and remains a mythical animal."[8] On these premises he concluded that any attempt at a liquidation of mythology was not only futile but also harmful to our cultural history, a deprivation of its origins and potentialities. And yet, Cassirer's extreme aversion to the very notion and actual manifestations of *political* myth has rendered his work rather outmoded to modern theorists in the humanities and social sciences, who now treat myth more objectively, and on the whole more positively, as an inevitable, and even valuable, source of personal and collective identities. For political myths are now commonly defined not as merely and utterly "fictional" stories but rather as "foundational" stories, namely, as stories that purport to explain the present in terms of some momentous event that occurred in the past. Through their commemoration in the religious and national traditions of society they enhance its moral norms and social forms of life, and thereby create a sense of historical continuity and unity, which is crucial to any political community, especially in our post-traditional age. As Anthony Smith has observed, although "civic" elements "are obviously required to maintain a nation in the modern world, with its particular complex of economic and political conditions, ethnic profiles and identities are increasingly sought, if only to stem the tide of rationalization and disenchantment. It is to their ethnic symbols, values, myths and memories that so many populations turn for inspiration and guidance, not in the everyday, practical business of running a state, but for that sense of fraternity and heroism which will enable them to conduct their affairs successfully."[9]

Following on these astute observations, I would like to reassess Cassirer's *Myth of the State* and its legacy in modern political theory. My main contention will be that, much as he had contributed to the epochal discovery of myth as a "new force" in political reality, Cassirer ultimately failed to realize the full meanings and implications of this discovery, namely, he failed to recognize the fact that modern political theorists now commonly assert: that myth is crucial to the constitution of modern political communities—and precisely because they are modern. Why has myth become so crucial in—and to—modern society? And why, of all modern societies, was it so sharply expressed, and explained, in Germany? What, if any, contribution had Cassirer made to it? And why did he ultimately turn against it? In order to clarify these issues we should examine the spiritual and intellectual conditions in Germany at the end of the First World War.[10]

II

In 1918 Max Weber delivered his famous lecture "Science as a Vocation" at the University of Munich. In that lecture he characterized the spiritual predicament of modern society in words that have become canonical in all subsequent discussions of modernity:

> The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world." Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human life . . . It is not accidental that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic pneuma, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together.[11]

Weber's aim in this lecture was not only to refute the positivistic doctrines that had reduced life and history to such dull regularities, but also to rebut the various idealistic movements that flourished in Germany in the first decades of the century. He was particularly concerned to warn his listeners of such wayward followers of Nietzsche as Stefan George whose *Kreis* exemplified, for Weber, those "smallest and intimate circles" where "prophetic" visions could still evoke majestic emotions and actions. Yet, although Weber opposed George and other proponents of "modern intellectual romanticism of the irrational," he realized that George's poetry and policy, which were directed at the reactivation of myth, were not just efficient but also pertinent to an age that has become again so susceptible to myth—through such modern developments as nationalism, commercialism, or aestheticism.[12] As Weber observed:

> We live as did the ancients when their world was not as yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity. Fate, and certainly not "science," holds sway over these gods and their struggles . . . Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal

> forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.[13]

Weber's words proved to be prophetic for Weimar Germany. During that period myth became a category of absolute conceptual and historical primacy in all cultural and political ideologies, as well as in critical theoretical studies of them across the humanities and social sciences.[14] The emergence of new human sciences like sociology, anthropology, psychology—along with the modernist movements in the arts—inspired many German scholars to inquire under what psychological and historical conditions certain mythopoeic modes of political comprehension and action were created and why they still persist in our personal and collective memories.

According to George Mosse, this new realization of the potency of myth in social life and history was peculiar to scholars like Sigmund Freud, Aby Warburg, and Ernst Cassirer, whom Mosse characterizes as "German Jews beyond Judaism." These scholars were "estranged" from the *völkische* (folk) alliances of their fellow German mythologists and could thus examine the very notion and various manifestations of myth from more critical perspectives: "Their confrontation with the irrational forces of the age was destined to reinvigorate whole fields of study and to extend the boundaries of traditional disciplines, founding a new kind of cultural history. Scholarship of this type rediscovered the importance of myth as determining the actions of men and societies . . . Myth was no longer confined to the thought of primitive man but was treated as a present concern, an enemy to be defeated and exorcised."[15]

This general observation aptly defines Cassirer's intellectual development as a critical theorist of myth from the early 1920s until the end of his life. Though his initial interest in myth was epistemological—his numerous references to anthropological, sociological, and psychological works on myth make clear that he perceived myth not only as a form of observation (*Anschauungsform*) and cognition (*Denkform*) but primarily as a "form of life" (*Lebensform*). As he would later put it in his *Essay on Man:* "Myth is not a system of dogmatic creeds. It consists much more in actions than in mere images and representations."[16] Cassirer displays this truism on almost every page of the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, entitled *Mythical Thought*, which was published in 1925. "The problem is not the material content of mythology, but the intensity

with which it is experienced, with which it is *believed*—as only something endowed with objective reality can be believed. The basic fact of mythical consciousness suffices to frustrate any attempt to seek its ultimate source in our invention—whether poetic or philosophical."[17] Note that at this stage, Cassirer did not yet consider the possibility of *political* invention or manipulation of mythology—which would become the central argument of his *Myth of the State*.[18] Moreover, during the 1920s Cassirer was rather impervious to the acute political meanings and implications of his own theories in Germany. Though he duly noted that "it is inconceivable that a nation should exist without a mythology," he largely obeyed the Weberian rules of *Gelehrtenpolitik* (academic politics), that is, not mixing scientific, value-free knowledge with contemporary events. Thus, to cite another example from that book, in commenting on the swastika he merely observed that this "earliest form of the four-pronged cross" symbolizes "primeval religious-cosmic motifs" that are to be found in various religions.[19] And this was at a time when the swastika had already acquired in Germany some distinct nationalistic meanings.

It was primarily this aloof and excessively "conceptual" treatment of myth in Cassirer's work that so irritated Walter Benjamin. Upon reading Cassirer's *Begriffsform im mythischen Denken* (*Conceptual Form in Mythical Thought*) in 1925, Benjamin wrote in a letter to Hugo von Hofmannstahl that he "remained unconvinced that it is feasible not only to attempt to present mythical thought in concepts—that is, critically—but also to illuminate it adequately in contrast with what is conceptual."[20] As this letter implies, Benjamin pursued a different method in his own work on myth, seeking "to illuminate it adequately"; it was a method, which in tacit opposition to Cassirer and like-minded theorists of myth, he called "dialectical enchantment" and consisted in the methodical attempt to reveal by careful experiential (rather than conceptual) immersion in mythopoeic activities (like dream visions, surrealistic trances, mystical revelations, infantile or insane delusions, or drug-induced hallucinations) the basic mythological compulsions that still operate in all human affairs, most visibly so in the materialistic and artistic productions of modern society (as can be seen in commercial advertisements).[21] Benjamin's life-long attraction to the Romantic legacy in Germany from Friedrich Schlegel to Stefan George; his intellectual attachment to writers like Charles Baudelaire, Franz Kafka, and Louis Aragon, and to such great discoverers of ancient mythologies from Pausanias through Johann Jakob Bachofen to Walter Lehmann

and Gershom Scholem; and above all his own great works on myth—culminating in the *Passagen-Werk*, all attest to his realization (first detected in Aragon's *Paris Peasant*) that we live in "modern mythology." "But," he observed, "it is precisely modernity that is always quoting primeval history [*Urgeschichte*],"[22] and he made clear why: because the dialectical tension in human life and history requires that the "disenchantment of the world," as Weber defined modernity, be revoked (*aufgehoben*) by re-enchantment.[23]

Benjamin's notions left a deep and lasting impression on theorists of modernity, firstly and most strongly on Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, whose *Dialektik der Aufklärung* appeared in 1946—the very same year in which Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* was published (posthumously). Setting out from the philosophical-historical assumption—drawn from a brilliant allegorical interpretation of Homer—that "myth is already enlightenment, and that enlightenment harks back to myth,"[24] Adorno and Horkheimer inverted the basic assumption of the German liberal ideology of Enlightenment from Kant to Cassirer. For contrary to Kant's famous conception of Enlightenment as a "liberation" from infantile primitive convictions—a presumption which resounds in Cassirer's definition of human culture as "the process of man's progressive self-liberation"[25]—Adorno and Horkheimer claimed that a true enlightenment is not so much (or at all) a liberation *from* myth, which might result in utter profanity and brutal instrumentality, but rather a liberation *through* myth, such as might still retain myth as a source of meaning. As Jürgen Habermas has shown, this radical revision of the Enlightenment owed much to Nietzsche, who sought to counter the positivistic ideology of history in his time by defying its most essential principle of progress—that of the transition from myth to reason. Whereas his age regarded the gradual emancipation from mythological beliefs and truths to be a process of enlightenment, Nietzsche saw it as a process of vulgar trivialization and profanation of the world, which ultimately left modern man not really more enlightened—but only more disenchanted about it, for "without myth every culture loses the healthy power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement."[26] It remained for another great German Jewish scholar of myth, Hans Blumenberg, to draw the conclusion: "Only work *on* myth, even if it is the work of finally reducing it—makes the work *of* myth manifest."[27]

Bearing in mind that Blumenberg directed his *Work on Myth* against Cassirer's works on myth[28]—his notions are particularly pertinent to

our discussion. Blumenberg honors Cassirer as the first modern theorist who has fully acknowledged myth as a specific form of knowledge, replete with its own epistemic, aesthetic, and linguistic configurations. But he criticizes Cassirer's presumption, common to all adherents of the Enlightenment, that as a prior and inferior form of knowledge myth has become obsolete with the advancement of philosophy and science in the age of Enlightenment. Blumenberg rejects this presumption: "Nothing surprised the promoters of the Enlightenment more, and left them standing more incredulously before the failure of what they thought were their ultimate exertions, than the survival of the contemptible old stories—the continuation of work on myth."[29] This work on myth attests to the work of myth, namely, to the fact that myth still operates in our human minds and cultures as a source of meaning. Like Goethe, Nietzsche, or some members of the Frankfurt school before him, Blumenberg too maintains that myth is already—and always—enlightenment, insofar as it reduces the "absolutism of reality" to the "absolutism of humanity," allowing us, as it were, to conceive of total reality in our human, all too human, terms. The operation of myth in science is thus akin to the operation of metaphor in language: it is, in Nietzsche's words, "a representative image standing concretely before man in lieu of a concept." The permanent advancement of reason thus implies the continuation of myth. Hence, where Cassirer dismissed any modern predilection to myth as "regression," Blumenberg claims that it might be a sign of "progression," insisting, however, on the dialectical movement of this process.

On Blumenberg's terms, then, I can restate my argument as follows: Cassirer, for all his immense work *on* myth, failed to account for the work *of* myth, because he did not grasp its essentially *dialectical* operation in human life and history. The fact that the major proponents of this dialectical conception of myth in the 1920s and beyond were fellow German Jewish scholars—like Benjamin, Scholem, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Ernst Kantorowicz, and others—is significant. For whereas Cassirer molded his own life and works on the strict principles of *Aufklärung*, consciously avoiding any mythological forms of "intoxication"—be they, in his life, religion and nation, or, in his work, association and narration—the above-mentioned scholars were exposed, in their lives and works, to cultural-political ideologies that were distinctly mythological. What finally awakened Cassirer from his formal conception of mythology was not a new philosophical discovery but rather a political

realization that in Germany of the early 1930s mythology had become synonymous with Nazi ideology.

III

Of all modern political ideologies, National Socialism was the most mythological: the employment of myth in this movement was not merely practical, but theoretical. In *Der Mythus des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (*The Myth of the Twentieth Century*)—which alongside Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was generally accepted as the official proclamation of the Nazi ideology—Alfred Rosenberg defined myth as a uniquely "German" form of expression that was prior—and superior—to the decadent forms of Western civilization.[30] His new *Mythus* was a "myth of the blood," an impulsion of primeval biological and mystical propensities inherent in the German *Volk*, which was destined to vanquish the classical and Christian myths and replace their old moral fictions with new racial convictions. "The new *Mythus* and the power to create a type cannot in any way be refuted," wrote Rosenberg, "they will establish themselves and they will create facts."[31] Indeed they did. The Nazification of Germany proceeded through the mythologization of its main national traditions and institutions.

In *The Myth of the State* Cassirer sought to reveal the intellectual origins of this cultural-political mutation. His late realization in that book, that "it is beyond the power of philosophy to destroy the power of political myths," that they are "invulnerable" to rational arguments and historical refutations, may explain his resolution to fight this "most dangerous enemy" of reason and civilization with so much—perhaps too much—vigor.[32] Like other scholars at the time—one thinks of Karl Popper or A. J. P. Taylor—Cassirer consciously wrote a book that was meant to contribute to the "war effort." Whereas in his works of the 1920s he treated myth rather objectively, even positively, and in any case analyzed and described it in the neutral terms of modern human sciences, he now discarded his usual contemplative terms for combative terms like these:

> In politics we are always living on volcanic soil. We must be prepared for abrupt convulsions and eruptions. In all critical moments of man's social life, the rational forces that resist the rise of old mythical conceptions are no longer sure of themselves. In these moments the time for myth has

> come again. For myth has not really been vanquished and subjugated. It is always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity. This hour comes as soon as the other binding forces of man's social life, for one reason or another, lose their strength and are no longer able to combat the demonic mythical powers . . . The political myths acted in the same way as a serpent that tries to paralyze its victims before attacking them. Men fell victims to them without any serious resistance. They were vanquished and subdued before they realized what actually happened.[33]

Now, even if we grant that Cassirer employed these metaphorical terms as a rhetorical means, his choice of such diabolical and hysterical terms implies that he now identified all myths with the Nazi *Mythus*. So much so, in fact, that in his new conception of myth as something utterly aboriginal and irrational, Cassirer appears to have adopted—however inadvertently—the Nazi (Rosenberg's) definition of myth.[34] For, much like the Nazis—even if in order to combat them—Cassirer too now confined myth solely to manifestations of primeval compulsions in social-political reality. In so doing Cassirer ignored other, "higher," forms of mythopoeic manifestations—like the images and tales of classical antiquity, or the Biblical figures, events, and visions that had commonly created and still sustain the fundamental ethical norms and aesthetic forms of Western civilization. He decided to fight *against* myth rather than *over* myth. This latter option was taken by Thomas Mann. From the mid-1920s, when he first encountered the new *völkische* "interpretation" of mythology of Alfred Baeumler and other Nazi ideologists, Mann resolved (as he stated later) to "have myth taken out of Fascist hands and humanized down to the last recess of its language."[35] He accomplished this task in his "mythical novel" *Joseph and His Brothers*, in which he recounted why and how certain mythological creations—like religious beliefs and rites, moral inhibitions, or social conventions—had evolved and become crucial for our civilization.

However, the main problem with Cassirer's book was not so much ideological as methodological. Peter Gay's contention that Cassirer did not conduct any "*social* history of ideas"[36] is particularly obvious in the case of *The Myth of the State*, where Cassirer did not really examine any actual myths of the state, not even those of the Nazis, but rather theories about them. He thus produced a rather immaterial book, an idle exercise in philosophical—instead of political—history. Yet even as such the

book is much too idle. In his discussion of modern theorists of myth Cassirer concentrates on a minor figure like Thomas Carlyle, whose theory is rather insignificant in itself and irrelevant to the Nazi ideology; and he completely ignores major figures like Nietzsche and Sorel, whose theories of political mythology are immensely important, not least because they have inspired so many radical ideologists from both the left and the right, including some prominent Fascists and Nazis. In any case, even if we grant that the theories of Carlyle, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, and Hegel merit so much attention, the question remains whether their—or any other—theories are pertinent to the actual political mythologies of the twentieth century. As George Sabine pointed out, "it is hard to believe that the three men mentioned were so solvent of sufficient force to bring about the disruption of European culture, when it suffered the stresses and strains of the period after the First World War."[37] In order to explain the fascination of the myth of the state in modernity it was necessary to probe deeper layers of our consciousness and cultures—primarily the Christian ideas of the polity, which are hardly mentioned in Cassirer's account.

The historian Ernst H. Kantorowicz realized as much in his great book *The King's Two Bodies*, in which he sought to discover the origins and meanings of the modern notion of the state in medieval political theology.[38] This task, he noted, bears on "the problem of what has been called 'The Myth of the State' (Ernst Cassirer)."[39] Kantorowicz's influential study warrants particular attention because, much like Cassirer, but ultimately against him, Kantorowicz too was forced to rethink his early work *on* myth by the actual work *of* myth in modern German history.[40] For in 1927, while a follower of Stefan George, Kantorowicz published a famous historical biography *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite* (*Friedrich the Second*) in which he created what he himself had termed *Mythenschau* (mythical show). He presented the medieval emperor as a mythical hero, a model *Führer* for the new Germany, before it actually got one.[41] Fifty years later, in *The King's Two Bodies*, Kantorowicz reexamined the particular case of Friedrich and the whole problem of political mythology—and he did so by means of critical engagement with the ideological and methodological premises of Cassirer's work.

Thus, already in the introduction Kantorowicz makes clear that his work differs from "the all-too-sweeping and ambitious studies in the history of ideas," by which he obviously also meant Cassirer's work, in that

it is strictly historical, dealing with a specific myth of the state and with its "transformations, implications, and radiations" in European political history.[42] Whereas Cassirer was committed to the liberal philosophy of the Enlightenment and therefore sought to edify an ever more rational conception and organization of the state, Kantorowicz was rooted in the metaphysical theology of the Middle Ages, that is, he sought to reveal the mythopoeic beliefs and traditions that have made up and sustain the state. Kantorowicz thus set out to trace the history of the notion of the state as a corporation. He found its origins in the legal formulations of the political theories of the later Middle Ages, principally in the notion that the king has two bodies: one that is physical and dies with him, and the other, which is mystical and never dies. His main contention was that the political notion of the state as a mystical body of the king grew out of the theological notion of the Church as the "corpus mysticum" of Christ, and that the political notion of the king's body proved to be equally effective in securing the unity and continuity of the secular organization in the face of social divisions and historical ruptures. According to Kantorowicz, this "mystic fiction" served not only the legal theorists of the medieval monarchies but also subsequent theorists of the state, and it survived in many modern political theories that deified the state, most notoriously in the Nazi ideology. Kantorowicz duly mentions "the horrifying experience of our own time in which whole nations, the largest and the smallest, fell prey to the weirdest dogmas and in which political theologisms became genuine obsessions defying in many cases the rudiments of human and political reason."[43] The difference between Kantorowicz's conception of the myth of the state and Cassirer's is obvious: not only is it theological (as any real myth must be) rather than philosophical, but it is also actual and historical: the notion of the "king's two bodies" really animated and affected political reality, whereas Martin Heidegger's notion of the *Geworfenheit* (being thrown) of man, on which Cassirer dwells, was known to very few if any intellectuals, many of whom may have been Nazis—yet even then, they surely had other sources for their political mythology.

