



Simon Truwant (Ed.). "Interpreting Cassirer: Critical Essays"

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Simon Truwant (Ed.). *Interpreting Cassirer: Critical Essays.* Cambridge University Press 2022. 249 pp. \$117.95 CAD (Hardcover ISBN 9781108496483); \$37.95 CAD (Paperback ISBN 9781108733878).

The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer was certainly one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. Yet at his death in 1945, his works did not receive the same fortune as those of authors such as Husserl or Heidegger. The reason for this can be explained by the fact that Husserl and Heidegger had the opportunity to train brilliant pupils, who certainly contributed to the spread of their thought, while Cassirer, as is well known, was forced to leave Germany in 1933 soon after Hitler was elected chancellor, wandering around various European cities, and then finally going to the United States in 1941. Without any doubt, Cassirer was a highly esteemed author and his works were often mentioned. However, the general image scholars have always had of Cassirer has been that of a great historian of philosophy or ideas. The Breslau thinker was also a great theoretician and a sophisticated historian of science. In any case, Cassirer has nevertheless experienced a kind of renaissance thanks to the critical edition of his edited and unedited works. The edited ones consist of 25 volumes, while the unedited ones—the publication of which has recently been completed—consist of 18 volumes. This new publication allows scholars to compile new aspects of the philosopher of symbolic forms and explore further facets of this important and polyhedric philosophical figure.

Articles, monographs, and editorships devoted to Cassirer are increasing year by year, and the recent volume edited by Simon Truwant, a careful scholar of the Breslau thinker, deserves special attention. This important volume not only contains contributions from the most important Cassirer scholars, but these scholars also address all the main aspects of Cassirer's thought in the light not only of the most recent literature on the philosopher of symbolic forms but also of the publication of the previously mentioned unedited writings. In these writings scholars and researchers will be able to find new aspects of Cassirer, such as writings on the so-called 'Wiener Kreis' and on the metaphysics of symbolic forms. Cassirer, as is well known, expands the Neo-Kantian background to include the various forms of *kultur*—myth, art, science, language, religion and so on—elaborating a philosophy of symbolic forms in which the totality of meanings arising from the various spiritual forms is not exhausted within the sphere of 'exact' concepts alone. Cassirer's ambitious intent at first glance may also seem to be affected by a kind of relativism, but in reality, as Truwant writes in his introduction, 'he aims to establish a unifying account of human culture as



a whole' (I).

The volume opens with a section entitled, 'Cassirer's Philosophy of Culture', the first chapter of which contains Robert S. Leib's contribution entitled, 'Interactions between Language and Other Symbolic Forms'. Leib analyzes the problem of language in Cassirer by considering three functions, which are as follows: 'the basic unit of language is the sign [...]. Language is neither a product of the "I" nor of the world, but a medium in which they are created, distinguished, and given relative significance. [...] Language schematizes the structure and relation of understanding, reason, and judgement' (16). Later the author analyzes mythic language in more detail, especially in relation to the political use of myth in the 1900s and which Cassirer famously deals with in the posthumous *The Myth of the State* (1946).

The second chapter is a contribution by Samantha Matherne, entitled 'The Status of Art in Cassirer's System of Culture', in which the author analyzes from the subjective-objective perspective and the perspective of the system of symbolic forms. Regarding the first aspect, Matherne states that according to Cassirer, art 'at once expresses something subjective and presents something objective' (42). To explain this dual aspect, as Matherne points out, Cassirer states that art, ultimately, seeks to express and present what the Breslau philosopher calls intuitive forms, whereby intuitive form Cassirer means 'the spatial and/or temporal structures of external things or emotions' (Ibidem). For Matherne, therefore, art, as understood by Cassirer, is not simply expressive but rather 'something that at once expresses and presents intuitive forms of external objects and emotions' (52).

Another aspect of Cassirer's thought, much of whose unedited material can be found especially in chapter 3 of his posthumous writings, is that of history, addressed by Anne Pollok in her contribution entitled 'Being in Time. History as an Expression and Interpretation of Human Culture'. In her essay Pollok shows how Cassirer moves away from teleological perspectives such as those found in, for example, Leibniz and Hegel. There is no predetermined direction since history is nothing but a progressive and dynamic movement whose fundamental character must be found in cultural mediations. Pollok writes, 'all works and manifestations of culture necessarily emerge from and stand in the flow of time – their coming into being as well as their presence are shaped by their place in time and culture' (60).

Chapter 4 of the first section is a contribution by Massimo Ferrari entitled 'Science as a Symbolic Form: Ernst Cassirer's Culture of Reason'. The author, very appropriately, seeks to dispel the myth that in the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1923–1929), science took an

increasingly marginal role. One feature that has always distinguished the *Denkstil* of the philosopher of symbolic forms is the virtuous and fruitful systematic interweaving of theoretical inquiry and historical analysis. From the very beginning of his philosophical apprenticeship, Cassirer has always used this *modus operandi*, applying which he first plumbed themes and problems concerning the delicate relationship between the history of philosophy and the history of science and then expanded this method of inquiry to the vast compendium of symbolic forms. Cassirer's systematic intent, moreover, consists in identifying the salient moments punctuated by the problem of knowledge and which he finds in the transition from a substantialist to a functionalist conception, in which there is a progressive emancipation of thought from immediate sense-data, of which modern science constituted for Cassirer the most characteristic example. This transition—one of the most important theoretical aspects of Cassirer's epistemological thought—is accomplished, as is well known, with the dethroning, by Galilean physics, of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic conception of the universe. For these reasons, as Ferrari writes, 'at the end of his life, Cassirer was thus still convinced that an authentic philosophy of culture rests on the pivotal role of science as the symbolic form that accomplished the long way from substance to function' (87).

