A Methodological Study of the Cultural Definition of Man of Ernst Cassirer

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A METHODOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE
CULTURAL DEFINITION OF MAN
OF ERNST CASSIRER

by
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VITA AUCTORIS

Peter J. Roslovich was born on July 22, 1932 in Buffalo, New York. Upon graduating from the Diocesan Preparatory Seminary in that city, he entered the Society of Jesus at St. Andrew-on-Hudson in Poughkeepsie, New York. There he pursued courses toward an A.B. Degree from Fordham University. In 1954 he enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences at West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana. He was awarded the Bachelor's Degree in Latin by Loyola University, Chicago, in June of 1955, and the Licentiate in Philosophy by West Baden College, in June of 1957.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

No modern educator, however humanistically inclined he may be, would decry the acute limitations of scope that are made in the higher reaches of education. Professional competence today is contingent upon the broad inroads that have been made in almost every field. It is not inconceivable for a man to so restrict his, e.g., engineering competence that his usefulness is impossible without a bevy of colleagues mutually complementing each other. And so the situation stands, to a greater or lesser degree, in every field of endeavor. This, indeed, is the Age of Specialization.

Given that rare individual, then, whose competence is — and is conceded to be — multifold, difficulties in understanding the full gamut of his writings will arise proportional to the diversity of the fields covered. Still, the specialist should, as a rule, have no trouble fathoming the specialized writings of the polymath. Such is not the case, however, where widely diversified fields are made to converge. Here the specialist can hope for a partial understanding at most.

Ernst Cassirer is a polymath. To categorize his thought by
designating the field of study in which his interest and ability lie appears a rather involved, if not a hopeless and impossible task. The wide variety and profound depth of his writings give pause to the classifier. For here was a man equally at home in a myriad of the arts and sciences. Just to read through a bibliography of his writings or to page through one of his books is to be convinced of his scope; a specialist studying him sees the profundity.

Those who knew him personally echo this appraisal, in praise that is almost embarrassing in its superlatives and enthusiasm. "So great, moreover, was the scope of Cassirer's mental gifts, so inexhaustible his energy, so faithful his memory, so deep, swift, and versatile his power of comprehension, his mind so original and imaginative, that he was able to undertake a unique voyage around the entire world of man and to discover, on his journey, innumerable treasures of human thought." ¹

Cassirer's students, too, were impressed by the depth and variety of his knowledge. "In the lecture hall we were particularly impressed by the profound and appropriate allusions made to every field of knowledge. . . . In short, we came to realize, all of us, that as a man of learning and wisdom, a scholar, Ernst

Cassirer was unique."² At first dismayed, they were soon spurred on to emulation. "[T]he kind of scholarship which was Ernst Cassirer's became for me something to strive for, a goal which I might attain, but a goal which was truly clear, for I had seen it defined in the being of a living man."³

Further verification may be had from a specialist's perusal of Cassirer's major writings. "Immense was the number of books Cassirer had to study and familiarize himself with"⁴ in order to write the four volume Problem of Knowledge. "Almost the entire world's literature on language and myths, almost all the realms of human science had been closely explored by him"⁵ in the three volume Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. "Almost incredible is the wealth of concrete facts"⁶ in these volumes. And Cassirer showed in Freiheit und Form "that his feeling for all forms of poetry was just as deep and incisive as his understanding of science."⁷

To all appearances, this breadth and depth of Cassirer's thought only rarely befuddles the specialist; only at times does

³Ibid.
⁵Ibid., p. 27.
⁶Ibid.
⁷Ibid., p. 23.
Cassirer's wide knowledge cause the explicit intrusion of one field upon another. The apparent conclusion, then, is that any analysis of Cassirer's contributions to learning must be heterogeneous in scope and that the specialized scholar may employ freely and with no reservations the portions of Cassirer's writings that deal with his field.

And yet, Cassirer himself warns the reader to beware; there is unity in the seeming diversity. In his *Essay on Man*, he states: ³

A book concerned with psychological, ontological, epistemological questions, and containing chapters on Myth and Religion, Language and Art, on Science and History, is open to the objection that it is a mixtum compositum of the most disparate and heterogeneous things. I hope the reader after having read these pages will find the objection to be unfounded. It was one of my principle aims to convince him that all the subjects dealt with in this book are, after all, only one subject.

Since Cassirer's enumeration in this place exhausts the subjects he has discussed in other places, he is, reductively, asserting that all his writings are on just one subject.

This unity amid diversity arose from the historical accident of Cassirer's intellectual development. A German Jew, born in Berlin, he turned first to law at the insistence of his father. But before long he shifted his concentration to philosophy and letters, history and art. Yet even in these he was discontented. "[H]e missed in them a certain degree of depth in understanding

and failed to find any solution of fundamental problems."  

And thus he wandered about to different universities, from Berlin to Leipzig to Heidelberg and then back to Berlin, all the while increasing the scope of his studies.  