The same methodological fallacy is evident also in the actual explanation that Cassirer offered for the main problem of his book. His assertion that Nazi myths were inauthentic, namely, that they were "made according to plan . . . fabricated by very skillful and cunning artisans"[44] is ingenious, and indeed might be seen as a major—perhaps the first—contribution to what Hobsbawm and other theorists of nationalism call

"the invention of tradition."[45] Similarly, his observation that in this age of modern technology in mass communication "myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods of any other modern weapon" might well be correct, even if it runs counter to what he himself had written—correctly in my view—two decades earlier, in his *Mythical Thought*, namely, that "no one who understands what a mythology means to a people, what inner power it possesses over that people and what reality it manifests therein, will say that mythology, any more than language, was invented by individuals."[46] As in the case of so many other theories of "manipulation" forged by Marxists, Frankfurt school critical theorists, or similar experts on the "masses"—Cassirer's theory does not quite explain how these new myths, if they were indeed mere fabrications and inventions by the "rulers," came to be believed by so many very rational people. As the preeminent scholar of nationalism Hans Kohn implied in his review of *The Myth of the State:* Cassirer should have taken national myths as seriously as those who believe in them do. According to Kohn these political myths were (or could be interpreted as) intellectual reactions to the crises of European societies in the age of revolution; in other words, they were authentic (even when horrific) attempts to recreate political integration and legitimization.[47] In another review of the book Leo Strauss raised similar objections, arguing that the main question was not how the Nazis had used myth but rather why so many people had become so susceptible to it.[48] In the same vein, albeit in much harsher terms, Hermann Lübbe has argued that Cassirer failed to deal with modern political mythologies in adequate terms—most notably in his treatment of Rosenberg's *Mythus:* "The arguments for its rejection seem trivial. Nontrivial would be the arguments that would explain to us its engrossing political efficacy."[49] Lübbe thus opines that, on the whole, Cassirer was much *too* clear about this (and any other) issue, much too certain in his philosophical judgments, as if all the catastrophes of modern civilization had not really shaken his liberal assumptions about human life and history. He certainly adhered to his own rational judgments on the irrationality of myth.

For, much as Cassirer has written and warned against "the preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought" in modern cultural and political ideologies, and particularly among German intellectuals, he never once stopped to inquire whether he himself may have been affected by mythical conceptions. Unlike other critical theorists of myth from Plato to Marx, who readily revealed their own obsession and fascination

with myth, Cassirer discerned the "mythical" only in his adversaries.[50] Calling to mind the famous words of Claude Lévi-Strauss—that his aim was "to show not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds [*les mythes se pensent dans les hommes*] without their being aware of the fact"[51]—it seems that Cassirer was not really aware of the mythical compulsions in his own life and works and was therefore unable to perceive the dialectical operation of myth in other people's theories and histories. In what follows I shall demonstrate this assertion by one example: Cassirer's (mis)interpretation of the notion and function of myth in Machiavelli's political theory. In this case, I shall argue, Cassirer failed to discern the essential connection between the ethical and the mythical in the constitution of political communities like the nation, state, or nation-state.

IV

The discussion of Machiavelli occupies the central—and by far the largest—part in Cassirer's philosophical history, *The Myth of the State*. It comprises three chapters (10–12) and is forty-seven pages long (compared with twenty-five on Plato, or twenty-nine on Hegel). The main reason for all this attention is the fact that "Machiavelli wrote not for Italy nor even for his own epoch, but for the world—and the world listened to him," and his main message, in Cassirer's view, was that of radical secularization.[52] Whereas political theorists from Plato to Dante still conceived of the state in idealistic and holistic terms, for Machiavelli "the state is entirely independent; but at the same time it is completely isolated. The sharp knife of Machiavelli's thought has cut off all the threads by which in former generations the state was fastened to the organic whole of human existence. The political world has lost its connection not only with religion and metaphysics but also with all other forms of man's ethical and cultural life. It stands alone—in an empty space."[53] Cassirer is genuinely ambivalent in his appreciation of Machiavelli. While he duly admires the courageous attempt to dissociate the state from all its mythical relations, he is also acutely aware of "the most dangerous consequences" of this resolution, namely, that political life is therefore devoid of any moral inhibitions.[54] The problem, in other words, is the one raised above: the essential connection between the ethical and the mythical in political associations. Cassirer does not deal directly with this problem, mainly

because he is primarily concerned with the Machiavelli of *The Prince* rather than with the Machiavelli of the *Discourses*, where this problem is more clearly elaborated by Machiavelli, but also because Cassirer does not think that this was a real problem for Machiavelli. This becomes clear in his lengthy discussion, "The Moral Problem in Machiavelli," where he portrays Machiavelli as an essentially amoral political thinker, a theorist who did not so much despise morality as ignore it.

Cassirer, however, could not simply ignore Machiavelli's passionate exhortation of the moral values and lessons culled from classical antiquity, principally from the Roman philosophical-historical tradition of civic humanism, which Machiavelli commonly designated with the term *virtù*. Whereas modern Machiavellian scholars seek to accommodate the Machiavelli of *The Prince* with that of the *Discourses* and of the *Florentine Histories*—to show, in Quentin Skinner's terms, how "the adviser to princes" matured into "the philosopher of liberty" and "the historian of Florence"[55]—Cassirer resolved to dissociate them: "Unlike many other thinkers of the Renaissance he did not cherish the hope of restoring the life of the ancients. The Roman Republic was founded upon the Roman *virtù* —and this *virtù* is lost, once and for all. The attempt to resuscitate ancient political life appeared to Machiavelli as idle dreams . . . In Italian life of the fifteenth century Machiavelli saw nothing to encourage his republican ideals."[56] This observation practically ignores the entire historical-political philosophy of the *Discourses*, so poignantly indicated by Machiavelli in the preface to that work, where he expresses his "astonishment and grief" that the virtuous actions performed by the heroes of antiquity are "rather admired than imitated." Moreover, it obscures the fact that even in *The Prince* Machiavelli still held to the basic Roman ideology of virtuous policy. He indeed no longer believed in the applicability of the specific classical virtues to the modern polity, but he still believed that, as in classical antiquity, so too in the modern polity there must be certain virtues by which all the citizens must abide. To sum up: even if Cassirer was right to portray Machiavelli as the fiercest opponent of "the myth of the state," he still had to account for the fact that, at the same time, Machiavelli was equally fierce in his endorsement of "the myths of the state."

In order to resolve this apparent anomaly, Cassirer sought to show that Machiavelli used myths in order subvert their meanings and implications, and this was also the policy that Machiavelli recommended for princes and republican governments in their states. Cassirer's most effective argu-

ment for (and from) Machiavelli's antimythical policy comes at the end of his discussion, where he offers a brilliant interpretation of the notion of *fortuna* in Machiavelli's world. This classical goddess figures prominently in Machiavelli's writings as the capricious deity that rules human life by irrational and impersonal measures, and thus becomes the quintessential myth of "myth." Cassirer argues, convincingly, that, unlike and against many Renaissance sages who still adhered to astrological and other mythological deities, Machiavelli did not yield to this goddess or "to any sort of fatalism."[57] Over against this force he revived the notion of *virtù*, which in classical Roman civilization signified some distinct human—primarily virile—qualities like courage, fortitude, or comradeship, that any man (*vir*) ought to possess in order to counter *fortuna*.[58] Cassirer thus sums up Machiavelli's teaching as follows: "The power of Fortune is great and incalculable, but it is not irresistible. If it seems to be irresistible it is the fault of man who does not use his own forces, who is too timid to take arms against Fortune."[59]

Now, Cassirer's discussion of the notion of *virtù* in Machiavelli, though generally correct, is nevertheless marred by some curious, albeit characteristic, partialities. Above all, those that pertain to the apparent opposition between *virtù* and myth. For as Machiavelli and the many commentators on his work make clear, the classical ethical qualities connoted by *virtù* were established—and are to be regained—primarily through the narration of mythical histories. That is how the Romans initiated their virtues in their educational and national lore of heroic legends, and that is how Machiavelli sought to reaffirm them in Florentine culture through his own *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*—the classic source of such mythical histories. Livy's famous pronouncement in the preface to his *History of Rome* resounds throughout Machiavelli's discourses on this work:

> Such traditions as belong to the time before the city was founded, or rather was presently to be founded, and are rather adorned with poetic legends than based on trustworthy historical proofs, I propose neither to affirm nor to refute. It is the privilege of antiquity to mingle divine things with human, and so to add dignity to the beginnings of cities; and if any people ought to be allowed to consecrate their origins and refer them to a divine source, so great is the military glory of the Roman People that when they profess that their Father and the Father of their Founder was none other than Mars, the nations of the earth may well submit to this also with as

> good a grace as they submit to Rome's dominion. But to such legends as these, however they shall be regarded and judged, I shall, for my own part, attach no great importance.[60]

Machiavelli, for *his* part, could not just ignore the question that Livy had posed (but then all too easily waved off)—as to how "such legends as these . . . shall be regarded and judged." All the more so because what Livy seems only to have intuited, but could not yet fully realize, has now become for Machiavelli—and subsequently for all modern humanists—a major claim in social and political studies, namely, that in order to know who the Romans really were, the historian must know who they thought they really were and where they thought they came from and were going. And the best, perhaps the only, way to get this knowledge is to take their historical myths seriously. Hence in this lies Machiavelli's decision to concentrate only on Livy's ten first books, where the Roman historian recounts these myths. He shared the basic Roman veneration for their *mos maiorum* and believed that, as in Rome where this national tradition was guarded by the wise old men of the Senate, a similar policy to consecrate this tradition as an ancient constitution ought to be adopted in any republic. And as in classical antiquity so too in the new secular polity—rulers must bear in mind that real authority (*auctoritas*), as distinct from actual power (*potestas*) resides only in the mythistorical norms and forms of government. "Those princes and those republics which desire to remain free from corruption, should above all else maintain incorrupt the ceremonies of their religion and should hold them always in veneration; for there can be no surer indication of the decline of a country than to see divine worship neglected."[61] Assuming that republics are based on remembrance of epochal actions like the foundation of cities or the liberation of states,[62] such that manifest for all generations the virtuous origins and traditions of the polity, Machiavelli insisted that this remembrance of history must assume the form of reverence for tradition: "He who desires or proposes to change the form of a government in a state and wishes it to be acceptable and to be able to maintain it to everyone's satisfaction, must needs retain at least the shadow of its ancient customs, so that institutions may not appear to its people to have been changed, though in point of fact the new institution may be radically different from the old ones."[63] And he duly realized that in fact it cannot be otherwise, because "the whole truth about olden times is not grasped, since what redounds to their discredit

is often passed over in silence, whereas what is likely to make them appear glorious is pompously recounted in all its details."[64] Machiavelli was quite content with this historiographical predicament: his commentaries on heroic figures from classical or Biblical antiquity make clear that he did not really mind who they really were or what they actually did as long as they—or rather their historians—set the right examples for posterity. This was in stark contradistinction to what Cassirer would argue—Machiavelli believed in historical education that leads to a mythical, not critical, engagement with past events. Hence his famous recommendation for all political associations to conduct a conservative policy of methodical "renovations" of their ancient traditions through ritual and cultural festivities.[65]

Cassirer rightly saw that what prompted Machiavelli to recommend all these forms of historical manipulation—or, to use the fashionable term, "invention of tradition"—was not some cynical or immoral will to power of the politician. He certainly discerned the ethical motivation in Machiavelli's deliberations over political mythology, but could not quite see or accept that, for Machiavelli, the ethical notions that are essential to any political association are deeply and inseparably embedded in mythical traditions because, in themselves, they cannot be grounded in any rational or historical convictions. Patriotism, for example, is a *virtù* that defies not only rational or historical argumentation, but also and more substantially, some very human, even prehuman, propensities: the instinctual obligations to self-preservation, blood relation, affiliation to family and clan, and the like. Roman tradition solved this problem by the consecration and continuous narration of such historical myths—such as that of Romulus who killed his brother Remus, or that of Brutus who executed his sons—for these primeval cases where, very literally, the loyalty to the *patria* appears to have prevailed over against the loyalty to or of the *pater*, exemplify *virtù* in a way that remained both memorable and credible.[66] The mythical means proved indispensable to the ethical ends.

In recent years, this classical notion of "virtue" has become prevalent in humanistic studies. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, first published in 1981, has been the most influential work on the topic.[67] MacIntyre's work warrants more than passing attention because his notions bear directly on the main philosophical issue under discussion—the problematic relation between the ethical and the mythical in political association. I will offer a brief exposition of his main philosophical argument for a "revision" in our

liberal conception of human life and history and move on to show how this kind of revisionism has affected modern political theory. From these perspectives I shall then, by way of conclusion, reassess Cassirer's work *The Myth of the State*.

V

According to MacIntyre, the basic rule of life is that "man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal . . . a teller of stories that aspire to truth."[68] What he means by this is that we live out and understand our lives (and those of others) according to certain narratives, which lay out for us basic precedents, rules, and prescriptions for moral action in social situations. A successful life depends on whether the person who lives it possesses and exercises "the virtues," which are those qualities which his or her society has predetermined as crucial for that sort of life, or "role" in life, which that person seeks to fulfill. According to MacIntyre each society defines for its members those "roles" through the typical heroes of its traditional stories. In order to survive, modern society must reassert its tradition through "narrative history," insofar as this, in his terms, "is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon the events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer," but rather a form of life in which "stories are lived before they are told," an "enacted dramatic narrative in which the characters are also the authors." Hence, he concludes, "there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things."[69]

The ramifications of this revision are particularly evident among modern political theorists and historians of nationalism. Whereas scholars of the older generation still tended to explain the employment of national myths in the rather crude terms of the old and hard social sciences and Marxist doctrines, and thus dismissed these myths as "inventions" of the ruling state authorities that seek to masquerade—under the false pretences of communal unity and continuity—real socio-political tensions and conflicts and historical ruptures, modern scholars have commonly come to realize that the modern nation does not just invent or use, but actually consists in, its mythological narration.[70] For, as Benedict Anderson

has shown, modern nations are necessarily *imagined communities*, that is, they are based on certain beliefs in the "historical" unity and continuity of the various populations and territories that make up the "new" political organizations.[71] According to Anderson, the main promoters of this political transformation were intellectual nationalists in the nineteenth century—artists, authors, and journalists—whose images and tales were widely disseminated through the new systems of education and mass communication, and thereby created a common cultural history of and for the nation.[72] The institution of modern history as a new and highly respected academic vocation, and the proliferation of national histories since the early nineteenth century also attest to the fact that this kind of legitimacy had become imperative for the new nationalities. For Anderson, this narrative construction of national identity is not a mere "invention," as Hobsbawm and others would have it, even if it almost always involves some fabrication or even falsification of historical facts. Rather, he seeks to show that what may seem to us "new," or "invention," in the political culture of the modern nation, harks back to a deeper and older cultural-political tradition—and so it is also conceived by the members of that nation. As Anderson points out, "if nation-states are widely considered to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nation states to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and . . . glide into a limitless future." Nationalism must therefore be aligned not with "self-consciously held political ideologies" but rather with the much larger "cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being."[73] These are what one might call "historical myths"—the narratives that express and explain the beliefs in the common origins and destinies, which alone turn the new "imagined communities" into real—because very old—ones. Ernest Renan realized as much long ago when he claimed that historical narrations of successive generations are not only needed to form a national identity, but they also pass into that identity itself, so that in order to understand what it means to be French, for example, the historian has to accept certain common stories, which might be "wrong" (for example, stories about Joan of Arc) as "true," in other words—as effective insofar as they are affective.[74] David Miller largely accepts this view. In his recent book *On Nationality* he rightly observes that "nations are not things that exist in the world independently of the beliefs people have about them," and so the question about their historical myths is not whether they are real or false, but rather what they mean to those

who believe in them.[75] Taking as his prime example the myth of Dunkirk in the Second World War—where, presumably, a flotilla of small boats navigated by fishermen evacuated the British soldiers from the German siege—Miller shows how myths like that "serve in the constitution of national identity" during and beyond their times, for "they provide reassurance that the national community of which one now forms part is solidly based in history, that it embodies a real continuity between generations; and they perform a moralizing role, by holding up before us the virtues of our ancestors and encouraging us to live up to them."[76]

Such claims for the priority and superiority of "images" over "ideas," of "beliefs" over "reasons," of "myths" over "theories," or of "narration" over "classification" and "abstraction" in human life and history—have now become prevalent across the humanities and social sciences. For all his immense contribution to the rehabilitation of some of these "primitive" symbolic forms as organic factors of our all too human condition, Cassirer never regarded them as estimable in themselves, let alone as desirable states in our psychological or historical development. And though he may justly be regarded among the first theorists who have argued for the "linguistic" turn in the human sciences, he himself did not really take that turn: he applied the same philosophical categories and terms to all cultural and historical communities. This is evidently the case in his interpretation of his own national community. His essay "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths" (1944) is an attempt to explain the entire cultural history of this community by some philosophical notions that presumably had formed and governed Judaism throughout the ages, but were in fact those of the German *Aufklärung*.[77] His (mis)interpretation of Judaism in this essay is all the more significant because it is predicated on the same assumption that inspired his more general work *The Myth of the State*, namely, that the ethical and the mythical are essentially incommensurable. According to Cassirer, the Jews "had proved it by their whole history, by their tradition, by their cultural and religious life. In the history of mankind they had been the first to deny and to challenge those very conceptions upon which the new state was built; for it was Judaism which first made the decisive step that led from a 'mythical' to an ethical religion."[78] Cassirer demonstrates these assertions by some Biblical proclamations, like the second Mosaic command or Isaiah's famous prophecy on "eternal peace," as well as by some ceremonial rules and practices concerning religious purity, which he interprets, all too willfully, as non-

racial, and thus—on his premises—antimythical. Unfortunately, these examples only prove the inadequacy of his philosophical categories for historical realities. For, as contemporary scholars of Judaism like Martin Buber or, above all, Gershom Scholem have made clear, mythological images and practices have permeated all spheres of Jewish life and history.[79] They recur in apocalyptic visions in the Bible, in mystic figurations in the Kabbalah, in magic rites in Hassidism, as well as in some recent messianic ideologies in Zionism. These latter examples—the political myths of Judaism—are particularly important to our discussion, and not only because they so clearly defy the main claims made by Cassirer in his essay, but also because they prove yet again that Judaism, like any other nationality, is fundamentally and inevitably mythological.[80] Cassirer rightly emphasized the strong antimythical impulsion in the ethical and legal principles of Judaism, and yet, as Scholem maintains, it is exactly this permanent dialectical tension between the mythical and the ethical-legal that has always regenerated Judaism.[81]

If we recall the incident with which I began this essay—Cassirer's early confrontation with his own Judaism in Hamburg—we see that Cassirer's late essay on Judaism betrays the same basic intellectual disposition which I initially diagnosed as a certain kind of German Jewish *Aufklärung*, one that may have made Cassirer immune, for better or worse, to the power of myth. In this latter case he failed to recognize the power of myth in Judaism. And even if we grant that Cassirer knew very little about his own people, as he himself admitted,[82] and, moreover, that his conception of Judaism as so utterly ethical and so resolutely antimythical was largely determined by his teacher Hermann Cohen,[83] his fallacy in this case is similar to the one we detected in the (to him) much more familiar case of Machiavelli: it is primarily an ideological rather than (merely) a methodological fallacy, and it derives from his deepest convictions as a champion of the *Aufklärung*—that, ultimately, there are some rational norms and forms of life that are absolute and must prevail in all human societies.