Thomas Ryckman's contribution, entitled 'Quantum Mechanics As the Ultimate Mode of Symbol Formation. The Final Stage of Cassirer's Philosophy of Physical Science' is equally focused on epistemological issues. This chapter pays special attention to Cassirer's third great epistemological work, *Determinismus und Indeterminismus in der modernen Physik*, published in 1937 when Cassirer was in Gothenburg. With his great work of 1937, Cassirer will confirm the symbolic character of science and show how the set of concepts in quantum mechanics increasingly demonstrates the definitive shift from a substantialist to a functionalist conception of reality. Moreover, Cassirer also reiterates the importance of not considering science and its results as isolated from various cultural forms. On the contrary, as Ryckman states, 'epistemological investigations in physical science are also to be viewed in relation to these other cultural manifestations of symbolic presentation, receiving illumination from, and in turn illuminating, other symbolic forms' (108).

Chapter six consists of Nicolas de Warren's essay entitled 'Spirit in the Age of Technical Production' and addresses the contents of Cassirer's important 1930 writing *Form und Technik*, published in the volume edited by his friend and musician Leo Kestenberg and entitled *Kunst und Technik*. In the analysis of the phenomenon technique, Cassirer begins with a straightforward observation, namely the effectiveness it assumes at a global level; considered from this aspect, the

technique shows its undoubted primacy. Nevertheless, this effectiveness, if seen as the tangible sign of the overwhelming weight of technology over the various spiritual forces, seems to take the form of an inevitable destiny to which the latter seem to have submitted without the possibility of any reaction. But the interesting aspect of Cassirer's reflection highlighted by de Warren is the alternative way in which Cassirer approaches the problem of technique. The latter is in fact incorporated by Cassirer into the vast universe of symbolic forms and is seen as one of those means by which man frees himself from sensible immediacy, that is, a means that expresses the process of man's self-liberation: 'Incorporating a reflection on *Technik* within the project of symbolic forms would appear, moreover, to be an imperative given how Cassirer's narrative of modernity centers on the reconciliation between 'form' and 'freedom' (111).

Chapter 7, written by the volume's editor Simon Truwant, is entitled 'Political Myth and the Problem of Orientation: Reading Cassirer in Time of Cultural Crisis'. In this contribution, Truwant analyzes the problem of political myth as addressed by Cassirer in his posthumous work *The Myth of the State* (1946). As is well-known, Cassirer had already dealt systematically with myth in the second volume of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (1925), in which myth was considered fundamentally important as a paradigmatic symbolic form. However, with the posthumous work from 1946, Cassirer seemed to have reduced the importance of the myth due to the appearance of the so-called modern political myths, which obscured human rationality. But it is incorrect to speak in Cassirer's case of a profound revision of the so-called mythical thought. What Cassirer disputes about modern political myths (fascism, Nazism, etc.) is the political use of the myth as a completely rational way to change consciences. For these reasons, Cassirer insisted on the importance of philosophy's supervisory role and the cosmopolitan task of philosophy.

The second part of the volume is entitled 'Cassirer's Philosophy of Consciousness' and the first essay included in this second section is 'Rethinking Representation. Cassirer's Philosophy of Human Perceiving, Thinking, and Understanding' by Martina Plümacher. The interesting aspect of Cassirer's reflection on the problem of perception, highlighted by Plümacher, is that the philosopher of symbolic forms disengages from the idea of perception as mere representation or imitation. Perception is never merely passive because 'structures of experience and knowledge are already present in every perception' (153).

It is followed by Guido Kreis' contribution, 'Cassirer's Philosophy of Mind: From Consciousness to "Objective Spirit"', which discusses the relationship existing between Cassirer's approach and Gestalt psychology. The human mind is never entirely passive even at the simple

level of sensory perception. The latter reveals itself as an active, selective, and constructive process. For these reasons Cassirer—following an anti-physicalist strategy—develops an approach of a holistic nature in which ‘mental occurrences appear to possess properties that are only possessed by them, and which physical entities never possess: They have representational content’ (179).

The third part of the volume is “Cassirer's Philosophical Method”, which features contributions by Daniel O. Dahlstrom entitled, ‘Cassirer’s Phenomenological Affinities’ and Sebastian Luft’s contribution entitled ‘Cassirer’s Place in Today’s Philosophical Landscape: “Synthetic Philosophy”, Transcendental Idealism, Cultural Pluralism’ which closes the volume. Dahlstrom analyzes the similarities present between Husserl’s phenomenological approach and Cassirer’s critical-symbolic idealism, particularly regarding questions of logic, which both disengage from so-called psychologism. Luft addresses the issue of the analytic philosophy-continental philosophy dichotomy as illustrated by Michael Friedman. Luft’s analysis sees Cassirer as the one who could have overcome this dichotomy, since Cassirer had tried to unify systematic and empirical aspects, but in Luft’s view, he had failed to do so because of the underlying neo-Kantian approach, which had privileged the *factum* of science. In fact, the approach of the Marburg Scholars Cohen and Natorp was not limited to scientific questions either, as their studies on ancient philosophy, ethics, religion, etc. show. Cassirer, rather than remaining anchored to simple epistemological questions, would broaden the perspective of the Marburg School by analyzing the various and irreducible symbolic forms, which is why the *kulturphilosophisch* project outlined by Cassirer was thus directed toward a pluralist perspective capable of doing as much justice as possible to a differentiated and inherently complex world.

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