Continuing his search for the solutions to fundamental problems back at the University of Berlin, Cassirer chose a course which was to lessen his frustration and discontent and eventually bring him to the answers he sought. Impressed by a lecturer on Kant, he turned to the University of Marburg and the neo-Kantianism of Hermann Cohen. But before going to Marburg, he studied the works of Kant and Cohen thoroughly, read those of Plato, Descartes, and Leibnitz, and devoted a part of his time to mathematics, mechanics, and biology, -- "sciences which were indispensable for an understanding of Cohen's interpretation of Kant."  

Kantianism and neo-Kantianism, however, did not in themselves hold the answers Cassirer sought. But with an ever-deepening insight Cassirer was to see that his goal lay hidden along the paths he had already traversed. He had merely lacked the key to discovery; and that key was critical idealism as he understood it.  

At Marburg, Cassirer felt called upon to reject the one-sidedness of Kant and Cohen, their limiting the theory of knowledge.

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9 Gawronsky, p. 4.
10 Ibid., pp. 4-5.
11 Ibid., p. 6.
to reason alone. Cassirer desired to include such potencies as imagination, feeling, volition. But the insufficiencies of Kantianism, coupled with his command of other branches of learning, led him to seek his ultimate answers in a comprehensive survey of all disciplines; what Kant had done with Newtonian physics, Cassirer would do with all fields. Thus, every art and science became for him in a real sense parts of philosophy; they assumed the role of supplying the raw materials out of which he could draw the answers he sought.

The ultimate answers Cassirer sought as well as the perfect unity of thought he wished to achieve never reached complete fulfillment.\(^{12}\) And he himself admits "that the full determination of a concept is very rarely the work of that thinker who first introduced the concept."\(^{13}\) Throughout his works, it was Cassirer's practice to concentrate "his attention on a very limited number of major problems, treating them exhaustively, adducing a great wealth of linguistic, mythological, and psychological material to prove his point."\(^{14}\) Like his early education, his con-

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\(^{13}\) Cassirer, An Essay on Man, p. 228.

tributions were haphazard, though not aimless; and over and above a partial system—well documented in spots—he left "a key with which to open the treasure house of our own culture."\(^{15}\)

Besides this inadequacy, moreover, the philosopher has a triple choice in systematizing pedagogically the philosophy of symbolic forms. Cassirer's presentation—clear in detail and broad in scope—suffers because of the three attempts he made to organize and systematize the whole. In the Erkenntnisproblem, Cassirer takes the creating mind as his matrix; in the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, it is the created form which is followed in its development.\(^{16}\) And when he was asked to translate the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms into English, Cassirer begged off and preferred to "make a fresh start and to write an entirely new book,"\(^{17}\) the Essay on Man.

This confusion in Cassirer's mind as to the best way to present his entire system as well as the resulting incomplete state of his thought is perhaps attributable to the fact that his basic insight was a growing one and not one completed in the first instant of its conception. This explanation is borne out by the dispute as to the time Cassirer first conceived the idea of a philosophy of symbolic forms. One explanation would have it that

\(^{15}\)Hartman, p. 329.

\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 291.

\(^{17}\)Cassirer, An Essay on Man, p. 12.
the idea flashed into his mind as he was boarding a street car and that "a few minutes later, when he reached his home, the whole plan of his new voluminous work was ready in his mind." But the presence of this insight in works written prior to the street car incident must be explained; it was no doubt the all-pervasive applicability of the earlier insight that occurred to Cassirer on the street car. 19

It would seem best, then, to accept Cassirer's latest work, the Essay on Man, as the most definitive of his presentations. Though it is sub-titled merely as an introduction and referred to as just an illustration, 20 it seems clear that Cassirer was ultimately attempting a cultural anthropology, the "integration of man's soul and culture." 21

Here then—somehow or other through man himself—is the unity in Cassirer's thought, the ultimate reduction of all subjects to one. If, therefore, the classifier does not take cognizance of this unity that is at least latently present throughout Cassirer's thought, he will err by oversimplification and try to squeeze Cassirer into some labeled pigeon-hole; Cassirer, on the

18 Gawronsky, p. 25.
21 Hartman, p. 333.
contrary, must be considered *sui generis*. And the specialist, employing one or another of Cassirer's specialized writings, will go astray unless he takes note of the hidden prejudice deriving from the concealed intrusion of one field upon another.

What first must be done is to understand Cassirer's system as a whole and to evaluate the conclusions he derives from the vast store of matter adduced. Only through such a prior investigation of his writings can the full scope of Cassirer's contribution to philosophy as well as to the specialized disciplines be properly, accurately, and fruitfully appreciated.

Such is not the purpose of this thesis; indeed, even experts in the various fields can contribute only a partial explication and evaluation. A total picture would require the combined efforts of many scholars. This thesis is, rather, a prolegomenon to a complete picture, a study of Cassirer's philosophic method.