Cassirer, in other words, now seems to have failed to take the kind of "turn" that modern theorists in the humanities and social sciences have since defined as a "hermeneutic," "narrative" or even "mythic" turn—all of which attest to the same basic conviction: that the mythistorical traditions in which different peoples believe, are as real as the conditions in which they actually live.[84] They are the "real narratives" that not only these peoples, but also those who study them actually have, and their task should

therefore be to illuminate, not to eliminate, these narratives, by showing their extension or configuration of social reality.[85] Hence, whereas Cassirer still employed strict epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic categories in order to explain what myth is, modern humanists simply note and accept what myth does; and where Cassirer was primarily concerned with the problem of (how myth distorts) "truth," these scholars either dismiss the whole notion of "truth" (as Richard Rorty does) or, more astutely, acknowledge, as MacIntyre does, that "to raise the question of truth need not entail rejecting myth or story as the appropriate and perhaps the only appropriate form in which certain truths can be told."[86] Such truths pertain not only to metaphysical mysteries, like the ultimate origins and destinies of mankind, but primarily to those practical verities in which we all believe and live even though (or precisely because) they are mythical rather than logical or historical deductions. In the words of Leszek Kolakowski: "Values inherited under a binding function of authority are being inherited in their mythical form; they are not being inherited as information about social or psychological facts (that this or that happens to be thought valuable) but precisely as information regarding what is or is not a value . . . Myths that teach us that something simply is good or evil cannot be avoided if humanity is to survive."[87]

NOTES

1. Toni Cassirer, *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 130–131.

2. Ibid., 189–190.

3. Ibid., 132–133.

4. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 296.

5. Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 31.

6. Ibid., 36.

7. Ibid., 35.

8. Ernst Cassirer, "The Technique of Modern Political Myths" (1945), in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer,* ed. Donald P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 246.

9. Anthony D. Smith, "The Myth of the 'Modern Nation' and the Myths of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 11 (1988): 12.

10. On the intellectual and historical origins of Cassirer's theory of myth, see Ivan Strenski, "E. Cassirer's Mythical Thought in Weimar Culture," *History of European Ideas* 5 (1984): 363–385.

11. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, trans. by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 155.

12. On Weber and George, see Wolf Lepenies, *Between Science and Literature*, trans. by R. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 258–296.

13. Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 148–149.

14. Theodore Ziolkowski has measured this trend in Germany as follows: between 1907 and 1920 there appeared roughly ten books with the term "myth" in their titles; in the 1920s—roughly twenty; and in the 1930s—over sixty! Theodore Ziolkowski, "Der Hunger nach dem Mythos: Zur seelischen Gastronomie der Deutschen in den Zwanziger Jahren," in *Die sogenannten Zwanziger Jahre*, ed. R. Grimm and J. Hermand (Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1970), 169–201.

15. George Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 47.

16. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 79.

17. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. by R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 11–12.

18. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 282ff.

19. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 147–148. For general discussions of the *Gelehrtenpolitik*, see H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 328–332; and Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 128ff.

20. Walter Benjamin to Hugo von Hofmannstahl, 28 Dec. 1925, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, ed. G. Scholem and T. Adorno, trans. by M. R. Jacobson and E. M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 287.

21. The best discussion of Benjamin's notion of "dialectical enchantment" is John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), esp. 229–252.

22. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth-Century," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. by E. Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978), 157.

23. On Benjamin's myth, see my essay, "The Reconciliation of Myth: Benjamin's Homage to Bachofen," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60 (1999): 165–187.

24. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947; Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1971), 5.

25. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 228.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by W. Kaufmann (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 135. Habermas elaborates on these issues in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. by F. G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 83–130.

27. Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. by R. M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 118.

28. This is the main contention of Robert Wallace in his translator's introduction to Blumenberg's *Work on Myth*, viii–xxix.

29. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 274.

30. Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythus des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hoheneichen, 1930). On Rosenberg's notion of *Mythus*, see the interpretation of his fellow Nazi ideologist Alfred Baeumler, *Alfred Rosenberg und der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hoheneichen, 1943), 71.

31. Rosenberg, *Der Mythus des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*, 700.

32. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 296.

33. Ibid., 280, 286.

34. Although Cassirer does not mention Rosenberg in *The Myth of the State*, the title of part 3 of the book—"The Myth of the Twentieth Century"—betrays Cassirer's keen attention to Rosenberg's work.

35. Thomas Mann, *The Theme of the Joseph Novels* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1943), 21.

36. Peter Gay, "The Social History of Ideas: Ernst Cassirer and After," in *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. K. H. Wolff and Barrington Moore, Jr. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 106–120.

37. George Sabine, review of *The Myth of the State* in *Philosophical Review* 56 (1947): 317.

38. E. H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

39. Ibid., ix.

40. On Kantorowicz's life and works, see the indispensable monograph of Eckhart Grünewald, *E. Kantorowicz und Stefan George. Beiträge zur Biographie des Historikers bis zum Jahre 1938 und zu seinem Jugendwerk "Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite"* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982). See also Yaakov Malkiel, "E. H. Kantorowicz," in *On Four Modern Humanists*, ed. A. R. Evans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 146–219. Cassirer refers to Kantorowicz's work in *Myth of the State*, 137.

41. See my "E. H. Kantorowicz: History as *Mythenschau*," *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997): 579–603.

42. Kantorowicz, *King's Two Bodies*, ix.

43. Ibid., viii.

44. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 282.

45. Eric Hobsbawm, introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 7.

46. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 282; *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 11–12.

47. Hans Kohn, review of *The Myth of the State* in *Commentary* 4 (1947): 80–82.

48. Leo Strauss, review of *The Myth of the State* in *Social Research* 14 (1947): 125–128.

49. Hermann Lübbe, *Cassirer und die Mythen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Hubert & Co., 1974), 8.

50. On Cassirer's apparent submission to the mythopoeic modes of thought that he so resolutely opposed, see Christopher G. Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1996), 257–274.

51. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. by J. and D. Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 14.

52. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 126.

53. Ibid., 140.

54. Ibid.

55. For a brilliant exposition of—and mediation between—these roles in Machiavelli's life and works, see Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

56. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 159.

57. Ibid.

58. See the discussion in Skinner, *Machiavelli*, 21–47.

59. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 159.

60. Livy, *History of Rome* I, trans. by B. O. Foster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919), 3–6.

61. Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, trans. by L. J. Walker (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 243.

62. For a philosophical affirmation of this Roman-Machiavellian notion of "tradition," see Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 120–126.

63. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 272.

64. Ibid., 353.

65. Ibid., 459.

66. For a stimulating discussion of this notion, see Bruce James Smith, *Politics and Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke, and Tocqueville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 84–93.

67. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, rev. ed. (1981; London: Duckworth, 1985).

68. Ibid., 216.

69. Ibid., 215–216.

70. See, among many examples, John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991); Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990); and John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

71. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

72. Ibid., 15–49.

73. Ibid., 19.

74. Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation?" [1882], trans. by M. Thom, in Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 11.

75. David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

76. Ibid., 36. See also David Archard, "Myths, Lies and Historical Truth: A Defence of Nationalism," *Political Studies* 43 (1995): 472–481.

77. Ernst Cassirer, "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths," *Contemporary Jewish Records* 7 (1944): 115–126.

78. Ibid., 116.

79. Martin Buber, "Myth in Judaism," trans. by R. Manheim, *Commentary* 9 (1950): 562–566. Scholem elaborates his theory in "Kabbalah and Myth," in G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism,* trans. by R. Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1965), 87–117.

80. See, for example, the recent studies of Nachman Ben Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Aviezer Ravitzky, "Religious Radicalism and Political Messianism in Israel," in *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle-East,* ed. E. Sivan and M. Friedman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 18–30.

81. On Scholem's theory of myth and its impact on his conception of Jewish religion and history, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

82. Arthur Hertzberg, "A Reminiscence of Ernst Cassirer," *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* 15 (1970): 245–246.

83. Ernst Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen, 1848–1918," *Social Research* 10 (1943): 219–232.

84. William McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History and Historians," in McNeill, ed., *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1–10.

85. I elaborate this notion in my "Real Narratives: Myth, History, and Mythistory," in *Storia della storiografia / History of Historiography* 30 (1996): 3–18.

86. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60 (1977): 458.

87. Leszek Kolakowski, *The Persistence of Myth,* trans. by A. Czerniawski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 25.

NINE

Cassirer's Enlightenment and Its Recent Critics

Is Reason Out of Season?

FANIA OZ-SALZBERGER

In "The Mind of the Enlightenment," the first chapter of his trailblazing book *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932),[1] Ernst Cassirer very clearly made the following points: Eighteenth-century European thought centered on reason; the major thinkers saw reason as a matter of self-reflective analysis of observed facts; their purpose was to apply Newton's mathematical account of nature to all other areas of knowledge; reason in the eighteenth-century sense was taken "rather as an acquisition than as a heritage . . . not as a sound body of knowledge, principles, and truths, but as a kind of energy, a force that is fully comprehensible only in its agency and effects";[2] and, armed with this dynamic concept of a cumulative truth quest, the Enlightenment rationalized—and by its own lights Newtonized—field after field of inquiry: psychology, epistemology, religion, history, law and politics, and even aesthetics.

Each of these fields of endeavor is tidily covered by a chapter in Cassirer's book. Together, they orchestrate his Enlightenment. For each of them Cassirer offered, in a manner familiar to all students of his philosophy of symbolic forms, a different variation on the grand theme of the human quest for knowing all that is worth knowing. In each instance he retold his story: how the initial toolbox of Galilean inquiry was gradually and beautifully transformed into a particular sort of rationality appropriate to the specific body of knowledge; and how each discipline grew and matured, emancipating itself from the warm fatherly embrace of Newton and emerging from the nurturing womb of the great matrix provided by natural science.

The story is thus a delightful sequence of disciplinary coming-of-age tales. But at closer glance something is off balance: not all of Newton's

children are equal. The chapters are not even equal in length, for Cassirer divided his epistemological cake into slices of very different sizes. At the risk of seeming petty, one should consider the arithmetic, for example, in the English translation of *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1951). Religion is allotted sixty-two pages, and history just over half that number with thirty-six. Politics and law are discussed together in forty-one pages, while aesthetics gets more than twice as much—with eighty-five pages—and commands a special status as the book's grand finale.

Do these proportions really matter? Of course, all these fields of enlightened inquiry are set in a Cassirerian unity, the unity of a self-processing rainbow of intellectual quests. Cassirer's Enlightenment manifestly sets the scene—and, historically, acts as the earliest full-fledged prototype—for his own concept of the symbolizing function. Indeed, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* is brimming with subtle references to Cassirer's philosophy. The book could have been subtitled "the prehistory of symbolic forms."

Cassirer's analysis of the Enlightenment's concept of knowledge came in the wake of his own cognitive philosophy, which had been laid out in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923–1931).[3] Readers versed in that work can watch with pleasure as the individuation of the great forms of human creativity unfolds in the grand historical moment depicted in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. From the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, fields of inquiry gradually liberate themselves from the powerful matrix of natural science, creating a modern web of truth quests, interlinked by epistemic parallels. The ultimate goal and end of the Enlightenment are finally reached, when Kant and Goethe shine forth, two perfect and coordinated, synchronized and mutually enhancing monads in a new universe of analogous wisdoms.[4] And Cassirer's great concluding chapter on aesthetics gently leads this rich and exhausted intellectual cosmos into the new era of Romanticism, when reason itself can gently transform itself into a more sophisticated, more subtle, more sublime concept of the human search for truth.

Now, to put it a bit bluntly, recent historians do not like this. While practically all later writers on the Enlightenment have paid tribute to Cassirer, since the 1980s historians no longer tend to proclaim themselves his disciples in the way Peter Gay did in the 1960s. Recent scholars have acknowledged his intellectual rigor and pioneering accomplishment, but many of them have sought to present his history of the Enlightenment as

outdated or worse. The gist of Cassirer's "mind of the Enlightenment" is almost bound to induce hostility, bafflement, or alienation in historians studying the Enlightenment today, be they liberal, radical, or feminist historians, social or anthropological historians, historians of books and readership, historians of transmission, translation, and reception, or even plain middle-of-the-road intellectual historians.

Why has this happened? To begin with, Cassirer is seen as a master narrator of a highbrow, unilinear history governed by great ideas—ideas sporting an ontological status comparable to Arthur Lovejoy's time-trotting creatures, ideas that were mostly expressed by master thinkers and their entourage of second and third violins. The meaning of the title "master" in the present intellectual climate can range rather widely from the lionized to the ludicrous. Calling Cassirer the "master" or the "doyen" of Enlightenment studies can amount to confining his work to one or two footnotes, usually in the introductory chapters of new textbooks.[5] The field has now become radically democratized, with diminishing demand for doyens, great syntheses, grand theories, and master narratives. More specifically, Cassirer has been deemed ahistorical in several senses. Standing on "a lofty and rather static" plateau, he casts a "liberal," "self-assured," and "distant" gaze on an imagined eighteenth-century landscape of ideas.[6]

Cassirer's Enlightenment is populated by philosophers just like himself, always men, preferably Continental, and ultimately German. When I say "ultimately German," I mean, quite simply, that in both of its *termini*, Cassirer's Enlightenment is quintessentially German, with Leibniz as its point of departure and Kant and Goethe as its grand conclusion and self-transformation. Cassirer has been accused of extreme selectivity, "imposing [his] own retrospective and often ahistorical evaluations as to who was 'truly' important."[7] Even if we follow his lead to the Olympus of grand masters, he still has nothing to tell us about Adam Smith, Cesare Beccaria, or Jeremy Bentham.

As to those great thinkers who were lucky enough to attract Cassirer's attention, even they received a very abstract treatment at his hands. He had little time for social, cultural, and intellectual contexts. He was indifferent to David Hume's intellectual milieu, oblivious of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's sex life, and uninterested in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's social background or in Denis Diderot's personality. He did not seek their forgotten manuscripts, political pamphlets, or personal correspondence. He made them the servants of their ideas, and made his history

of the Enlightenment into an abstract drama of ideas. As Roy Porter has written, Cassirer was able to "blithely disembody ideas and assess them out of their wider context. Living people are reduced to doctrines on the printed page."[8] He was, Margaret Jacob adds, a "true believer" in the metaphysical reality of concepts, such as reason.[9] But the main reproach of Cassirer's critics is not that he misrepresented the scene of ideas and great thinkers but that he did not transcend it. "The map he gave us is still useful," writes Jacob, "but it floats above the terrain, pinpointing only the tallest buildings, all the texts of the major philosophes, ignoring the many architects, master builders, and artisans who helped to create them as texts and then in the new social enclaves gave them various and distinctive meanings."[10]

This point is worth pursuing. While ignoring the informal, oral transactions of Enlightenment discourse, Cassirer also ignored its venues and its loci—except for printed books and articles and famous items of correspondence. He did not look into the *salons*. He ignored the debating societies and reading circles. Consequently, he disregarded almost completely the numerous uncelebrated participants in the Enlightenment, its second violins, its chorus line. He ignored all the women. There is no Elizabeth Carter, no Julie de l'Espinasse, no Henriette Herz. Cassirer, Dena Goodman has said, followed his icon Rousseau as he turned his back on the *salons* and his face toward the republic.[11] But had he faced the republic in earnest, he might have come across Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges.

Politics, tightly latched to law, takes up one of Cassirer's shortest chapters. It is by no means Newton's best-loved offspring. It remains within the eighteenth-century German conceptual contours of state administration and high government. Cassirer did not distinguish between national enlightenments with their specific characters, such as the Scottish or the Neapolitan or even the French and the Prussian versions. He passed in silence over enlightened rulers, ministers, and reformers and paid no attention to the practical innovations inspired by Enlightenment ideas in legal, economic, or technological areas. This is perhaps the reason why Beccaria, the great humanizer of Europe's penal codes, or Adam Smith, the herald of economic reform, were of no use to Cassirer. In terms of its tonus, its "feel," Cassirer's Enlightenment is indeed high and dry, textual and cerebral. Today, with our changed sensitivities, we tend to see the

Enlightenment as a social, intertextual, discursive, and oral phenomenon, involving many issues of gender and invoking sentiment as well as reason.[12] It is in matters of overall tonus, then, that Cassirer's Enlightenment "feels" wrong today.