A sketch of the *Essay on Man*—with data drawn in from the other works when it is essential or at least helpful—will reveal Cassirer's aims and procedures in their final published formulation. Why man and culture occupy the central place in Cassirer's philosophy, why Cassirer selected the particular approach he did and what that approach is, what his basic notions are and how he derived them, as well as an indication of the final unity—hoped for, if not fully achieved—are all contained in this slim volume, the last work published before Cassirer's death on April 13, 1945.

Such a study of Cassirer from the viewpoint of methodology
has relevance for philosophy. Cassirer's educational background alone indicates that his orientation is Kantian with genetic variation; and the terms so basic in Cassirer—"symbol" and "form"—are reminiscent of the Critiques. But careful students of Cassirer will not miss the fact that Cassirer's "alleged supplementation [of Kant] requires a fresh ground-plan and, in fact a different building."21

Cassirer did not merely write companion-pieces to the Kantian Critiques. In spite of Cassirer's intended adherence to Kant, his objectives—and resultingly, his achievements—are not Kant's. Objectives, moreover, and the modes of their implementation, are part of method. An analysis, then, of Cassirer qua talis—though Kant must enter necessarily into the discussion of any neo-Kantian—must be had over and above the extent analyses of Kantian and neo-Kantian methodology.

CHAPTER II

MAN

Cassirer's humanism, his concern with man himself, may at
first sight seem to be a mere segment of his philosophy, just as
speculative psychology is treated—pedagogically, at least—as
one branch of special metaphysics. His earlier works, especially,
such as Substance and Function, contain little explicit reference
to anything but the experimental science then being discussed, be
it physics, mathematics, biology, etc. As indicated above, how­
ever, the complete insight and final formulation of his thought
revealed itself to Cassirer's mind only gradually;¹ and not until
his statement that all the subjects he has treated are really one
subject, "common roads leading to a common center"² and that it
is "for a philosophy of culture to find out and to determine this
center"³ does the over-all organization of his thought on the
basis of cultural anthropology become explicit.

Accepting Cassirer's claim, then, that anthropology is his

¹Pp. 7-8.
³Ibid., p. 13.
philosophy and not just a part of it, a re-reading of Cassirer's earlier works does reveal man as the focus of all his studies. "It permeates his thought in his historical studies and also in his theoretical and systematic works. . . . Even his most technical contributions to linguistics and to epistemological and mathematical theory reveal his pervasive humanistic concern."\(^4\)

Why is man Cassirer's prime concern? Perhaps the solution to fundamental problems that he sought throughout his early training was precisely man. Perhaps all his life he had been seeking to understand himself and had been following devious paths in doing so until the goal became clear. This can only be conjecture; such personal notes do not occur in Cassirer's writings. And they are only hinted at by his biographer.\(^5\)

Another possible reason for Cassirer's final anthropological orientation might be the intellectual atmosphere of the times. "At the turn of nineteenth to the twentieth century, German philosophy sought to put a check on the hegemony of the natural sciences by working out a system of Geisteswissenschaft."\(^6\) This too, however, is a reason never adduced by Cassirer.

What Cassirer does say is that his own preoccupation with

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\(^5\)Cf. Gawronsky, pp. 4–6.

\(^6\)Kuhn, p. 549.
man is echoed in the whole gamut of philosophical experience. For amid a diverse mass of conflicting tenets, the imperative "Know thyself!" was the element common to all systems of thought. Although mode of procedure and final conclusions varied, man remained always the highest aim of philosophical inquiry. "In all the conflicts between the different schools this objective remained invariable and unshaken: it proved to be the Archimedean point, the fixed and immovable center of all thought."  

In proof of this, Cassirer sketches the history of philosophy in its attempts to determine the nature of man. Presumably, since it is his own wish to offer a new definition of man, Cassirer should show how these attempts failed. Oddly enough, he does not. His only overt purpose seems to be—besides proving that man has always been concerned about man—to show that each theory was found wanting by a new theorist. But Cassirer seems to show—at times explicitly—a sympathy with each theory in so far as it is a step forward. Each advance clarifies, as it

7Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 15.

8Cassirer was fond of using a historical presentation as a demonstration of his own ideas; more often than not, he considered it adequate to show the gradual unfolding of one system of thought into another, all of them leading up to his own (Cf. Hartman, pp. 291-292.). This procedure makes it difficult to separate what Cassirer taught from how he taught it (Cf. Walter M. Somitz, "Cassirer on Galileo: An Example of Cassirer's Way of Thought," in The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, 1949), p. 756; and Harry Slochower, "Ernst Cassirer's Functional Approach to Art and Literature," in The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, 1949), p. 634.).
were, the mode of procedure that will be most advantageous for Cassirer.

Cassirer differentiates four major attempts to establish a theoretical anthropology, viz., the Stoic, the Christian, the mathematical, and the biological. The Stoic finds its earliest enunciation in Socrates, who, according to Cassirer, was the first to pose the "question which seems henceforth to absorb man's whole theoretical interest," What is man? Previously, it is true, there was always "a primitive anthropology side by side with a primitive cosmology." But the cosmology was the dominant science. "In its earliest stages Greek philosophy seems exclusively concerned with the physical universe." And what there was to a science of man was more or less cosmological in nature. Man was just another part of the physical universe to be studied in the strictly behavioristic approach to science.

Socrates' step forward was to transform philosophy from an intellectual monologue into a dialogue. To learn the nature of man it is insufficient and inadequate to confront him by empirical observation, to describe him as a physical thing in terms of his objective properties. "[M]an may be described and defined

10Ibid., p. 17.
11Ibid., p. 18.
only in terms of his consciousness."\(^{12}\) Man must constantly search for himself by cooperating with others in mutual interrogation and reply. Thus, Socrates defined man "as that being who, when asked a rational question, can give a rational answer."\(^{13}\) And this was the foundation not only of knowledge but of morality. Because he can give a response to himself and to others, "man becomes a 'responsible' being, a moral subject."\(^{14}\)

This rationalistic approach to anthropology, according to Cassirer, reaches its culmination in Stoicism. Like Socrates, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius was convinced that "to find the true nature or essence of man we must first remove from his being all external and incidental traits."\(^{15}\) By seeing riches, rank, social distinction, even health or intellectual gifts as indifferent, by acknowledging the unalterable and imperturbable rule of reason, man will live in harmony with himself and with the universe. He will realize that what matters is the inner attitude of the soul, which cannot be disturbed from without. And this conception of himself "gives to man both a feeling of his harmony with nature and of his moral independence of nature."\(^{16}\)

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 20.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 21.
\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 22.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 24.
Cassirer seemingly accepts the new approach but not its implementation; for the subsequent theory of man rejects an absolute independence for man based on reason but allows that man is to be defined from within. With the advent of Christianity, Cassirer states, reason became man's fundamental vice and error, "one of the most questionable and ambiguous things in the world." According to Augustine, reason, perverted by the fall of Adam, cannot find its way back to its former pure essence without the supernatural aid of divine grace. Aquinas accorded reason a much higher power, but a power that reason is unable to use "unless it is guided and illuminated by the grace of God." 

This theological view of man "found its last and perhaps most impressive expression" in Pascal. Man, according to Pascal, has no nature; he is a contradiction, "a strange mixture of being and non-being." The rectitude of his reason and will forfeited by the fall, man "has to silence himself in order to hear a higher and truer voice." But religion can offer no solution to the problem of man. Religion is dark and incomprehensible. Considering religion's true aim and purpose, its highest praise is

17 Ibid., p. 25.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 28.
21 Ibid.
Religion cannot be clear and rational. What it relates is an obscure and somber story: the story of the sin and the fall of man. It reveals a fact of which no rational explanation is possible. We cannot account for the sin of man; for it is not produced or necessitated by any natural cause. Nor can we account for man's salvation; for this salvation depends on an inscrutable act of divine grace. It is freely given and freely denied; there is no human action and no human merit that can deserve it. Religion, therefore, never pretends to clarify the mystery of man.

Man, then, remains a homo absconditus.

Cassirer has but one conclusion to draw from all this: with Pascal we are no nearer to determining the nature of man. "What we learn from Pascal's example is that at the beginning of modern times the old problem was still felt in its full strength." But Cassirer deigns to make no comment as to the values of either of these early anthropologies. To him there was no need. The reason: there was no crisis in man's knowledge of himself. To be sure, no age in history found perfect accord among its thinkers on the question of man. "But there remained at least a general orientation, a frame of reference, to which all individual differences might be referred." As long as there was an established authority that served as an intellectual center for all thought, the problem of man could reach a satisfactory, though

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22 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
23 Ibid., p. 29.
24 Ibid., p. 39.
not necessarily a valid, solution in at least its general ramifications.

In its day, the metaphysics of the Stoic was so strong that it "assumed the guidance for thought on the problem of man and determined the line of investigation." When metaphysics was no longer capable of such direction, theology was already established as a new frame of reference. And theology was to be succeeded by mathematics and mathematics by biology.

This type of argumentation illustrates Cassirer's historical approach to problems as well as his peculiar orientation as to the problem of man. The real meaning and import of anthropology, he claims, lies in the clash of the deepest human passions and emotions. "It is not concerned with a single theoretical problem however general its scope; here the whole destiny of man is at stake and is clamoring for an ultimate decision."

Historically, then, theorists almost up to the present day were never, according to Cassirer, dissatisfied completely with the explanations of man that they had. Pragmatically, at least, in a field where emotion predominates over concepts, satisfaction is apparently more important than truth. The fact that theology replaced metaphysics as the frame of reference for any definition

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25 Ibid.
26 Cf. supra, p. 13, footnote.
27 Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 25.
of man is to be noted; precisely why is not important for Cassirer. But that one system should supersede another indicates that the new one is aware of considerations that the earlier ignored. In the case of Socrates advancing from the cosmological approach of his predecessors, the new consideration was introspection through reason. And the theologians said that reason does not take into consideration the partial irrationality of man.