This reproof is not wholly unfair, nor wholly anachronistic. No one can charge Cassirer with disregard for the scholarly and theoretical trends of the last quarter of the twentieth century. But his history of the Enlightenment might have benefited from ideas and sensitivities that were already at work within the Weimar culture and from the new French history being written in his day, the Annales school, and in particular, the scholarly ambience of Daniel Mornet's *Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (1933). It was Cassirer's overemphasis on the Enlightenment as "a value-system rooted in rationality" that prompted the scathing critique launched against his turn of thought—against the very essence of "his" Enlightenment—by his compatriots and contemporaries Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin.[13] Liberal historians today are wondering whether Cassirer's account of the Enlightenment did not play into the hands of some of its most powerful twentieth-century critics. If Cassirer had made his Enlightenment less tidy, less theoretical, less obsessed by a rational quest for truth, then perhaps it would have been more difficult to pin down its responsibility for the twentieth-century failures of its purported heirs.

Cassirer's rationalist reading of the Enlightenment, Dorinda Outram has recently written, "must have possessed considerable attraction in the notoriously irrational 1930s in Europe."[14] Surely Cassirer, and the decade in question, deserve a little more intellectual credit than that. Here, I would like to put in a few words in Cassirer's defense. The best way to do this is to accept some of the criticism point-blank. The index of *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* does not list a single female author. The only women appearing in the index—each is granted one brief mention in the book—are two empresses, one mistress, and two *salonières*. Other representatives of Enlightenment thought and culture are similarly ignored. Legal and political reformers, technological and medical innovators, mediators of ideas such as publishers and translators, and other practitioners of the Enlightenment all remain beyond Cassirer's pale. National enlightenments are out of focus, local variants hardly matter, and discord—intellectual, political, temperamental—is not an issue. All this is clear enough.

And yet, there are three possible ways to defend Cassirer. First, to mention the overlooked fact that *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* is a philosophical work, an integral part of its author's philosophy, and not a historical textbook. The second is to recontextualize Cassirer in his times. A third defense of Cassirer's enduring relevance to Enlightenment studies is the observation that his intimate grasp of the Enlightenment, its mood, its joys, its intellectual climate, is unrivaled to date.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF CASSIRER'S PHILOSOPHY

The term "Enlightenment" in Cassirer's usage amounts to "the philosophy of the Enlightenment." This is proclaimed loud and clear on the first page of the book. When he announces that his work approaches the topic "in its characteristic depth rather than in its breadth" and that he has focused on its "underlying principle rather than on the totality of its historical manifestations and results," Cassirer did not intend disrespect for the social history of the Enlightenment or the history of its printing presses and book circulation, its female contributors or its obscure interlocutors, its discourse or its material culture.[15] By the "totality of its historical manifestations" Cassirer means—and he says as much—that he is *not* offering his readers an extensive overview of the genesis and evolution of all the philosophical problems taken up by Enlightenment thinkers, but rather that he has written an "intensive" account of the unifying concepts of the Enlightenment. In plain words, Cassirer's Enlightenment is only about philosophy, and the choice he faced was between different ways of treating that philosophy: a historical approach and a philosophical one. He chose the latter. History in a broader sense—the history of culture or society or language or representation at large—did not present itself as an option.

What did present itself to Cassirer was history in an even broader sense. He saw his *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* as a building block that might contribute to the realization of the Kantian project of a "history of pure reason" by creating a historical account of the development of the human will—partaking in "man's progressive self-liberation" in a Kantian vein.[16] This work of philosophical history involved the tracing of dialectical progress in the history of ideas. This kind of achievement was exemplified most powerfully by Cassirer's study of three Enlightenment thinkers in his *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe* (1945).[17]

The effort to substantiate Rousseau's powerful impact on Kant comes from Cassirer's own concern to view Kant's epistemology in terms of a philosophy of human experience in its broadest possible spectrum. Taken on his own, Kant can be disconcertingly cerebral; a Rousseauist Kant comes closer to Cassirer's attempt at a variegated study of human creativity and thought. Goethe takes the new synthesis a step further, pointing ahead—as it were—to a mature, multicolored spectrum of Cassirerian symbolic forms.[18] This kind of historicity is, of course, not quite what Cassirer's present-day critics have in mind, even when they appear to be aware of this philosophical agenda.[19] Ironically, Cassirer, who wished to hail the eighteenth-century "systematic spirit" and its triumph over the seventeenth-century "spirit of systems," was eventually branded as yet another metaphysical system maker. His search for a unifying principle, for an underlying explanatory solution, is deeply alien to the basic instincts of most historians, indeed of most humanities scholars, in the early twenty-first century. His attempt to weave multiplicity into unity is a far cry from our current ideas of multiplicity. His Kantian bid to write "a history of reason," to furnish reason with an ontological status and establish it as a dynamic historical force, is either alien or downright incomprehensible to most historians today.

CASSIRER IN CONTEXT

The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, conveys no echo of the Nazis marching in the streets. Nor does it attempt to engage with the modernist intellectual assaults on the Enlightenment legacy and on the primacy of reason, not even with the brilliant assaults launched by Martin Heidegger and by Walter Benjamin. Cassirer clearly did *not* wish to use this book—the last major work he published before fleeing Germany—to defend the Enlightenment concept of reason against its new opponents in the Weimar Republic.[20] He did not choose to carry his famous debate with Heidegger directly into his study of the Enlightenment. The book is astonishingly silent on contemporaneous anti-Enlightenment rhetoric and seemingly oblivious of the fact that at the time of its composition, the Enlightenment tradition—as it was interpreted through the prism of Weimar modernism—was subject to clear and present danger. Instead, Cassirer labored to fortify his own philosophy of cultural forms by accounting for the Enlightenment

as its direct precursor. The book's subtext is philosophical rather than political.

This book was evidently conceived as a canonical study of its subject matter, not as a commentary on current affairs, be they political or intellectual. It was intended as a revolutionary text in the methodological sense, a vehicle of "philosophical reorientation and self-criticism."[21] Cassirer thus ought to be contextualized, but not in a simplistic biographical sense and not by way of making a historical apology on his behalf. What needs to be analyzed is not his last-ditch defense of Enlightenment rationalism, but his conception of the Enlightenment within the matrix of his own philosophy. It may well be asked whether Cassirer's powerful emphasis on the development of eighteenth-century aesthetics—the *grand finale* of his book—did not cross paths with the modernist rejection of reason. Or whether the concept of creative symbolization did not ripen, in Cassirer's own work as in Freud's, toward its detachment (wrought by others) from the Western rationalist tradition altogether.

CASSIRER'S INTIMACY WITH THE ENLIGHTENMENT

This is where Cassirer has a great deal to teach us. He seems to know something about the mood and the substance of the Enlightenment that we have almost forgotten. One recent textbook on the Enlightenment, which I will leave unnamed, begins by defining its subject matter as, in so many words, a manifold conglomerate of "problems" freshly recognized and awaiting resolution—or, better still, further problematization. As these "problems" are explored one by one, the reader gets the disquieting idea that the eighteenth-century individuals who dealt with them were haunted by a sense of unease, injustice, political and intellectual displeasure. There is something wrong with this impression. Many recent writers on the eighteenth century convey the same feeling, namely, that our own discontents, our questions of self and identity, our contested models of truth, our cultural and gender politics, were opened up by Enlightenment thinkers with something like our own postmodern bitterness. Cassirer provides a reminder that this is not the case. The intellectual activity of most eighteenth-century thinkers was carried out with a far stronger sense of well-being than is acknowledged today. Hume and Diderot and Lessing and Kant, regardless of their disparate personal biographies, shared a joy of discovery and a pleasure of interlocution that are very different from

the attitudes characteristic of our academic and journalistic debates. Most Enlightenment thinkers were rather jolly social persons, and their conversation and correspondence convey a sense of fun. The spectrum between the amateur and the professional writer, the gentleman-scholar and his university counterpart, did not consist of rigid divisions. Of course there were exceptions, such as the unhappy Rousseau and the sad de Sade. Some university professors, in Glasgow and in Göttingen, were recognizable precursors of today's prevalent breed. But the Enlightenment's "mood," if we can venture to pinpoint a particular representative "mood," was that of an aesthetic and social pleasure. Its tone, indeed, was often that of *self-pleasure*—a *salon* and coffeehouse corollary of Alexander Pope's dictum that "self-love and social be the same." Its thinkers and their readers delighted in discovering and in allowing things to fall into place, filling in the giant jigsaw puzzle of nature's laws and the study of man. It was a time of discipline building as well as state building. It conferred a strong sense of harmony and tidiness, of the constant "unfolding" of things pretty and reasonable. That was a world we have lost. Somehow, Cassirer still remembered that world. His philosophical mood was in some ways very similar to that of the eighteenth century. Cassirer and Voltaire and Immanuel Kant were all collectors and inventors of modes of inquiry, which fall into place with pleasing harmony. They shared a sense of intellectual well-being that no present-day historian of the Enlightenment seems to enjoy.

Thus, no historian of the Enlightenment conveyed its mental climate as well as Cassirer did. And this insight draws out several substantial contributions that his work can make to the most recent readings of the Enlightenment. Cassirer's sense of the unity of the Enlightenment's project is finally coming back full circle to the most recent attempt of several historians to look above national context and redraw the genuinely cosmopolitan aspects of Enlightenment thought.[22] This is especially useful for portraying the cross-European discourse of political economy, which allowed Scottish, Italian, and French thinkers to complement one another's angles of observation.[23] Such dynamic intercourse is reminiscent of Cassirer's account of the transformation of aesthetics through a dynamic transcultural exchange from Nicolas Boileau via Johann Christoph Gottsched to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten.[24]

More generally, Cassirer's treatment of artistic imagination and his discussion of religious faith are now back on center stage in Enlightenment scholarship. The Scottish, Spanish, and Polish perspectives, among

others, have helped to dissolve the atheistic and materialist emphases that have long ruled the mainstream image of the Enlightenment. Cassirer's attempt to describe a subtle interplay between reason and imagination, faith and natural intuition, feeling and knowledge, is now curiously back on the agenda of Enlightenment scholarship.[25] So, perhaps Cassirer's account of the Enlightenment was not so devoid of postmodern sensitivities. And, considering recent attempts to establish that reason and the emotions were involved in mutual interplay in Enlightenment thought, perhaps there was something faintly feminine about Cassirer's Enlightenment after all.

NOTES

1. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932). References in the text are to the English-language edition, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. by C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

2. Ibid., 13.

3. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923–1931).

4. Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1: 78ff.

5. Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1990), 43.

6. Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19.

7. Porter, *Enlightenment*, 43.

8. Ibid.

9. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, 217.

10. Ibid., 218.

11. Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 62ff.

12. Ibid. Goodman makes a similar point, perhaps somewhat overemphasizing the Habermasian dichotomy between the public and the private spheres.

13. Max Horkheimer, "The Concept of Enlightenment," in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; New York: Seabury Press, 1972); Horkheimer, "Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment" (1946), in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 359–367.

14. Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

15. Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, v.

16. Cf. David A. Wisner, "Ernst Cassirer, Historian of the Will," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 145–161.

17. Ernst Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe: Two Essays*, trans. by J. Gutman, P. O. Kristeller, and J. H. Randall, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945).

18. Ibid., 1–60.

19. Cf. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment*, 217–218.

20. There is only a very general and vague statement in the preface: "The age which venerated reason and science as man's highest faculty cannot and must not be lost even for us" (Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, xi).

21. Ibid.

22. The approach heralded by Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), has recently been countered by a measured return to a cosmopolitan approach inspired by the works of Franco Venturi, esp. *Settecento Riformatore* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1966–1990); cf. John Robertson, "Franco Venturi's Enlightenment," *Past and Present* 137 (1992): 183–206.

23. Cf. John Robertson, "The Enlightenment above National Context: Political Economy in Eighteenth-Century Scotland and Naples," *Historical Journal* 40 (1997): 667–697.

24. Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, chap. 7.

25. See Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Mark S. Micale and Robert L. Dietle, eds., *Enlightenment, Passion, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); and Fania Oz-Salzberger, "New Approaches toward the History of the Enlightenment," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 30 (2000): 171–182.

TEN

Practicing "Intertextuality"

Ernst Cassirer and Hermann Cohen on Myth and Monotheism

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> [For the Jews,] . . . reading is a sacred performance. To read for them means . . . to read . . . the very inscription of God on the tablets, in the book. All Jews are readers. All Jews are reciters.
>
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Cassirer's life's work, his attempt to establish a philosophy of culture that would encompass every aspect of the creativity of human consciousness, bears witness to the haunting scope of a lifetime's reading. Cassirer's philosophical project was aimed at the totality of all those literary sources that are at work in shaping the process of human culture and civilization. Cassirer once described the agenda of Pico della Mirandola, one of the Renaissance figures he loved most, as the ambition to "render vocal at the same time all the intellectual forces which had heretofore cooperated in establishing religious, philosophical, and scientific knowledge."[1] Although referring specifically to Pico, Cassirer in fact seems to speak for himself, as it is he who in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* sets out to assemble all the "intellectual forces" into the polyphony of an all-embracing philosophy of culture.

Cassirer stated in 1944 that it is the "mission of Judaism to confront and break the totalitarian structures of modern political myth-making."[2] The question here is whether for Cassirer reading was still a "sacred performance"; in other words, was Cassirer in his intellectual embrace of the entire *globus intellectualis* still engaged in reciting "a holy text," transmitting, to use Péguy's words, the "inscription of God on the tablets, in the book."[3] There is a privileged subtext at work in Cassirer's philosophy of human civilization, a subtext that—once brought to the surface—links him with

a prominent group of Jewish thinkers for whom critical thinking is the foremost task of Jewish tradition. This "privileged subtext"—which will be outlined below—would appear to be part of an oral tradition passed on to Cassirer by his teacher, Hermann Cohen, a tradition that originates in the critical rationalism of the medieval Jewish thinkers and most prominently in the thought of the twelfth-century rabbinic authority, Moses Maimonides. More specifically, this critical tradition originates with a medieval Muslim and Jewish rejection of all fanatic literalism—a rejection that amounts to a denial of all theological ontological claims that purport to be based on an absolute knowledge of God.[4] Maimonides in particular, as is well known, rejects the very possibility of knowing God's substance, allowing only for a knowledge of divine attributes of action, which are, in fact, attributes of human relations.[5] One might well borrow the title of Cassirer's epistemological work *Substance and Function* to describe this medieval, rationalist, theological position.[6]

According to Cohen, however, Maimonides' reading of divine attributes amounts not only to an epistemological "theory of relativity" but also to a decidedly ethical theory of intersubjectivity, since the much restricted knowledge of God's attributes becomes significant solely in the context of human interaction pointing to moments of "loving kindness," "justice," and "truthfulness."[7] Cassirer was intimately familiar with Cohen's reading of Maimonides and knew how to evaluate the medieval thinker's central significance for Cohen's own philosophical methodology:

> In the methodology of Maimonides, whom Cohen held in profound esteem and whose writings he studied all his life anew and with ever growing love and admiration—in this methodology he believed to recognize his own . . . Maimonides taught the unknowability, the noncogitation of all divine attributes—except for the ethical attributes. He restricts the cognition of God to the "attributes of action." On the grounds of this method, the religious significance contained in the concept of God and the significance of human action and of human ethics are irresolubly interconnected: between these two aspects a pure and strict correlation is being negotiated . . . Thus the prophets were able to rebel against the mythical correlation between man and God, replacing this correlation by rooting the correlation between man and man in the topsoil of the prophetic religion.[8]

Maimonides and Cohen are signposts on a long narrative path of Jewish nonconformist thinking in which human creativity, autonomous

critical judgment, and the effort to establish a kingdom of social justice are marked as imperative ways for Jews to relate to the living God. And Cassirer's own philosophical work remains true to this tradition. A close reading of central passages from his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* suggests that for Cassirer, too, all theological and, for that matter, all mythic or ethnic positivism indicates a betrayal of the Jewish engagement with a God whose voice can be heard but whose face cannot be seen.

Cohen's entire life's work consisted in the ardent advocacy of a humanism that is specifically grounded in what he terms "the Jewish literary sources."[9] While Cassirer turned his attention to the literary sources of the Renaissance and German humanism, his work also resonates with Cohen's critical idealism, an idealism that Cohen himself posits explicitly as the rationalism of the Jewish medieval thinkers. Cassirer's link to Cohen is the key to a "transcendental" or "critical bent" that permeates Cassirer's analysis of mythical consciousness throughout his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. I am thus searching for how Cassirer carried critical idealism beyond Kantian philosophy in order to save its political and philosophical potency at a time when "abstract, liberal idealism" had most definitely lost its power. In other words, I am looking for the very core of Cassirer's philosophy, which enabled him to confront the ambivalence of what he himself called *mythical* consciousness. As Jürgen Habermas has suggested, we are still searching for the story from the perspective of which Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is told.[10]

If we turn to Cohen in pursuing this point, we see that Cohen posits the body of Jewish literature as the original sources for his critical philosophy.[11] Cohen reads Kantian and Platonic concepts expressly in the light of the Jewish literary tradition.[12] Cassirer, on the other hand, hardly acknowledges the existence of a Jewish literary tradition, knowing however that there exists, in fact, a concrete textual narrative that underlies Cohen's humanism. To Cohen, there is no "abstract humanism," no abstract philosophical grounding for the imperatives of acting according to loving kindness and justice. Philosophy may postulate goodness, but—as Cohen declares in a surprising passage in the middle of his analysis of Maimonides—philosophy is "impotent" when asked to provide further proof for the idea of goodness. "He has told you, Adam, what is good, and what God requires of you: only to do justice and love goodness, and to walk humbly before your God."[13] It is the text that informs Cohen's humanism, and it is by "reciting" this narrative that Cohen expresses his humanist commitment.

Cassirer's rather lukewarm reformulation of Cohen's impassioned promotion of "prophetic messianism" in his late essay of 1944, "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths," is due to a peculiar sort of forgetting: Cassirer carries on the teachings of Cohen in a subtext of which he himself can give no account because the memory of the original texts has been lost. It is this forgetting of the patterns of Jewish textual creativity and of textual reasoning that leaves Cassirer with an antiquated defense of the liberal tradition of "ethical reasoning" when challenged by the mythical bent of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, put at the service of the Aryan ethos.[14]

My underlying assumption is that there is a transmission of very specific subtexts in any philosophical position. In what follows, I shall establish and discuss a set of texts and subtexts that will link up oral teachings that were originally part of a tradition replete with texts, which demonstrates how a narrative loses its strength when its literary sources are no longer invoked.