The theological definition of *homo absconditus* did not please the ensuing age. Now a new instrument of thought transforms the question and raises it to a higher level. The modern scientific spirit, achieving so much success in other fields, enters the anthropological lists and insists upon a "theory of man based on empirical observations and on general logical principles." 28 Henceforth the definition of man could be grounded on empirically verifiable data.

This new approach, according to Cassirer, removed the artificial barriers that separated the human world from the rest of nature. As a consequence, man is no longer the center and end of the universe. "Man is placed in an infinite space in which his being seems to be a single and vanishing point. He is surrounded by a mute universe, by a world that is silent to his religious feelings and to his deepest moral demands." 29 To understand man,

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then, we must first study the cosmic order.

Modern philosophy and science were here faced with a challenge. They must show "that the new cosmology, far from enfeebling or obstructing the power of human reason, establishes and confirms this power." And Giordano Bruno was the one to sound the keynote to the solution. Infinity, in his philosophy, received a new meaning. No longer was it the boundless, the formless, the indeterminate, the negative of the Greeks, inaccessible to human reason which knows nothing but forms. Applied to reality, it now means immeasurable and inexhaustible abundance; applied to the human intellect, it signifies unrestricted power. And the human intellect breaks through the narrow walls of finitude and becomes aware of itself by measuring its infinite power against the infinite universe. An infinite universe is precisely "the great incentive to human reason." But Bruno the poet could go no further. It required the scientist Galileo to make the assertion that "in the field of mathematics man reaches the climax of all possible knowledge." Here man can rival the divine intellect, though not in scope, at least in objective certainty. Then Descartes, seeking mathematical certitude, enclosed man by his universal doubt within the

\[30\text{Ibid.}.
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\[31\text{Ibid.}, pp. 32-33.
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\[32\text{Ibid.}, p. 33.
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limits of consciousness, only to break forth by means of the infinite to the reality of God and of the material world. Next Leibnitz rendered the physical world intelligible with his infinitesimal calculus, showing that the laws of nature are "nothing but special cases of the general laws of reason." Finally, Spinoza contributed a mathematical explanation of the moral sphere, constructing a new ethics modo geometrico demonstrata.

Thus, mathematics was the general theme which permeated the philosophy of the sixteenth century. "Mathematical reason is the bond between man and the universe; it permits us to pass freely from the one to the other. Mathematical reason is the key to a true understanding of the cosmic and the moral order." And so mathematics was the foundation of their anthropology.

But it was not long before Denis Diderot sounded the death knell of a mathematical theory of man. Erroneously he felt that mathematics could proceed no further, "for we must add the names of Gauss, Riemann, Weierstrass, and Poincaré to the 18th century galaxy of mathematicians. But quite correctly he saw a new form of science in the offing, "a science of a more concrete character, based rather on the observation of facts than on the assumption of general principles." 33

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p. 34.
35 Ibid., p. 35.
And so it was that biological thought took precedence over mathematical thought with the publication of Darwin's Origin of the Species. No longer would we seek to give a general definition of the essence or the nature of man. Henceforth we would be factual. "Our problem is simply to collect the empirical evidence which the general theory of evolution has put at our disposal in a rich and abundant measure." 36

Here Cassirer finds the beginning of a final answer to the problem of man. "Henceforth the true character of anthropological philosophy appears to be fixed once and for all." 37 Darwin, by demonstrating the success of empirical observation and by amassing empirical evidence, had set the stage for this new approach. It was to be hoped that now philosophers would take empirical data, and, by "a really scientific insight," 38 classify and systematize it. In other words, "an empirical counting of the different impulses we find in human nature" 39 is not sufficient; we must discover the structure that binds them together. "In the complicated wheelwork of human life we must find the hidden driving force which sets the whole mechanism of our thought and will in motion." 40

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p. 38.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
Darwin had furnished the means and material; all that had to be done was to prove the unity and homogeneity of human nature by building upon Darwin.

The explanations given, however, make this unity appear doubtful. Every philosopher who offered a theory believed he had found "the mainspring and master-faculty" that explains the structure of human nature. But their explanations not only varied widely, they contradicted each other. Now, all of these philosophers claimed to be empiricists; "they would show us the facts and nothing but the facts." So their theories should at least be compatible if not identical. "But their interpretation of the empirical evidence contains from the very outset an arbitrary assumption." Each arbitrarily selected what he wished to be the master-faculty. "Nietzsche proclaims the will to power, Freud signalizes the sexual instinct, Marx enthrones the economic instinct. Each theory becomes a Procrustean bed on which the empirical facts are stretched to fit a preconceived pattern."

Theologians, scientists, politicians, sociologists, economists all approached the problem from the viewpoint of their own disciplines. And the lack of generally accepted scientific principles

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
within the special fields gave the personal factor, the temperament of the individual, the decisive role. "Every author seems in the last count to be led by his own conception and evaluation of human life." And thus, according to Cassirer, we have chaos in our modern theoretical anthropology, we have "a complete anarchy of thought." And so, modern science has reached an impasse on the question of man.

These conflicting views of human nature, this antagonism of ideas, could have far reaching consequences in the destruction of our ethical and cultural life. It is not just a grave theoretical problem, but an immanent threat in the practical sphere. It is a situation fraught with anarchy which could destroy man.

But this modern confusion is paradoxical. Never before since Socrates first defined man as the proper study for man was there an age "in such a favorable position with regard to the sources of our knowledge of human nature." The instruments for gaining knowledge in Socrates' day were so limited that he had to restrict his inquiries to what he could learn through reason. Theology rejected reason as inadequate and built a view of man on faith. And even with the inception of modern science, the quest

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46 Ibid., p. 38.
47 Cf. supra, p. 18.
for man was limited to mathematics, the only instrument they felt could deal with the potentially infinite.

Today, however, we have "an astoundingly rich and constantly increasing body of facts. Our technical instruments for observation and experimentation have been immensely improved, and our analyses have become sharper and more penetrating."49 But we are lost in our abundance; we are unable to organize and master this material. And, as Cassirer observes, "our wealth of facts is not necessarily a wealth of thoughts."50 What we need is a real insight, a clue, an Ariadne's thread "to lead us out of this labyrinth."51 Otherwise, "we shall remain lost in a mass of disconnected and disintegrated data which seem to lack all conceptual unity."52

Cassirer's constant emphasis on facts, technical instruments and analysis, seems to lead to the conclusion that his position is that of a Positivist. Indeed, it would seem that Cassirer's finding former attempts to define man inadequate rests on the failure of those attempts to employ a purely empiricistic approach. Is such the case? Since Cassirer himself gives no answer, this question can be approached only by contrasting Cassirer's proposed method with those he found inadequate.

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
What Cassirer has in mind in his theoretical anthropology is to open up a new way to man, "the way of civilization."\(^5\) In so doing, we must neglect no possible source of information about man. "We must examine all the available empirical evidence, and utilize all the methods of introspection, biological observation, and historical inquiry."\(^4\) Nothing is to be discarded, but only "referred to a new intellectual center, and hence seen from a new angle."\(^5\)

As to his new field of inquiry—civilization—Cassirer envisages his approach as nothing more than an advance based on a new insight akin to Plato's advance on Socrates in the question of man. Socrates, in his quest to know himself, approached the individual man; Plato recognized the limitation and, therefore, the insufficiency of this way of inquiry. "The phenomena we encounter in our individual experience are so various, so complicated and contradictory that we can scarcely disentangle them."\(^6\) But the text that is written in such small, illegible characters in personal experience, is written in capital letters in the nature of the state. Thus, for Plato, in Cassirer's view, a sat-

\(^{53}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 44.}\)
\(^{54}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 93.}\)
\(^{55}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{56}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 87.}\)
isfactory theory of man can develop only out of a theory of the state. 57 "Here the hidden meaning of the text suddenly emerges, and what seemed obscure and confused becomes clear and legible." 58

Cassirer, then, wishes to take a broader basis for his anthropology than was ever taken before. Man, besides his discovery of social organization, has attempted to organize and systematize his feelings, desires, and thoughts, "in language, in myth, in religion, and in art," 59 as well as in other ways. We must consider all these ways in which man has expressed himself if we wish to develop an adequate theory of human nature.

Cassirer's directive that we are to employ every avenue of inquiry open to us and that we are to discard nothing is ambiguous as a criticism of past theories of man. It may imply merely that we now have more data and more instruments than were available in the past. As a general criticism, it would be valid; as Cassirer states, theory "has always to orientate itself anew as

57 The point at issue here is not whether Cassirer interpreted Plato correctly but that, right or wrong, he compares his own advance as analogous to Plato's over Socrates. The doctrine here presented by Cassirer as Plato's thought is challenged by David Bidney, "On the Philosophical Anthropology of Ernst Cassirer and its Relation to the History of Anthropological Thought," in The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, 1949), pp. 475-478.

58 Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 87.

59 Ibid., p. 88.
But there is a deeper implication to this directive, the implication that the former theories denied evidence by introducing arbitrary principles which misconstrued data. This is the reason given by Cassirer why, historically, the followers of Darwin failed to agree and so plunged anthropology into chaos.61

Darwin himself, according to Cassirer, set the stage for those who came after him. An assumption unwarranted by his data brought him to a theory not unlike Aristotle's. Evolution, in a general philosophical sense, states Cassirer, "received its classical expression in Aristotle's psychology and in his general view of organic life."62 All Darwin did was to substitute material causes for Aristotle's final causes, accidental causes for formal. At last modern thinkers thought that "they had definitely succeeded in accounting for organic life as a mere product of chance."63 But in so doing they had gone beyond their data; materialism is an unwarranted assumption.