The narrative in question is Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and how it was developed. Cohen's reading of Jewish literature was a formative influence on Cassirer's analysis of myth, I shall treat several texts that substantiate this. I first refer to a text that demonstrates Cassirer's indebtedness to Cohen's critical idealist method and his prophetic humanism, a speech Cassirer delivered to the members of the Verein zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Hamburg on May 17, 1920.[15] Cassirer—together with Nehemiah Nobel, Franz Rosenzweig, Ignaz Goldziher, and others—was a member of the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums at the time, and Cohen had been among its initiators and founders. This talk, held two years after Cohen had passed away, was entitled "Hermann Cohen."[16]

Of all of Cassirer's public pronouncements concerning the philosophy and the personality of Cohen, I find this text of 1920 the most instructive. Cassirer presents an assessment of Cohen's critical philosophy that is very attentive to Cohen's philosophical engagement with Jewish literature and Jewish classical texts. According to Cassirer, Cohen's Jewish writings, more specifically his *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, "constitute the great synthesis that Cohen, the philosopher of history, the philosopher of culture, the philosopher of religion, was aiming at throughout."[17] It is significant that Cassirer here associates Cohen with his own philosophical project by referring to Cohen as the philosopher

of history, culture, and religion, and not to Cohen as the mathematician, logician, or ethicist.

It is Cohen's late book on religion, Cassirer emphasizes, that provides us with the central idea out of which emerges an understanding for the various parts of his earlier critical philosophy, in particular his *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (*Logic of Pure Cognition*) and his *Ethik des reinen Willens* (*Ethics of Pure Will*). In other words, the earlier parts of Cohen's philosophical system—his three critiques of Kant, and Cohen's own logic, ethics, and aesthetics—all originate in what was to be the great theme of Cohen's last book, a Jewish theme that had been the driving force behind Cohen's thought all along. "The idea of monotheism in its particular formulation of the prophets assumed for Cohen the function of historical testimony to the power, to the purity, and to the autonomy of the human spirit; it is precisely this power and this purity out of which Cohen developed the idea of critical cognition, the idea of philosophy as science."[18]

Cassirer seems to suggest that Cohen's particular reading of Kant and Plato not only correlates with but actually even originates in the Jewish concept of divine "purity." We must keep in mind, of course, that Cassirer is addressing a Jewish audience here; and not just any Jewish audience, but one for whom Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* became a canonical book precisely because of the ways in which it deals with the Jewish literary sources. Cassirer's explanation of how central Jewish concepts are in the philosophy of his venerated teacher was just what this audience had come to hear. The entire text would therefore be of no value whatsoever for an assessment of Cassirer's own cultural philosophy, were it not for the fact that those Jewish themes resurface most prominently and significantly in Cassirer's own *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, namely, wherever Cassirer himself reflects upon the question of how to evaluate the creativity of mythical consciousness.

"Wir fangen mit dem Denken an" (We begin with thinking itself), says Cohen at the beginning of his *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*[19]—and here I wish to reiterate that whenever we hear Cohen say "pure thought," "purity," or "origin," we are not dealing with an abstract philosophical construct of so-called "Marburg neo-Kantianism," but rather with a teaching that is itself rooted in literary sources and embodied in a concrete, religious tradition. Cohen's teaching of "pure thought" constitutes the very attempt to secure the continuation of that tradition, a culture of religious thought in which critical judgment figures centrally. In this light, let us pay close

attention to the following pronouncements of Cohen's philosophy of origin: "Thinking must not recognize any originative principle outside itself, if it is to safeguard its purity without reservation and without blemish." The concept of purity, according to Cohen, "signifies the spontaneity of cognition in its various stages; purity means that the process of cognition itself—and not what is given by the senses—provides the grounds for generating all objects of human consciousness."[20]

Later Cohen will say, "Originality is the distinctive mark of creative reasoning, a reasoning that frees itself from all sensuous enchantments of consciousness—a creative process whose products bear the mark of purity."[21] Cohen's *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*—published in 1902—subsequently projects a future agenda of a philosophy of human culture that might well be taken to be Cassirer's very own: According to Cohen, it is the methodological task of a future philosophy of culture to "systematically clarify all the ways in which human consciousness expresses itself . . . a phenomenological task predicated upon the unity of cultural consciousness."[22]

Cassirer's text of 1920 clearly reiterates this philosophical agenda:

> The expression "purity" signifies . . . that the validity of those . . . principles upon which the *unity of cognition . . . , of will . . .* and of *aesthetic creativity* is predicated, must not be itself objectified by the senses. Each of these unities presents not some aspect of *Dasein* but rather a certain way and direction of spiritual creativity. . . . Cohen's thinking of origin never constitutes the mere copy or imitation of what is at hand [*es ist niemals die blosse Abbildung und Nachbildung eines vorhandenen Daseins*], but it rather demands the very active constitution of what validity we grant to being . . . Only now does the fundamental idea of spontaneity, the sovereignty of the human spirit whose freedom is predicated upon no external factor, appear sufficiently safeguarded on all fronts.[23]

Cassirer's approach to the world of myth clearly invokes Cohen's principle of origin in precisely the methodological function that Cohen assigned to it in his projected agenda of a future philosophy of culture: "[The objectivity of myth] lies neither in a metaphysical nor in an empirical-psychological 'reality' which stands *behind* it, but in what myth itself is and achieves . . . [Mythical imagination] is objective insofar as it is recognized as one of the . . . factors by which consciousness frees itself from passive captivity in sensory expression and creates a world of its own in accordance with a spiritual principle."[24]

According to Cassirer, not only mythical imagination but rather all human symbolic activity is governed by the principle of origin: "Myth and art, language and science, are in this sense configurations toward being: they are not simply copies of an existing reality but represent . . . main directions of the . . . ideal process by which reality is constituted for us as one and many—as a diversity of forms which are ultimately held together by a unity of meaning, [by a unitary perspective of consciousness.]"[25] "The reality that is produced in the end," says Cassirer in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, "stands before us as a self-contained configuration with a being and meaning of its own. And myth, although it . . . encompasses the whole of existence . . . represents a unitary perspective of consciousness from which both nature and soul . . . appear in a new form."[26]

This "unitary perspective of consciousness" is, of course, precisely the problem. What exactly is it that constitutes this unity of consciousness that Cassirer postulates as the underlying ground of all symbolic activity? Cassirer himself suggests—or rather reveals to the surprised reader who is quite unprepared for such a personal confession—that it is this very postulate of "unity" that, in fact, constitutes an existential choice, a choice that ultimately turns out to be an *ethical* one:

> We are called upon to decide whether to seek . . . the human spirit in its pure originality which precedes all mediating configurations—or whether to surrender ourselves to the . . . diversity of these mediating forms . . . True, *human* knowledge can nowhere dispense with symbols and signs; but it is precisely this that characterizes it as human, i.e., as limited and finite, in contradiction to the ideal of the perfect, archetypal and divine intellect. . . . All the many images do not designate, but cloak and conceal the *imageless One*, which stands behind them and toward which they strive in vain. Only the negation of all finite figuration, only a return to the "pure nothingness" of the mystics can lead us back to the one primal source of being . . . The more . . . energetically the human spirit engages in its formative activity . . . [the more] it seems to be imprisoned in its own creations—in the words of language, in the images of myth or art, in the intellectual symbols of cognition, which cover it like a veil, delicate and transparent, but unbreachable. But the true, the profoundest task of a *philosophy* of culture . . . seems precisely to consist in raising this veil—in penetrating from the mediate sphere of mere meaning and characterization to the original sphere of intuitive vision. But on the other hand the specific *organ*

> of philosophy . . . rebels against this task. To philosophy . . . the paradise of mysticism, the paradise of pure immediacy, is closed.[27]

What is striking here is that at this very sensitive point of his account regarding what is central to the methodology of his own *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer, in fact, invokes the medieval notion of *imitatio dei*, according to which the creativity and autonomous activity of the human mind (or of human consciousness) is recognized as the ultimate expression of living *be'tselem elohim*, in the image of God. Cassirer does not derive this particular theory from its original Islamic and Jewish sources. Rather he seems to "recite it" in a version that is resonant with readings of classical Jewish texts that Cohen offered to his students while he was still at Marburg. However, the difference is that Cassirer does not take up the decidedly ethical slant that is so strongly inscribed in Cohen's own interpretation of medieval Jewish literature in such essays as "Liebe und Gerechtigkeit in den Begriffen Gott und Mensch" (Loving Kindness and Justice in the Concepts of God and Man, 1900), "Die Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis" (Characteristics of Maimonides' Ethics, 1908), or "Die Einheit des Herzens bei Bachja" (The Unity of the Heart in Bachya, 1910).[28] The absence of this ethical bent in Cassirer's veiled reference to the *imitatio dei* motif in the passage quoted above may well be due to the fact that Cassirer does not relate to the texts themselves—in which "striving toward the imageless One" and "the negation of all finite figuration" are explicated as the active emulation of "compassion and graciousness, slowness to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness." Cohen's so-called "ethical monotheism," commonly taken to be an outgrowth of nineteenth-century liberalism and its moral sermons, is rather the result of a painstaking textual analysis of the Jewish literary sources in which Cohen finds guidance for a radical critique of religious positivism and literalist fundamentalism.

But although Cassirer does not directly convey the ethical bent of Cohen's reading, his insistence upon the transcendental function of all human symbolic activity can, in fact, be seen as a variation of the ethical theme prominent in Cohen's reading of Jewish literature. Jewish literature, according to Cohen, is inspired by the idea of the One, the Unique God. The *imageless One* to whom nothing can be compared, and of whom Cassirer speaks—the tradition says "mi yidmeh lakh, umi yishveh lakh umi ya'arokh lakh" (who is like you, and who can be compared unto you,

and who measures up to you)—must have no ontological dimension in order to be recognized as the very ground of being. "Only the negation of all finite figuration, only a return to 'pure nothingness' . . can lead us back to the one primal source of being," says Cassirer in the above quoted passage. Cassirer's line hints at a radically demythologized doctrine of creation first suggested—not only by neo-Platonists and mystics—but rather by Saadya Gaon and then brought to its ultimate conclusion in Maimonides. Creation, according to that reading, must not refer to any cosmogenic process in which God plays the role of an ontological first cause. Rather, the significance of creation consists in the very knowledge that the world is given a purpose and that the world is endowed with meaning. The creative act—whose paradigmatic expression is the divine act of creating the world—signifies direction for human work and action in the world; it creates meaning out of the void—necessitated by no external force. *Creatio ab nihilo,* Cohen explains in his *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis,* means that human consciousness *must not shy away from an adventurous detour through nothingness if it wants to establish its spontaneous critical activity.*[29] It is the free, creative self—the ethical self, Cohen emphasizes—that correlates with the Jewish idea of purity, of the one, unique God.

"True idealism," says Cohen in a significant passage in his *Ethik des reinen Willens* that plays on the creation theme, therefore "does not intend to speculate with one's head hanging in the clouds. By means of its own particular sense of reality, it rather wishes to embrace reality in order to tame it, to master it, and to transform it. The deepest sense of the concept of 'purity' lies in its [concrete] applicability . . . The very transformation of reality is predicated upon the concept of purity."[30]

Thus we touch upon the very basis of the political dimension in Cohen's critical idealism—situated within the compass of prophetic messianism: "It is incredible that messianism defies all political pragmatism, denigrates reality, treats it with contempt . . . replacing it instead with a new kind of [reality] . . . that of the future . . . The great contribution of messianism is its creation of the future, representing, in effect, the true political reality."[31]

"Anticipation is the fundamental activity of time," says Cohen in his *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis.* "The past is predicated upon the future that is anticipated. It is not the past that is prior to thinking but rather the future."[32] Cassirer cites Cohen verbatim in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms:* "Time becomes future and only future. Past and present are submerged

in this time of the future."[33] It is this perspective of futurity, according to Cohen, from which mythical consciousness is judged: "The *one* God demands the *unity* of mankind. War must cease, war—this fighting for national existence. Peace must be established on earth . . . God is unique . . . Myth has no vision of the future; it posits the harmony between human beings and nature in the past, in the golden age . . . It is the concept of futurity that distinguishes religion from myth."[34]

"It is from this perspective of futurity," says Cassirer in the text of 1920, "that Cohen overcomes even the slightest remains of mythical consciousness."[35]

> [The idea of the one God] signifies . . . nothing but the sharpest protest against any admixture of true spirituality and the senses. God ought not and must not merge with nature as in pantheism or polytheism—lest all that the idea of the one God signifies will die in the confines of particularity and thingness. . . . It is not in the world of the senses . . . but exclusively in the ethical self that monotheism finds the very foundation for its own concept of the unity of God. It is at this point that [Cohen] grasps the ultimate, the deepest, and the most radical sense of what it means to be human, and of what God means, and of what Being means—all at once.[36]

Cohen's tale of the free, ethical self that is entrusted with the messianic task makes itself audible even in the middle of Cassirer's project with Aby Warburg. Mythical creativity sets against the factual world an independent world of imagination, "however, this mythical creativity does not yet bear the character of a free, spiritual act; it has a character of natural necessity, of psychological "mechanism." Precisely because at this stage there is not yet an independent self-conscious I, free in its productions, precisely because we stand here at the threshold of the spiritual process which is destined to delimit the "I" and the "world."[37]

Whoever arrives at this distinction between world and self-will becomes conscious of the significance of language: language integrates the human self into a now disenchanted world.[38] In his turn to language Cassirer invokes Humboldt's classical exposition of the transcendental function of language—"transcendental" in the sense that language constitutes meaning.[39] However, when turning his critical thought to the very problem of myth, Cassirer presents—almost verbatim—the distinction between myth and poetry that Cohen suggests in his *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (*Esthetics of Pure Feeling*): "Every beginning of myth, particularly

every magical view of the world," Cassirer says in *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, "is permeated by th[e] belief in the objective character and objective force of the sign. . . . The mythical world is concrete . . . because in it the two factors, thing and signification, are undifferentiated, because they merge, grow together, concresce in an immediate unity."[40]

"Myth imagines: What flies, is a bird. Lightning flies, thus it is a bird," says Cohen in his *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*.[41] Poetry (and likewise biblical language and midrash) transcends the world of myth by speaking in terms of *mashal* and *nimshal, Gleichnis* and *Bedeutetem*, positing a difference between *signifier* and *signified:* the biblical text does not say "the spirit is in this tree, therefore this tree is a god," but rather: "man is [like] a tree in field" (ki ha'adam etz ha'sadeh).[42] Cassirer comments:

> The figures and images of myth merely . . . replace the sensory things of the world with another form of materiality . . . What seemed to free the spirit from the fetters of things—namely mythical imagination—becomes a new fetter which is all the stronger since it is not a mere physical force but a spiritual one. However, a force of this sort already contains within it the immanent condition for its own future dissolution; it contains the potentiality of a spiritual process of liberation which is indeed effected in the progress from the *magical-mythical* world view to the truly *religious* view. . . .
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> This same dialectic of bondage and liberation . . . is still more evident when we compare myth with the other spheres of symbolic expression. . . . At first the world of language, like that of myth in which it seems as it were embedded, preserves a complete equivalence of world and thing, of "signifier" and "signified." It grows away from this equivalence as its independent spiritual form, the characteristic force of the logos, comes to the fore.[43]

Thus, it is Cohen's concepts of "origin" and critical reasoning that are at work in Cassirer's work on myth.[44] This is most overtly the case in the very last chapter of *The Myth of the State* where Cassirer mobilizes the "story of origin" against the "forces of myth"—against the ontological claims of pagan political myth making—to which he now refers unabashedly as the "demonic mythical powers" of "darkness."[45] Cassirer even uses the traditional imagery of evil in describing the very workings of the mythical consciousness: myth—especially in its fascist guise—acts like "a serpent that tries to paralyze its victims before attacking them."[46]

In his 1928 review of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Martin Heidegger criticizes Cassirer for not having recognized the important ontological function of myth with regard to the very constitution of human existence and its "being-in-the-world."[47] Instead of analyzing the various forms of symbolic activity from a detached, academic perspective, Cassirer ought to have realized that *Dasein* finds itself at all times "thrown" into a world of myth before it can even begin to critically investigate this world.[48] Proposing an ontological return to Kant's concept of subjectivity and to the "transcendental power of imagination," Heidegger allows the violence of the mythical world to take over: "In 'being thrown' [*Geworfenheit*] there lies a relinquishing of *Dasein* in such a way that such a being-in-the-world is overpowered by that unto which it is relinquished. . . . In this referral [of *Dasein*] to the overpowering force [of the world], *Dasein* is absorbed by it and is able to experience itself only insofar as *Dasein* belongs to and is related to this reality."[49]

Cassirer counters Heidegger's reading of Kant in an article published in *Kant-Studien* in 1931 entitled "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik—Bemerkungen zu Martin Heideggers Kant-Interpretation" (Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics—Remarks on Martin Heidegger's Interpretation of Kant), in which Cassirer carries on the Davos debate of 1929.[50] In a move that seemed hopelessly antiquated to an audience that had lost faith in the promises of liberal humanism, Cassirer still insists on defending the free, ethical self as the ultimate "noumenal idea," predicated upon an ideal of humanity that has "no temporal foundations."[51]

Had it not been for a "loss of text," Cassirer could have invoked a narrative of a different kind. "It is through the *lips of the prophets* that God announces the good," writes Cohen in his *Ethik des reinen Willens*. "It is not the human mind, not scientific reason that constitutes the source . . . of the good. This is precisely the point where revelation, the Jewish narrative, borders on myth."[52] However, the peculiarity of Jewish mythopoesis—or myth making—consists in its striving to break and nullify the mythological foundations of its own sources. It is Marduk, the Babylonian god, who has the last word in Cassirer's *The Myth of the State*. Marduk's failure to completely subdue the forces of the slain monster Tiamat serves as the mythological illustration of how the world is condemned to a perennial struggle with evil.[53]

It seems then that the critical idealism of Jews such as Cohen and Cassirer is grounded in a different story, a story that proclaims the end of all

theodicy and puts an end to all explanations of evil. "There is only one meaning that evil and suffering can have," says Cohen in his *Ethik des reinen Willens*—"and that is that they ought to be abolished."[54] This is neither an expression of optimism, nor an endorsement of the belief in the progress of history. It is rather an expression of defiance, a protest against *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation history, and against the very entanglement of messianism in history.

NOTES

1. Ernst Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 2 (1942): 125.

2. Ernst Cassirer, "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7, no. 2 (April 1944): 126, reprinted in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture—Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935–1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

3. Charles Peguy, cited by Annette Aronowicz in her *Jews and Christians on Time and Eternity—Charles Peguy's Portrait of Bernard-Lazare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

4. Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Ethics of Maimonides*, trans. and with commentary by Almut Sh. Bruckstein, foreword by Robert Gibbs (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

5. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. by Shlomo Pines and with intros. by Shlomo Pines and Leo Strauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1: 54, 124.

6. Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, trans. by William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: Open Court, 1923).

7. Hermann Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften*, intro. by Franz Rosenzweig (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), 3: 221–289.

8. Ernst Cassirer, "Hermann Cohens Philosophie der Religion und ihr Verhaeltnis zum Judentum," *Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin* 4 (April 1933): 92. Cassirer's careful reading of Cohen's essay on Maimonides, "Charakterstik der Ethik Maimunis," is also evident in Cassirer's lecture "Cohen's Philosophy of Religion," presented to the Oxford Jewish Society in June 1935, and transcribed and published by Dominic Kaegi in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 1 (1996): see esp. 97–99. I wish to thank John Krois for drawing my attention to these two rather unknown pieces by Cassirer on Cohen's Jewish philosophy and for his generosity in sharing his personal copies with me.

9. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. by Simon Kaplan and with intros. by Simon Kaplan and Leo Strauss (New York: F. Ungar, 1972), 24–34.

10. Jürgen Habermas, "Die befreiende Kraft der symbolischen Formgebung—Ernst Cassirers humanistisches Erbe und die Bibliothek Warburg," in *Ernst Cassirers Werk und Wirkung,* ed. Dorothea Frede and Reinhold Schmücker (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 99.

11. Cohen, introduction, *Religion of Reason.*

12. For example, Cohen, "Die platonische Ideenlehre psychologisch entwickelt," in *Hermann Cohens Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte,* ed. Albert Goerland and Ernst Cassirer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1928), 54–55. Also "Innere Beziehungen der Kantischen Philosophie zum Judentum," in *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften,* 1: 284–305.

13. The biblical citation is from Micah 6: 8. Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens,* intro. by Steven S. Schwarzschild (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1981), 54; cf. also Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften,* 245–246; Bruckstein, trans., *Hermann Cohen. Ethics of Maimonides,* 68–70 and Cohen, *Religion of Reason,* passim.

14. Cf. Ernst Cassirer, "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik—Bemerkungen zu Martin Heideggers Kant-Interpretation," *Kant-Studien* 36 (1931): 1–26.

15. Cf. Ernst Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen," *Korrespondenzblatt des Vereins zur Gründung und Erhaltung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* 1 (1920): 1–10.

16. Cassirer continued to speak about Cohen throughout his life. This speech of 1920 is the third of eight public talks by Cassirer on Hermann Cohen. First he published an essay, "Hermann Cohen und die Erneuerung der Kantischen Philosophie," in *Kant-Studien* in 1912. In April 1918, Cassirer delivered the eulogy at Cohen's funeral; it was later published in *Hermann Cohens Schriften zur Philosophie und Zeitgeschichte,* ed. Albert Görland and Ernst Cassirer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1928), 9–16. In 1926, shortly after the death of Paul Natorp, Cohen's colleague at Marburg, Cassirer published an essay, "Von Hermann Cohens geistigem Erbe," in which he criticizes the ways in which Natorp turns Cohen's philosophy of origin into an ontological theory; see *Almanach auf das Jahr 1926* (Berlin: B. Cassirer Verlag), 53–63. Then, in 1933, Cassirer contributed an essay entitled "Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion and Its Relationship to Judaism" to the newspaper of the Jewish community in Berlin (see n. 8 above), and in 1935, after emigrating to England, Cassirer gave lectures at the Oxford Jewish Society entitled "Cohen's Philosophy of Religion" (see n. 8 above) Finally, in 1943, toward the end of his life, Cassirer published an article commemorating Cohen's one-hundredth birthday that was meant to introduce Cohen's philosophy to American readers, featuring Cohen as the main initiator of the neo-Kantian school and as the most prominent Jewish philosopher of the twentieth century. See "Hermann Cohen, 1842–1918," *Social Research* 10 (1943): 219–232.

17. Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen," 2.

18. Ibid., 9.

19. Hermann Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis,* intro. by Helmut Holzhey (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1997), 13.

20. Ibid., 150.

21. Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums—Eine Jüdische Religionsphilosophie* (Wiesbaden: Fourier, 1995), 40.

22. Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, 611.

23. Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen," 6, emphasis added.

24. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 14–15, emphasis added.

25. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 107.

26. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 20.

27. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 112–113, emphasis in the original.

28. All in *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 3.

29. Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, 84.

30. Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 391.

31. Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft*, 338–339.

32. Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, 154.

33. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 120.

34. Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 405, emphasis in the original.

35. Cassirer, "Hermann Cohen," 9.

36. Ibid., 8.

37. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 23–24.

38. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 93.

39. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 23, and passim.

40. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 24.

41. Hermann Cohen, *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, vol. 1, intro. by Gerd Wolandt (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1982), 368.

42. Deut. 20: 19 and Onkolos ad loc.

43. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 2: 24–25, emphasis added.

44. Here I take my cue from Helmut Holzhey's "Cassirers Kritik des mythischen Bewußtseins," in *Über Ernst Cassirers Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Braun, Helmut Holzhey, and Ernst Wolfgang Orth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 194, 202.

45. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 280.

46. Ibid., 286.

47. See *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 49 (5), no. 21 (1928): cols. 1000–1012.

48. Ibid., col. 1008.

49. Ibid., col. 1009.

50. Note also Steven S. Schwarzschild, "Martin Heidegger and Franz Rosenzweig—The German and the Jewish Turn to Ethnicism," ed. Almut Sh. Bruckstein, unpublished.

51. See Cassirer, "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik," 15, 18.

52. Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 54.

53. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 297–298.

54. Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 450–452.

ELEVEN

The Hero of Enlightenment

GIDEON FREUDENTHAL

"Who is a Hero?
He who subdues his passions."
(ETHICS OF THE FATHERS, 4,1)

Written at the end of the Second World War, *The Myth of the State* applies the insights of Cassirer's philosophy, which for more than four decades had followed in the tradition of the Enlightenment, to a discussion of its diametrical opposite—Fascism, and especially Nazism. When he decided to write this book, in exile and at the end of his life, it forced him to study topics and authors he had never studied before. *The Myth of the State* therefore offers an unusual perspective on Cassirer's philosophy, putting in relief some of its essential features, which are not readily visible in his other works.

Here I will set out to attempt to elucidate Cassirer's theses concerning the victory of Fascism in Germany. I then use the results of this explication as the underpinning for a certain interpretation of Cassirer's philosophical system—for a system it is. My interpretation of Cassirer's philosophy aims to resolve the incompatibility of the pluralism of symbolic forms and Cassirer's commitment to the ideal of Enlightenment, which rules out genuine relativism. Cassirer's ethics and especially its place in his philosophy serve to resolve the apparent discrepancy between the pluralism of symbolic forms and the notion of commitment to one unique culture. Moreover, this interpretation also explains why Cassirer did not write an ethics and did not even include ethics among the different symbolic forms.

The kernel of Cassirer's philosophy is the notion of a fully developed "free and autonomous personality," or what I call the "hero of Enlightenment." This notion comprises cognitive and moral, as well as psychological, characteristics, which together form an ideal of man—the telos, as it

were, of historical development.[1] The general implications of this notion are manifold. First, it clarifies the nature of Cassirer's project in *The Myth of the State*. Cassirer is concerned to review the progressive forms of cultured societal rule (which are as many as the forms of the rule of reason and morals over passion and myth) in an attempt to understand Fascism as a destruction of these forms and as the outburst of the suppressed forces of myth. Second, Cassirer's conception of the process toward Enlightenment also explains why he did not write an ethics or even count ethics as a symbolic form. Cassirer's theory of the development of culture—to which he dedicated the main body of his oeuvre—is a theory of increasing rationality and control over the passions; of the development of the individual autonomous personality and the waning of primitive natural community. As in other rationalist conceptions of ethics—most notably Kant's—Cassirer's rule of reason is tantamount to the rule of morality. Cassirer's theory of the progressive development of human culture is also a theory of ethics. Ethics is human culture seen from a specific perspective. Third, Cassirer thus resolves the tension between his pluralism (of symbolic forms) and his antirelativism, or commitment to the Enlightenment. This is so because all criteria stemming from a specific symbolic form pertain only to this same symbolic form and may not be applied to others (pluralism); however, the distance separating the different symbolic forms from their common primitive origins, the degree of mediation, and the extent to which culture subdues nature, do not belong to any specific symbolic form but occur in each of them: Morality, reason, and culture are not symbolic forms but rather second-order concepts that apply to all symbolic forms.

The scales of progress, seen according to its different dimensions—mediation, culture, individuality, autonomy, rationality—converge because they are but different aspects of the one value underlying Cassirer's reflections on this, namely, the active formation of the "given" according to the rational essence of man: "Culture is the progress of the consciousness of freedom; for the freedom of consciousness is intended and actualized in every process of thought, will, or feeling that leads us from a mere passive state to a definite form of activity."[2] The active formation of culture requires effort to overcome the natural inclination to succumb to nature. This is also the reason for the moral pathos present in Cassirer's praise of "critical idealism" and in his critique of "empiricism" and "materialism," which he sees as passively accepting the data of the "given." These theses will be further developed and substantiated below.

THE "MOST DREADFUL" EXPERIENCE UNDER NAZI RULE

At the beginning of 1945, shortly before his sudden death, Cassirer wrote in the last chapter of his *The Myth of the State*, "of all the sad experiences of these last twelve years this is perhaps the most dreadful one." Cassirer is evidently referring here to 1933–1945, the twelve years of Nazi rule in Germany. Now, what would we expect that "most dreadful" experience to refer to? We may perhaps think of "Auschwitz," of the genocide and war crimes perpetrated mainly in Eastern Europe; we may perhaps think of the Second World War in general, a war in which fifty million people were killed. But Cassirer refers to none of these. In the preceding paragraph Cassirer quotes a comparison between "civilized" and "savage" man and then comments: "We have learned that modern man . . . has not really surmounted the condition of savage life. When exposed to the same forces, he can easily be thrown back to a state of complete acquiescence. He no longer questions his environment; he accepts it as a matter of course. Of all the sad experiences of these last twelve years this is perhaps the most dreadful."[3] And Cassirer continues:

> But here are men, men of education and intelligence, honest and upright men who suddenly give up the highest human privilege. They have ceased to be free and personal agents. Performing the same prescribed rites they begin to feel, to think, and to speak in the same way. Their gestures are lively and violent; yet this is but an artificial, a sham life. In fact they are moved by an external force. They act like marionettes in a puppet show—and they do not even know that the strings of this show and of man's whole individual and social life are henceforward pulled by the political leaders.[4]

These sentences contain much that is unsettling. It is indeed deplorable that people forsake personal responsibility, but is this the "most dreadful experience" of the twelve years of Nazi rule? And if these sentences are read to mean that the forsaking of individual responsibility and the falling back into passivity and rites was the principal historical *cause* of the Nazis' rise to power or of the crimes they perpetrated, or can serve as a metonymy for these, then Cassirer's approach to Nazism seems to me very disturbing.

I submit that in Cassirer's view, the loss of a certain cluster of the individual's personal qualities, with moral responsibility forming the very core of this cluster, marks the decisive development eventuating in Fascism. This cluster of qualities is the essence of what I have termed the

"hero of Enlightenment," which is both a descriptive and a normative concept. It is descriptive in that Cassirer believed that (European) history from Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment displays a progressive development that enables the rise of a new human personality: autonomous man whose actions are guided by rational thought according to moral principles rather than myth and passion. The concept is also normative in that Cassirer wholeheartedly approved of this cultural development and saw the emerging autonomous personality not only as the fruit of cultural development but also as an ideal that should orient the personal development of individuals in advanced societies.

In contrast to other "Enlighteners," Cassirer did not believe that the forces of the past, myth and passion, were definitely replaced by culture and reason. He rather believed that in the Enlightenment, culture and reason subdue myth and passion, which continue to exist as tendencies in every individual and in society at large—and the more so the less cultivated this individual, class, or society is. Cultured societies, classes, and individuals resist the ever present and strong temptation to yield to myth and passion, and the individuals who uphold Enlightenment versus their own tendencies toward myth and passion are therefore "heroes." In contrast, the yielding to temptation and the resulting loss of the qualities of the autonomous personality were for Cassirer "the most dreadful" experience because it paved the way (causally and morally) for Nazism. Cassirer believed that this was the case because the forces that gave rise to Nazism were always present, albeit suppressed by "the hero of Enlightenment," so that as soon as the latter failed to subdue these forces of darkness, Nazism was able to rise. An immediate implication of this view is that Fascism is essentially not a modern, but rather an archaic phenomenon.

THE TASK OF PHILOSOPHY

Although Cassirer had a cheerful nature, led a—for the most part—productive professional life and enjoyed affluent circumstances, it comes as no surprise that the course of events from 1914–1945, and especially the years 1933–1945, led Cassirer to some kind of despair. This is even more plausible if we keep in mind that Cassirer's formation had taken place under very different auspices. In the decades preceding the First World War, members of his social standing, including Jews, could indeed be confident of general progress and continuous improvement in their own lives as well

as in society in general. The experience of Fascism belied this assumption. However, in addition to the despondency, which was—understandably—felt by Cassirer, as well as by others in his generation, there was also a disappointment on Cassirer's part concerning the role of philosophy, and perhaps concerning his own role as a philosopher in the course of events.

> What can philosophy do to help us in this struggle against political myths? Our modern philosophers seem long ago to have given up all hope of influencing the course of political and social events. Hegel had the highest opinion of the worth and dignity of philosophy. Nevertheless it was Hegel himself who declared that philosophy always comes too late for the reform of the world. It is therefore just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy might transcend its present time as that an individual might leap out of his own time. "When philosophy paints its grey in grey one form of life has become old and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering." If this dictum of Hegel were true, philosophy would be condemned to an absolute quietism, an entirely passive attitude toward man's historical life. It has simply to accept and explain the given historical situation and bow down before it. In this case philosophy would be nothing but a sort of speculative idleness. I think, however, that this contradicts both the general character of philosophy and the history of philosophy. The classical example of Plato alone would be enough to refute this view. The great thinkers of the past were not only "their own times apprehended in thought." Very often they had to think beyond and against their times. Without this intellectual and moral courage, philosophy could not fulfill its task in man's cultural and social life.[5]

These are harsh words, and it comes as no surprise that a philosopher should quickly dismiss the possibility that Hegel may be right. Cassirer continues: "It is beyond the power of philosophy to destroy the political myths. A myth is in a sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational arguments; it cannot be refuted by syllogisms. But philosophy can do us another important service. It can make us understand the adversary. In order to fight an enemy you must know him."[6]

Now, the only trouble is that Cassirer's words were written in 1945, that is, certainly "too late for the reform of the world" and certainly too late to render any service to the struggle against Italian and German Fascism. Moreover, Cassirer's publications of the 1930s show no reference

to—let alone any extended discussion of—Fascism or political myth in general.[7] There is no indication in Cassirer's work of any attempt to analyze Fascism before it was defeated. *The Myth of the State* was written—so Charles W. Hendel tells us—between the winter of 1943 and the spring of 1945, in other words, after the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad (February 1943), the turning point of the war, when the fate of Nazi Germany was sealed. In fact, *The Myth of the State* was written as a response to critical comments leveled at Cassirer for his silence concerning Fascism, including the comments of friends in the United States who asked him to tell them "the meaning of what is happening today, instead of writing about past history, science and culture."[8] When *The Myth of the State* was written, it was in fact already dealing with past—albeit recent—history.

CASSIRER'S EVIDENCE ON FASCISM

On the whole, Cassirer's books abound in well-informed and excellent presentations of the subject matter discussed. This is not at all the case with *The Myth of the State*. One can consider first the most superficial evidence—Cassirer's bibliography and quotations. With one exception, none of the analyses of Fascism that appeared prior to this are mentioned.[9] There is no book or article that dates from the 1930s, neither by Otto Bauer, nor by members of the Frankfurt school; there is no mention either of Franz Neumann, Erich Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, or Herbert Marcuse, of Arthur Rosenberg or of course August Thalheimer, Leon Trotsky, or Georgi Dimitrov. There is also no reference to any study on the politics of Weimar Germany, no allusion to the causes or outcome of World Wars One or Two. In fact, only one passage in *The Myth of the State* refers to social and political realities: the rest resides in the heavenly realm of ideas.[10]

Cassirer's political analysis of the victory of Nazism in Germany is as follows:

> The general conditions which favored this development [i.e., turning the ideas discussed by Cassirer into political weapons] and contributed to its final victory appeared in the period after the First World War. At this time all the nations which had been engaged in the war encountered the same fundamental difficulties . . . The leaders of the Weimar Republic had done their best to cope with these problems by diplomatic transactions or legislative measures. But all their efforts seemed to have been made in

> vain. In the times of inflation and unemployment Germany's whole social and economic system was threatened with a complete collapse. The normal resources seemed to have been exhausted. This was the natural soil upon which the political myths could grow up and in which they found ample nourishment.[11]

Now, besides the fact that these are the only sentences on social and political realities in a book of three hundred pages, the content is in itself also very strange. Who are the leaders of the Weimar Republic who had done their best to cope with the problems? Von Papen? Schleicher? Hindenburg? Brüning? These sentences alone already make it quite clear that no political analysis, and certainly no long-range historical analysis, is to be expected from this book—and indeed none is offered. Cassirer was writing a traditional "history of ideas." In fact, there is not even any analysis of Fascist ideology to be found in the book. Although Cassirer's book bears the title *The Myth of the State*, there is no mention of Alfred Rosenberg's *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* nor of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, or any other Nazi literature. Cassirer always deals with the highlights of philosophical thought: Plato, Machiavelli, Hegel are his points of reference. Yet even the high-caliber antidemocratic writings of Carl Schmitt are not analyzed or even mentioned. Neither *Der Begriff des Politischen* nor any of the other writings of this proponent of National Socialism are considered. Spengler is mentioned once;[12] however, it is not his Fascist *Jahre der Entscheidung* of 1933 that is referred to, but rather his two-volume *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* of 1918–1920. In short, but for a few remarks and allusions—and of course the date of publication—nothing indicates that this book is about victorious Fascism in Europe of the thirties and forties.

THE THREE COMPONENTS OF FASCIST IDEOLOGY

Cassirer's *The Myth of the State*, however, is of course about so-called Fascist totalitarian regimes, especially about German Nazism. To be more exact, Cassirer discusses those ideological elements which he believes to be essential to the worldview of Fascism, and he assumes that an understanding of this worldview is a sufficient basis for understanding the real historical phenomenon. It is not that Cassirer thought that no real force is necessary to turn an idea into social and political reality, rather, as I will argue below, he believed that the necessary forces are permanently present. It is only

morality, the cluster of properties for which I have coined the term "hero of Enlightenment," which at times can prevent the victory of the forces of Fascism, and when this "hero" falters, Fascism prevails. In fact, this is the core of Cassirer's view of Fascism—and perhaps of political life in general. But what is the content of Fascist ideology in Cassirer's view?

For the answer to this question, a glance at *The Myth of the State*'s table of contents suffices: the conception of the total state, the worship of heroes (i.e., the Führer), and racism—and all three integrated in a political myth.[13] A problem arises already when we compare the title of the third part of the book, "The Myth of the Twentieth Century," with its content. Strangely enough this part of the book deals with three thinkers, none of whom lived in the twentieth century: Carlyle died in 1881, Gobineau in 1882, and Hegel as early as 1831. Is Cassirer suggesting that Nazi ideology was present in the middle of the nineteenth century? Cassirer's implicit thesis is in fact much more radical. The name of the chapter immediately preceding the part on "The Myth of the Twentieth Century" is "The Philosophy of the Enlightenment and Its Romantic Critics" and concerns the Romantic response to the Enlightenment (chap. 14). It seems that Cassirer conceives of a history of progress from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, and that Romanticism's criticism of the Enlightenment was conducive (although not in any way willingly) to Nazism.[14] If the repression of the forces of darkness—which are "natural" and therefore permanently present here and in need of no explanation—slackens, this is enough to help these forces erupt. But in fact, Cassirer's conception is even more far-reaching. In his view, there is a timeless struggle between the archaic forces of myth, fears, human drives, dissolution of the self, and the urge to become immersed in the community on the one hand, and on the other, the hero of Enlightenment, the forces of civilization, control of human drives, morals, and individuality. This permanent drama takes place in different forms throughout the course of history, but its essence remains the same. One of the important implications of this view is that Fascism is an essentially archaic and not a modern phenomenon.

COHERENT WORLDVIEWS: ANTIQUITY, THE MIDDLE AGES, AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

There are, according to Cassirer, three worldviews that offer a coherent system in which human beings securely live. Since Cassirer does not dis-

tinguish between theories of social order, worldviews and finally social reality itself, he believes that in writing about "representative" thinkers, he is also addressing the worldviews of people and the corresponding social orders themselves. The first, the "cosmos" or harmonious system is that of classical antiquity. In Cassirer's view, the construction of the "cosmos" is the Platonic achievement in all fields of human life. It is for dialectic to "set bounds to the boundless" and to create order in the chaos, and this implies that myth has to be fought:

> Of all things in the world myth is the most unbridled and immoderate. It exceeds and defies all limits . . . to banish this dissolute power from the human and political world was one of the principal aims of the Republic. Plato's logic and dialectic teach us how to classify and systematize our concepts and thought . . . Ethics shows us how to rule over emotions; how to moderate them by virtue of reason and temperance. Politics is the art of unifying and organizing human actions and directing them to a common end. Thus the Platonic parallel between the individual soul and the soul of the state is by no means a mere figure of speech or a simple analogy. It is the expression of Plato's fundamental tendency: the tendency to unify the manifold, to bring the chaos of our minds, or our desires and passions, of our political and social life into a cosmos, into order and harmony.[15]

As we shall see below, all the elements of Cassirer's thought are already here, especially the parallelism between the control of passions by reason, on the one hand, and the establishment of social harmony by exclusion and suppression of archaic forces, on the other.

The second worldview or social order characterized by Cassirer as a cosmos is what he calls "medieval culture." Significantly, he happens to speak of this harmony while discussing the revival of Stoic ethics in early modern Europe: "All the great and undeniable progress made by the Renaissance and the Reformation were counterbalanced by a severe and irreparable loss. The unity and the inner harmony of medieval culture had been dissolved. Assuredly the Middle Ages were not free from deep conflicts . . . But the ethical and religious foundation of medieval civilization was not seriously affected by these discussions."[16]

Finally the third and last period, which Cassirer sees as distinguished by an internal harmony, is the Enlightenment: "There has perhaps never existed a more complete harmony between theory and practice, between

thought and life, than in the eighteenth century. . . . It was this feature that gave to the culture of the eighteenth century its strength and its inner unity. Literature and art, science and philosophy had a common center and cooperated with each other to the same end."[17] Now, another common feature of these three periods and harmonious cultures is that they all combat myth. I have quoted already Cassirer's account of Plato's exclusion of myth from the Republic. On the Enlightenment Cassirer says: "To all thinkers of the Enlightenment myth had been a barbarous thing, a strange and uncouth mass of confused ideas and gross superstitions, a mere monstrosity. Between myth and philosophy there could be no point of contact. Myth ends where philosophy begins—as darkness gives way to the rising sun."[18]

This same attitude cannot of course be attributed to the second harmonious "cosmos," that of medieval religious culture. Cassirer rather conceived of religion as located between myth and philosophy, as rooted in myth but emerging out of it and sustaining itself through the critique of its own mythological origin.[19] If Cassirer's words on medieval "Enlightenment" are not as strong as those referring to "Enlightenment" in antiquity and in the eighteenth century, it is nonetheless worth noting that the chapters on the Middle Ages in *The Myth of the State* are almost the only locus in over forty years of scholarly work in which Cassirer discusses medieval philosophy. In most of his writing he usually moves directly from classical antiquity to early modern times. His discussion of medieval philosophy in these chapters is by all means meant in a positive light; it is presented as a cosmos. In short, the three periods in which a harmonious cosmos of culture existed are classical antiquity, medieval religion, and the Enlightenment—all three constituted by the suppression of myth and the establishment of a cosmos organized by understanding, and in which passions and desires are kept in check by ethics.

THE AUTONOMOUS PERSONALITY

Cassirer did not write an ethics, nor does ethics appear on any of his lists of the various symbolic forms; this is well known. Yet, all readers of Cassirer will agree that "his entire thought is permeated with ethics."[20] It is also quite clear what his ethical ideal is, namely, "autonomy," sovereignty over one's life and moral responsibility for it. Just as Cassirer's ultimate harmonious social order was the age of Enlightenment, the height of morality for him was Kant's ethics: "A man is a free agent if these motives

depend upon his own judgment and own conviction of what moral duty is . . . it means that the law which we obey in our actions is not imposed from without but that the moral subject gives this law to himself."[21]

However, there is an element in Cassirer's thought that is lacking in Kant's: the relation of the ethical ideal to history. Cassirer does not take the autonomous individual to be an ahistorical essence of man but rather the product of historical development. Cassirer says that "human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation."[22] This ties freedom not only to culture but also to historical progress in time. The question is, however, whether we can also establish an essential connection between culture and freedom and plausibly argue for their development in time.

The answer to this question is based on Kant's notion of freedom as autonomy. As corporeal beings, men are subject to the laws of nature and are therefore not free but rather heteronomously ruled. Autonomy means subjection to man's own rule of reason. This perspective is dependent on the view that man's essence does not belong to nature. Since Descartes, this essence has been identified with reason, the "cogito," which is independent from nature and is spontaneous and free.[23] But Cassirer does not wish to relegate autonomy out of the empirical world; the empirical, corporeal man should be free. Since human beings can be free inasmuch as they are rational beings, it is a moral imperative to be rational and form one's own life in accordance with reason; and Cassirer says as much: "The great thinkers who have defined man as an *animal rationale* were not empiricists, nor did they ever intend to give an empirical account of human nature. By this definition they were expressing rather a fundamental moral imperative."[24] Cassirer concurs with the view of man as *animal rationale* and subscribes to this ethical demand. In keeping with his philosophy, he further develops this definition to *animal symbolicum*: The autonomy of man shows in fact that in contradistinction to an animal's reaction, man's response to stimuli is mediated by symbolic systems. This view enables a further change in the classic definition. Man is not simply either rational or irrational, but he is rational inasmuch as his life depends on the mediation of symbolic forms; in other words, rationality can be ranked.[25]

The mediation of human conduct by (different) symbolic forms, which are cultural products, enables humans to postpone their response to stimuli and to also respond in different ways. Man does not necessarily react

to a stimulus, but rather responds to it actively and variously, and this testifies to his freedom.[26] The more human action depends on culture the more it is dependent on man's own product and the less it is heteronomously determined by nature. Creating distance, introducing means of mediation (tools, symbols) between the human agent and his objects, are the ways in which man demonstrates his ability to emerge from nature and determinism and develop culture and his own subjectivity and autonomy: "All knowledge of the world, and all strictly speaking '"spiritual' (*geistig*) action upon the world require that the I thrust the world back from itself, that in contemplation as in action it gain a certain 'distance' from it."[27] The development of human culture is thus not only parallel to the growth of human freedom but is its essential basis. An action is free to the same degree that it is mediated by culture. Thus "mediation" is a criterion that applies to the progress of both culture and freedom and orders them according to a corresponding scale: The more actions are mediated, the more culture is developed and the more the actions are free. The development of culture has an ethical value.

Hence in Cassirer's conception, as in other rationalist conceptions of ethics—most notably Kant's—the rule of reason is tantamount to the rule of morality. Ethics is human culture seen from a specific perspective. The prerequisite for ascribing to culture an ethical value, however, is a very general conception of "freedom" from being determined by external, heteronomous causes.[28] Maintaining a distance from the objects of human activity is the basis of the liberation of man from nature and this, as we saw, is of moral value. This tacit presumption is so strong that Cassirer's criticism of empiricism often has a moral tone of disapproval, since empiricism is allegedly more passive, adapting to nature and tied to the senses, whereas rationalism is active and spiritual and subdues nature by reason; in short, it is tantamount to freedom.[29] Subduing nature by culture is a social, cultural, and historical process on the one hand, but also a never-ending personal task, on the other.

MYTH AND THE DEEP DESIRE TO BE FREED FROM THE FETTERS OF INDIVIDUALITY

In Cassirer's view, the development of the autonomous personality requires not only the emergence from inanimate nature and a distancing from brutes, it also requires the liberation from the "natural" bonds of

human community. Primitive communities do not allow the development of an independent personality, whether in the form of life or thought. Myth expresses not personal but rather communal experience. The emergence of an autonomous personality and the suppression of myth are hence two sides of the same process. In Cassirer's view, the ethical significance of Enlightenment lies in the emancipation of man from myth and thus also from the primitive community; both are tantamount to the formation of the morally responsible autonomous individual. The formation of the autonomous personality is the process of dissolving myth and the "natural" primitive community by means of Enlightenment and a growing individuality.[30]

Since belonging to a community is in Cassirer's view a basic, natural, and strong (psychological) need of humans, the heavy price paid for the formation of individuality is the loss of communal ties. The dark side of emancipation and liberation is, on the one hand, the loss of traditional social coherence and, on the other, personal isolation and the shouldering of the burden of responsibility.[31] Cassirer writes, "if man were simply to follow his natural instincts he would not strive for freedom; he would rather choose dependence. Obviously it is much easier to depend upon others than to think, to judge, and to decide for himself."[32] In fact, it is not only that there is no "natural instinct" of freedom and individuality, rather, the exact opposite is the case, there is a deep natural "desire" to forsake both: "In the Dionysian cult we find scarcely any specific feature of the Greek genius. What appears here is a fundamental feeling of mankind, a feeling that is common to the most primitive rites and to the most sublime spiritualized mystic religions. It is the deep desire of the individual to be freed from the fetters of its individuality, to immerse itself in the stream of universal life, to lose its identity, to be absorbed in the whole of nature."[33] This desire of man as expressed in the Dionysian cult is viewed by Cassirer as suprahistorical. The desire may perhaps be overcome, but this is an achievement—and one opposed to nature; it therefore also has an ethical value.

THE HERO OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The value of ethical conduct lies in the fact that it requires effort: If nothing were required for moral conduct but to follow the natural course of things, it would have as little ethical value as the course of nature. The

crucial point is that Cassirer conceives of the maintenance and development of culture as an achievement opposed to natural powers, an achievement that requires heroism. Heroism is hence not only necessary in times of dramatic moral decisions but required for every act of civilization. Thus, on the occasion of commenting on the development of technology, Cassirer says, "the way of spirit is here as anywhere else under the law of *ascesis*, under the command of a heroic will, that knows that it can achieve and even set up its goal only by forgoing all naive-instinctive (*naivtriebhafte*) desire for happiness."[34]

The value of actual ethical conduct hence consists in overcoming natural inclinations and subjecting conduct to the will guided by reason; and the converse is also true: Every act of overcoming natural drives and conduct in accordance with reason is of ethical value.[35] This is the reason that Cassirer values the Stoic apathy that entails withdrawal from the real world. The classic age represented by Descartes allows and even recommends sensuous pleasure,[36] but the effort of the will is required to either master the passions and put them in the service of reason or, if necessary, to renounce them; and this effort requires heroes.[37]

What is true of the classic age is no less true of modern man: "Civilized Man is, of course, subject to the most violent passions, and when these passions reach their culminating point he is liable to yield to the most irrational impulses." To sustain freedom is therefore "the most arduous task that man can set himself" and "especially hard in times of severe and dangerous social crisis." The twentieth century was indeed a time of such crisis. Cassirer's view on the threat to the individual in such times is very clear: "In politics we are always living on volcanic soil. . . . For myth . . . is always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity. This hour comes as soon as the other binding forces of man's social life . . . lose their strength and are no longer able to combat the demonic mythical powers."[38] The hero of Enlightenment is the person who withstands the inclination to forego individuality and choose dependence and likewise resists the temptation to follow the passions. In the face of both external powers and internal inclinations he maintains his personal responsibility and forms his conduct—in spite of his passions—with a firm will and in the light of reason.

Responsibility rather than instincts, understanding instead of imagination, rational discourse instead of myth, and most important, moral duty instead of passion—this is only a partial list characterizing the

great alternative Cassirer posits.[39] Whereas everything in the world of fact speaks against freedom, it is the inner voice of the ethical imperative, which alone speaks for assuming personal responsibility and freedom. But if indeed there is nothing in human physical nature or in social life that supports freedom, then it really does takes a hero to control and suppress human nature, desires, and instincts, including those that support myth. The hero of Enlightenment is a hero not because he is immune to the temptations of myth, but on the contrary, because he is tempted and attracted by the forces of myth and nevertheless resists them. He is a hero in the sense of the old Hebrew proverb, Who is a hero? He who subdues his passions (*Eyzehu gibor? Hakovesh et yitzro*).

GÖRLAND AND THE "MOST DREADFUL" EXPERIENCE

Finally, I return to Cassirer's words quoted at the beginning of this paper on the "most dreadful" experience in the twelve years of Nazi rule: "But here are men, men of education and intelligence, honest and upright men who suddenly give up the highest human privilege. They have ceased to be free and personal agents."[40] I believe that this verdict of Cassirer's can now be better understood: If Fascism is the outburst of the archaic forces of myth, which are always threatening to erupt from under the thin crust of civilization and culture, then forsaking moral responsibility and rational control means relinquishing the only means at hand for combating Fascism. Everything that followed, the terror of the 1930s, the Second World War, the war crimes, the genocide—all these were nothing but the consequences of the fateful release of the pressure by which the archaic forces of myth had been subdued. Whoever betrayed the privilege of freedom and morality can be held morally responsible for the outrageous crimes committed by these forces once they were set free.[41]

There is, however, one expression in the opening sentence that still requires interpretation. Why does Cassirer refer to "men of education and intelligence, honest and upright men" in speaking of those who "suddenly give up the highest human privilege"? Neither the Nazi party nor its leadership was characterized by an especially high percentage of "educated and intelligent, honest and upright" persons. The meaning of this characterization may be complex. Since in Cassirer's view morality and culture converge, the more cultivated a person is the greater the astonishment caused by his moral corruption. Moreover, by the same criterion the

immoral behavior of the lower and "uneducated classes" is less surprising than that of the upper, educated, and civilized classes. The relations between the upper and the lower classes in this respect were often conceived as analogous to the relations between the "civilized" nations (or the latter's upper classes) and the "primitives." Finally, since Cassirer himself belonged both to the upper class and to the most educated and civilized stratum of society, it seems plausible that he is also touching on his experience in his own social circle. I believe that Cassirer is referring here also to very personal and painful experiences with people of his social environment who were indeed educated and intelligent, and also seemed—before the moment of truth—honest and upright; they then gave in to their passions and desires and betrayed their former convictions, thereby forsaking their individual responsibility.

Each and every exiled German must have undergone such an experience, but rarely did it result in a letter such as Cassirer wrote to his former colleague and close acquaintance of decades, Albert Görland. The letter was written in response to one from Görland, in which he asks Cassirer to help a Jewish colleague to emigrate from Germany, and closes with the words, "as you see, dear Cassirer, I have not changed." Toni Cassirer writes about her husband's reaction: "I have seldom seen Ernst so indignant ("empört") as on that day." In his answer, dated 26 November 1938—two weeks after Kristallnacht, the pogrom of 11 November 1938!!!—Cassirer informs Görland that he has reliable testimonies concerning the latter's metamorphosis ("Wandlung") and then adds:

> I could have understood if you had kept silent as did so many others. There are, thank God, men, who, in spite of their silence, did not renounce their innermost convictions (*Gesinnung*)—men whom I respect and with whom I to this day maintain relations of scholarship and friendship. But you thought it right and necessary, at this decisive moment of most acute danger, to forget and renounce your teachers, your friends, as well as the convictions you have professed for years in your books and lectures. Your ambition (*Geltungstrieb*) did not allow you to silently stand back. You wanted to "be part of it" at all costs, even at the cost of personal dignity. . . . Time and again I have had to severely condemn what has happened in these last years. But I have tried to be restrained and moderate when my judgment concerned people, individual persons, and not principles. I have told myself time and again, how much power bedazzling prejudice and

> blind passion can have over men. But you were among those who were not blind, but rather capable of seeing. You knew what Jews and Judaism were; you knew what to think of the destructive influence of Judaism on German philosophy. Because you knew and understood the achievement of Hermann Cohen and knew with regard to yourself that without it you would not have written a single line of your own books. Was it really necessary to renounce all this?
>
> But to me, your switching of principles is worse than your conduct toward people—it is the way you suddenly discovered for yourself the "ideas of 1933." You cannot fool yourself with regard to the fact that this was a break with everything you have ever taught. You may attempt to conceal it from yourself as much as you like, but you will never succeed in making yourself believe your own "dialectic constructions" for you cannot disavow that by your conduct you have taken upon yourself a terrible responsibility and that you cannot absolve yourself of the guilt for what is now happening.[42]

As we see, Cassirer holds Görland responsible for the atrocities that occurred in Germany in November 1938 ("was jetzt geschieht," what is now happening). He is passing a harsh moral judgment, but one that, at least to me, is also convincing. I believe that an experience of this kind may explain the emphasis Cassirer put on "men of education and intelligence, honest and upright men" who have given up their "highest human privilege" of individuality and responsibility and joined the mainstream of Nazism. And yet as an explanation of Nazism it seems to me flawed in principle. It was, however, very difficult in Cassirer's time—as it is in our own—to distinguish between, and keep separate, these three layers of personal consternation, moral judgment, and political explanation.