To determine the truth or falsity of this assertion of Cassirer's with regard to the other three earlier definitions of man as well as whether or not Cassirer could prove it—if he so

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60 Ernst Cassirer, Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics, trans. O. Theodor Benfey (New Haven, 1956), p. xxiii.
62 Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 36.
63 Ibid.
desired, which he does not in the Essay on Man—would require a fairly penetrating philosophical—not merely methodological—analysis of all of Cassirer's writings. If true, the insertion of arbitrary principles into any previous anthropological system would call its validity into question and would establish Cassirer's new intellectual center for a definition of man as the only correct one. Otherwise, Cassirer's approach can be, at most, a simpler, more fruitful, way of handling all the data made available by modern science. And this latter is Cassirer's overt view; the Essay on Man "is not designed to abrogate but to complement former views."64

Thus, in summary, Cassirer has fairly well proven his claim that man has always been the Archimedean point of all philosophical inquiry. As to his general method, it will be the historical culmination of theoretical anthropology, perfecting rather than replacing previous theories. As to the scope of the inquiry, man will not be studied in his individual self, nor in the organization of the state, but in his civilization, in his humanity. As to general procedure, the inquiry will follow the lead of biology, in attempting to determine the master-faculty which will unify all human endeavor and thus furnish a definition of man. This master-faculty, moreover, must satisfy the mathematicians who desired to find the potency in man which would

64 Ibid., p. 93.
enable him to match himself against the infinite universe; it must satisfy the theologians to whom man's nature was not completely knowable; it must satisfy Socrates and the Stoics in their assertion that man is to be known from within and not from without as just another object in the universe.

The Socratic approach, however, and the biological do not appear to be compatible. Socrates said that man is different. "The theory of evolution had destroyed the arbitrary limits between the different forms of organic life." Does the man of the evolutionists, then, become a being to be studied cosmologically? Is the cultural world reducible to the same principles as the physical world? Was Socrates wrong? This problem had first to be solved. And in showing that man is higher than the organic level of brutes, Cassirer discovered—or at least felt that he had discovered—the key to the unification of culture, the pivotal point in man of all his endeavors.

65 Ibid., p. 38.
CHAPTER III

SYMBOL

Following the lead of the biologists, Cassirer must first determine whether man differs essentially in his cultural life from the organic life which he shares with all animate beings. This inquiry follows the line of experimental psychology and issues in a specific definition of man that is scientifically accurate but very vague. Nevertheless, it does establish the fact that man's specific activity cannot be determined by an organic study of his physical structure.

Cassirer takes as his starting point the theories of the biologist Johannes von Uexkull. Uexkull, a resolute vitalist, contended that biology cannot be explained in terms of physics or chemistry. But his is not a metaphysical vitalism; "it is founded rather on empirical principles."¹ Biology, as a natural science, must be developed by the usual empirical methods. So, given the anatomical structure of an animal species, "we possess all the necessary data for reconstructing its special mode of existence."² A careful study of the number, quality, and distri-

¹Ibid., p. 41.
²Ibid., p. 42.
bution of the various sense organs as well as of the conditions of the nervous system gives us a perfect image of animal life.

Cassirer is not necessarily accepting Uexkull's biological principles. The fact of its empirical foundation, of course, is perfectly in accord with Cassirer's own views. But primarily, Cassirer is interested in the biologist's terminology. Uexkull described the life of an animal as its functional circle. Every animal, according to its anatomical structure, possesses a receptor system by which it receives outward stimuli and an effector system by which it reacts to stimuli. These not only adapt the organism to its environment but also entirely fit it into its environment. "Without the cooperation and equilibrium of these two systems the organism could not survive."³

Cassirer asks, therefore, whether Uexkull's functional circle of the biological world can be used for a description and characterization of the human world. "Obviously this world forms no exception to those biological rules which govern the life of all other organisms."⁴ Some, however, as late as the 18th century, sought to find a marked difference between man and the other animals on this organic level. "In the early stages of empirical observation it was still possible for the scientist to cherish the hope of finding eventually an anatomical character

³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
The disciples and followers of Comte inclined to this position, since they feared Comte's differentiating between physiology and sociology "would lead back to a metaphysical dualism." Darwin, however, put an end to all such hopes by asserting the homogeneity in anatomy and physiology of the entire animal world.

And so, the way was open for scientists to apply some sort of biological functional circle like Uexkull's to man. Cassirer cites Taine as indicative of this school of thought. By reducing intelligence to instinct by asserting a difference of degree and not of quality between them, Taine could discard intelligence as a useless and scientifically meaningless term. Thus, man could be squeezed into Uexkull's functional circle. Intelligent behaviour, then, becomes "only a more refined and complicated play of the same associated mechanism and automatism which we find in all animal reactions." Cassirer regards as paradoxical the striking contrast between what such theories promise and what they actually give. Taine was striving after an ideal of absolute scientific exactness, an ideal that is much higher than merely speaking of human nature in the terms of every day common experience. But the results were disappointing. To substitute

5 Ibid., p. 90.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
instinct for intelligence does not explain; it merely substitutes a new name. It just rephrases the question, giving us "at best an idem per idem, and in most cases it is an obscurum per obscurius."  