CONCLUSION

I close this interpretation with two complementary conclusions: Cassirer's political interpretation of Fascism is in principle flawed inasmuch as it is indebted to the myth of the hero of Enlightenment. As a matter of course Cassirer saw all social and political problems as individual and moral ones. He did not challenge at all the assumption that Fascism is archaic and modernity moral, and he accepted unquestioningly the dichotomy between passions as something evil and reason as something good.[43] Questioning

these assumptions, or at least recognizing them to be assumptions and not self-evident matters of fact, would have been the necessary precondition for a serious social and political reflection on Fascism. Cassirer did not raise these questions nor did he attempt an analysis of Fascism; he in fact wasted no more than one passage on social history and politics in Weimar Germany—and a misguided one at that. Like others of a similar background, Cassirer was blind to the social forces that were attracted to—and profited from—Fascism and helped it to power. On the other hand, Cassirer's moral indictment of individuals who yielded to the lure of Nazism is defendable and testifies to Cassirer's admirable humanistic personality. The problem with *The Myth of the State* is that Cassirer did not distinguish between political analysis and moral judgment.

Finally, in his discussion of Fascism, Cassirer further illuminates the place of ethics in his system and its relation to the advancement of culture. It becomes clear, then, that for Cassirer, not only was cultural development associated with moral progress, but there was a clear argument connecting the two: The more human conduct becomes culturally mediated and the more it is determined by man's own action (embodied in former cultural products), the less man is subjected to the heteronymous determination of nature. Cassirer's statement that "human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation"[44] is not merely a dictum but also a precise summary of the well-argued message of his entire oeuvre.

This of course suggests that the hierarchy established for the different symbolic forms and cultural products can be justified by way of reference to an ethical scale. This seems to me a very appealing perspective because it excludes the inference of "relativism" from the "pluralism" of symbolic forms.[45] Cassirer put considerable effort into convincing his reader that different symbolic forms may not be measured by the same yardstick, that they have internal proper criteria by which they should be measured. This seems to indicate relativism, since it forbids the use of a gauge belonging to one symbolic form in evaluating others, and suggests that all gauges have to belong to some such symbolic form. Relativism means that all symbolic forms "enjoy equal rank as products of the human spirit."[46] Nevertheless, Cassirer never veiled his conviction that science and Enlightenment rank highest in human culture; in fact, the entire structure of all his major works is inconceivable without this conviction.[47] Thus, when asked by Hugo Bergman about the privilege of science over other symbolic forms, Cas-

sirer said: "We can understand myth, myth cannot understand us."[48] But the answer begs the question: Why is "understanding"—rather than "happiness" or "wealth" or other dimensions—privileged as a dimension for ranking cultures? However, if freedom and autonomy, or ethics, rationality, and culture are not themselves symbolic forms but rather second-order concepts in respect to these, then their universal application is not biased in favor of one symbolic form over others. Indeed, Cassirer grades symbolic forms on the basis of ethical, rational, and cultural standards, which all converge to the degree of mediation of the action or product involved. Also, since ethics is not itself a symbolic form, Cassirer can maintain his commitment to both Enlightenment and to an antirelativist stance.

In Cassirer's conception, autonomy and freedom, as well as epistemological adequacy and comprehensiveness, are not merely proportionate to the distance from nature, but are identified as consisting in this distance or in the mediation of human conduct by cultural means. Ethical and epistemic value are thus two aspects of the same matter of fact. Hence there is one universal (not necessarily linear) hierarchy in which all spheres of human culture can be ordered, according to both their ethical and cognitive value. The ethical value is autonomy, the cognitive value is understanding, and the different developmental stages of culture can be progressively ordered.

One must ask, however, is there a justification for choosing a certain ethical or cognitive value (autonomy, understanding) over others? Ultimate values cannot be justified, says Cassirer:

> Critical ethics affords us no answer as to why order should be preferred to chaos, free subordination to the universality of self-given law, to arbitrariness of individual drives. In the *Critique of Reason,* theoretical as well as practical, the idea of reason, the idea of a final and supreme union of knowledge and will is taken for granted. Whoever fails to acknowledge this idea thus excludes himself from the orbit of its manner of posing problems, and from its conceptions of "true" and "false," "good" and "evil," which it alone can substantiate, empowered by its method.[49]

This insight partially explains Cassirer's despair concerning the role of philosophy. Philosophical controversy, like rational and moral discourse in general, depends on the existence of a common ground, on the sharing of the same orbit of "true" and "false," "good" and "evil"; and this common orbit did not exist in the controversy with Fascism.

The Myth of the State, as I have argued, is not adequate as an explanation of Fascism. The entire fabric of Cassirer's philosophy and also of *The Myth of the State* rests on the basic assumption that the progress of reason and morality are one and the same. The possibility of evil at the peak of civilization was strictly inconceivable within this philosophy. Cassirer therefore attempted to conceive of it as the return of the suppressed archaic layer of myth. The results, in my view, are very unsatisfactory. In addition to being a masterful exposition of a certain thread in the history of ideas, *The Myth of the State* is a testimony to the despair of the foremost representative of Enlightenment in his day, as he faced the destruction of Enlightenment and the reign of evil.

NOTES

1. "Man" is used in the sense of "human being." Since Cassirer named his latest (and best) summary presentation of his ideas *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), I chose to retain this linguistic usage, with no prejudicial intent.

2. Ernst Cassirer, "Critical Idealism As a Philosophy of Culture," in *Symbol, Myth and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1933–1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 90.

3. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 286.

4. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 286.

5. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 295–296. Cassirer here notes Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Dyde trans.), preface, xxx. Cassirer's criticism of Oswald Spengler and Martin Heidegger is essentially directed at their encouragement of passivity rather than activity. See *Myth of the State*, 289–292, and "Philosophy and Politics" (1944), in *Symbol, Myth and Culture*, 219–232, 230. Cassirer approvingly quoted Albert Schweitzer's verdict on the failure of philosophy to fulfill its tasks vis-à-vis the two dangers threatening civilization, namely, nationalism and the fact that "modern man is lost in the mass," that is, the loss of free individuality. Cassirer asks, "can there be a better and more striking expression of the present state of mind in Germany and in other countries than these words spoken more than twenty years ago?" Cassirer, "Philosophy and Politics," 231, 232. Note, however, that Cassirer also approves of Schweitzer's assertion that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries popular philosophy "controlled the general thought and maintained the enthusiasm for civilization," and that this was "lost during the second half of the nineteenth century" (232). Here as well as in *The Myth of the State* and elsewhere, Cassirer sketches a development that reaches its peak in Enlightenment philosophy. His commitment to the ideals of this philosophy prevents him from seeing any progress thereafter—there is only deterioration. This is a problem that Cassirer's theory shares with other theories of historical cognitive development, for example, Jean Piaget's.

6. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 295–296. This may be an allusion to Heine's poem "Die Wanderratten" (Migratory rats): "Man fängt nicht Ratten mit Syllogismen, sie springen

über die feinsten Sophismen" [You can't catch rats with syllogisms, / They nimbly jump over your finest sophism]. Heinrich Heine, *Lyric Poems and Ballads*, translated by Ernst Feise (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1961), 150–151. Heine refers positively to socialist masses, Cassirer seems to apply the verse negatively to the Fascist masses.

7. Certainly, all of Cassirer's work is political in the sense that it propagates the Enlightenment. On its merits and yet also somehow ridiculous character, see Michel Foucault's review of the French translation of "Die Philosophie der Aufklärung" (originally published in 1932; French translation, 1966) in *La Quinzaine littéraire* 8 (1–15 July 1966): 3–4. But in *The Myth of the State* Cassirer demands a more direct involvement, that is, an analysis of Fascism, and this he did not do. In fact, there is no change whatsoever in Cassirer's work during these years compared to previous ones. Consider his books alone: *Determinismus und Indeterminismus in der modernen Physik* (1936); *Descartes* and *Axel Hägerström* (1939). Almost the same can be said of his work in the 1940s: *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenshaften* (1944) and *Essay on Man* (1944). An exception are Cassirer's papers of 1944, for example, "Philosophy and Politics" (219–232) and "Judaism and the Modern Political Myths," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7 (1944): 115–126. The same is true of the numerous papers published in these years, as well as the then unpublished studies of the forties, which John Krois edited under the title *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*.

8. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, foreword, x.

9. Hannah Arendt, "Race-Thinking before Racism," *Review of Politics* 6 (1944): 36–73.

10. Oswald Schwemmer remarks that Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* is devoted to an "histoire de mentalités" ("mentalitätstheoretische Analyse") and neglects economics and power politics. See his *Ernst Cassirer: Ein Philosoph der europäischen Moderne* (Berlin: Akademie, 1997), 169. An "histoire de mentalités" would be fine, but Cassirer in fact wrote a history of ideas of high culture.

11. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 277–278.

12. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 289.

13. Part 3 of the book comprises the following chapters: XV—"The Preparation: Carlyle"; XVI—"From Hero Worship to Race Worship"; XVII—"Hegel"; XVIII—"The Technique of the Modern Political Myths."

14. Like similar histories of progress, Cassirer has nothing to say on the transition from antiquity to the so-called Middle Ages.

15. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 77.

16. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 69.

17. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 179.

18. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 182–183.

19. In fact, Cassirer believes that religion is born when the essential difference between signifier and signified is grasped. "Religion takes a decisive step that is essentially alien to myth: in its use of sensuous images and signs it recognizes them as such—a means of expression which, though they reveal a determinate meaning, must necessarily remain inadequate to it, which "point" to this meaning but never wholly exhaust it." *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New

Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 239. See also John M. Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 149: "On Cassirer's interpretation, religion is distinguished from myth by a turn away from passive obedience and fear to a positive, active, ethical orientation in which man becomes individually responsible to God." All characterizations are unsatisfactory because religion exists in the space between myth and ethics and is defined *ex negativo*, i.e., in its enlightening criticism of myth on the one hand and in its adherence to myth as compared with ethics on the other.

20. "[S]ein gesamtes Denken (ist) ethisch imprägniert." Birgit 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: Kultur und Philosophie*, ed. Dorothea Frede and Reinhold Schmücker (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 72.

21. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 287. Kant's ethics marks the height of early modern ethical history for Cassirer, and, as I will argue below, there is no development after it. For Cassirer, the very different, even opposed philosophies of the Cambridge Platonists Bayle and Grotius, and Leibniz, all belong to the same general development from Luther to Kant's ethics "from the concept of freedom of the Reformation to the concept of freedom of idealism, from the principle of justification by faith to the principle of the autonomy of the will and of practical reason." See Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, Austin (University of Texas Press) 1953 (1932), 85. See also Cassirer's report on the criticism of Hobbes's theory of the state, asserting that man cannot give up his personality "for by such an act of renunciation he would give up that very character which constitutes his nature and essence: he would lose his humanity." *Myth of the State*, 175.

22. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 228.

23. "In the same way in which the I ascertains its own existence in a direct manner in the act of the Cogito, it also assures itself in the very same fundamental act of its inner freedom, of its original spontaneity (see AT V, 159). And in the same way in which this freedom is for Descartes theoretically incontrovertibly valid, so it is also in ethical perspective the highest and most noble [property] of man. At this point he dares to explicitly deny and remove the barrier between the creator and the 'creatural' being. Free will—so he writes in his first letter to Queen Christiana—is in itself the most noble property we can have, especially since it renders us in some respect similar to God and seems to exempt us from being his subjects." Ernst Cassirer, *Descartes: Lehre, Persönlichkeit, Wirkung* (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1939), 92. The references are to *Œuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Charles Adam & Paul Tannery, 1897–1913).

24. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 25–26.

25. "No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are part of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience," *Essay on Man*, 25. For the definition of man as *animal symbolicum*, see 25–26.

26. The title of chapter 3 of *An Essay on Man* is "From Animal Reactions to Human Responses." Human activity and independence from the "given" play a key role in Cassirer's thought. Thus the stages through which symbolic formation runs—mimetic,

analogical, representational—also mark progressive detachment from the "given," hence they also mark progressive stages of freedom, of individuality (dependent on objectification of nature as the opposite pole to the free individual).

27. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 275–276. Single quotation marks as in original. See also Ernst Cassirer, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 1, ed. John M. Krois (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995), 224.

28. This was emphasized by Birgit Recki in "Kultur ohne Moral?" 73–78. Recki criticizes it as a mistake in conceptualization.

29. Cassirer writes that "the various products of culture . . . become multiple efforts, all directed towards the one goal of transforming the passive world of mere impressions, in which the spirit seems at first imprisoned, into a world that is pure expression of the human spirit." See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, *Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 80–81. This is but one of many examples.

30. At times it even seems that for Cassirer social coherence as such is tantamount to the reign of myth and therefore that the autonomous personality is quasi-independent of society: "If we abandon the mythical gods we suddenly seem to lose our ground. We no longer live in the atmosphere which appears to be the vital element of social life, the atmosphere of tradition." *The Myth of the State*, 72.

31. The positive aspects of this emancipation from nature and community were described in the three volumes of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In the *The Myth of the State* he also addresses the negative side.

32. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 288.

33. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 41. Compare this with Erich Fromm's words in *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941), 30: "Impulses arise to give up one's individuality, to overcome the feeling of aloneness and powerlessness by completely submerging oneself in the world outside. . . . Attempts to do so necessarily assume the character of submission, in which the basic contradiction between the authority and the child who submits to it is never eliminated."

34. "Denn der weg des Geistes steht hier wie überall unter dem Gesetz der Entsagung, unter dem Gebot eines heroischen Willens, der weiß, daß er sein Ziel nur dadurch zu erreichen, ja daß er es nur dadurch aufzustellen vermag, daß er auf alles naiv-triebhafte Glücksverlangen verzichtet." Ernst Cassirer, "Form und Technik," *Symbol, Technik, Sprache: Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1927–1933* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1985), 77–78.

35. Cassirer fully shares Kant's view that action upon inclination has no ethical value. Kant's "rigorism," says Cassirer, "is the reaction of Kant's completely virile way of thinking to the effeminacy and over-softness that he saw in control all around him." *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. by James Haden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 270. Cassirer is rarely so outspoken about his own views when expounding the views of another philosopher. See also Cassirer's discussion of Descartes' "relative" and "absolute" moral ideal: "There is a steadfastness of the will that has an intrinsic value and deserves our admiration for its own sake, even if we cannot approve of the ends this will sets itself and find that these are amiss and fall short of the highest ethical standards.

And thus in Descartes' moral philosophy there is a relative and an absolute ethical ideal." Cassirer, *Descartes*, 99–100.

36. Cassirer, *Descartes*, 244, 248.

37. "Here there was not only a heroism of action but also a Heroism of renunciation," Cassirer, *Descartes*, 275; on the Heroism in Corneille, see also 111. "Ethics for humans should not be an ethics for body-less beings, it should not negate human passions, but rather use them to attain the ends of moral reason." Cassirer, *Descartes*, 107, 110, 242–244.

38. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 280–281, 288, and 280. "The dark and diabolical forces of man's nature were relegated to the Middle Ages and to still earlier periods of history . . . One looked back upon these periods as one might at a volcano which for a long time has ceased to be a menace. One felt secure and confident that the achievements of modern democracy had wiped out all sinister forces; . . . When Fascism came into power . . . Only a few had been aware of the rumbling of the volcano preceding the outbreak." Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 8.

39. The autonomous person who keeps the demonic powers in check must first control his own inclinations and passions; he is free if the motives of his action "depend upon his own judgment and own conviction of what moral duty is. . . . It means that the law which we obey in our actions is not imposed from without but that the moral subject gives this law to himself" Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 287.

40. Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 286.

41. This consequential ethical stance is certainly debatable. Cassirer however never explicated his moral assumptions, and I can only spell out the assumptions that would ground his judgments.

42. Toni Cassirer, *Aus meinem Leben mit Ernst Cassirer* (New York: private printing, 1950), 242–243.

43. Cassirer states this at the very beginning of his *Myth of the State*. In the political sphere "modern man is supposed to forget everything he has learned in the development of his intellectual life. He is admonished to go back to the first rudimentary stages of human culture" (3–4).

44. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 228.

45. See my "Pluralism or Relativism?" *Science in Context* 9, no. 2 (1996): 151–163.

46. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 1: 77–78.

47. One example may suffice: "Science is the last step in man's mental development and it may be regarded as the highest and most characteristic attainment of human culture" Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 207.

48. Hugo Bergman, diary entry dated 14 September 1938: "In the afternoon, visit to Cassirer. I asked him the question that had been on my mind for long time: the justification of comparing our sciences with the other forms of expression. His answer: We can understand myth; myth cannot understand us. The rest of the conversation was dominated by consternation over Chamberlain's trip." Shmuel Hugo Bergman, *Tagebüucher & Briefe*, vol. 1 (1901–1948), ed. M. Sambursky (Königstein: Jüdischer Verlag), 477. The reference is to the Chamberlain-Hitler talks that took place on the following day, September 15, in Berchtesgaden. On September 29, Neville Chamberlain, Édouard

Daladier, Adolf Hitler, and Benito Mussolini signed the Munich agreement, which surrendered the Sudetenland to Germany.

49. Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. by James Haden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 246, translation modified. The references to Kant are from "Von dem Interesse, welches den Ideen der Sittlichkeit anhängt," in *Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten, Kants gesammelte Schriften*, 4, Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1911), 448ff, and to the preface to the first edition of *Kritik der prakischen Vernunft*, 5, 12.

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