The fact is that Uexkull's functional circle, as it stands, cannot apply to human life. There is a change in man that is qualitative and not just a quantitative enlargement. There is a new characteristic in the human world which appears to be the distinctive mark of man. The difference consists in inserting between the receptor system and the effector system, which man shares with the other animal species, "a third link which we may describe as the symbolic system." This acquisition places man not only in a broader reality than that of mere animal life, but, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality. And, thus, Cassirer defines man as an animal symbolicum, or, in this context where the definition is vague, as the animal who can make use of symbols.

The difference between organic reactions and human responses consists in that in the first case "a direct and immediate answer is given to an outward stimulus; in the second case the answer is

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8Ibid., p. 91.

9Ibid., p. 43. All Cassirer claims, it will be noted, is that this third link is not on the organic level. Precisely on what level it is he does not say; nor, as will be seen, is it relevant for his theory.

10Ibid., p. 44.
A slow and complicated process of thought interrupts and delays the response. And so, according to Cassirer, thought is the interposition of a symbol between stimulus and reaction.

What is to be established, then, is what Cassirer means by animal symbolicum on the empirical level, i.e., how does man differ from brute beasts.

To begin with, it would seem that if any indirect response to stimulus is an indication of a symbolic process, then man does not differ from the animals. Experimental psychologists, following Pavlov, have investigated the conditioned reflex whereby animals respond to a representative stimulus instead of to a direct one. It was found, for instance, that anthropoid apes "learned to respond to tokens as substitutes for food rewards in the same way in which they respond to food itself." This led some to the conclusion that the conditioned reflex is a primitive form of human symbolic processes. In that case, man's psychic life would differ from that of the animals only quantitatively. And Cassirer's definition of man as animal symbolicum would be an explanation of man in terms of conditioned reflexes.

On the basis, however, of the facts of animal psychology alone, the question is insoluble. Pointing to forms of animal accomplishments gained by drill and training is not enough. In-

\[11\text{Ibid.}, p. 43.\]
\[12\text{Ibid.}, p. 46.\]
Instead, we must "find a correct and logical starting point, one which can lead us to a natural and sound interpretation of the empirical facts." And that starting point is the definition of speech. Speech employs symbols, not just signs. And while the sign is subjective in reference, particular, and concrete, the symbol is objective in reference, universal, and abstract.

An analysis of language will reveal two different strata. The first is the language of the emotions; the second, theoretical language. The language of the emotions consists of mere interjections, involuntary expressions of feeling. In theoretical language, however, the word is "a part of a sentence which has a definite syntactical and logical structure." Now, analogies to emotional language may be found in the animal world. But what is to be noted is that the language of animals—emotional language—lacks the element of objectivity; it never designates an object. The reference of their phonetics is always and completely subjective.

The sign or signal, therefore, should be restricted to the subjective realm. When an experimenter has succeeded in substituting a representative stimulus for a direct stimulus, he has merely changed the subjective situation of the animal. The signal is an "operator" and as such is opposed to the character of the

\[ ^{13} \text{Ibid., p. 47.} \]
\[ ^{14} \text{Ibid.} \]
symbol, which is that of a "designator". In summation, Cassirer asserts that "a signal is a part of the physical world of being; a symbol is a part of the human world of meaning."\(^\text{15}\) And so, animal *symbolicum* defines that animal who can designate and describe objects.

A second aspect of the symbol is that it is "a principle of universal applicability which encompasses the whole field of human thought."\(^\text{16}\) Cassirer concedes that the higher animals do have a form of insight. Given a problem, an anthropoid ape does not necessarily solve it by trial and error. At least in some cases the solutions are genuine and not products of chance. But this intelligence is not the same as that of man. Cassirer calls it "a practical imagination and intelligence whereas man alone has developed a new form: *symbolic imagination and intelligence."\(^\text{17}\) The difference is that the practical is limited to the concrete singular; it applies to the individual. The symbolic, oh the other hand, is universal.

This universality of the symbol appears clearest in the development of the individual mind making a transition from a merely practical attitude to a symbolic attitude. Ordinarily, this process is too complicated to be distinguished by psychological

\(^{15}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. } 51.\)

\(^{16}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. } 54.\)

\(^{17}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. } 52.\)
observation. However, we have the classical cases of Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller, who made the transition not gradually but abruptly. "Nature itself has here, so to speak, made an experiment capable of throwing light upon the point in question." The teachers of these two children could point to one definite occasion on which Helen Keller and Laura Bridgman entered the specifically human world of discourse, or, to use the time honored phrase, gained the use of reason.

Both girls had learned the manual alphabet. But, at first, the word was a sign to them; every name was a proper name which designated only one singular individual. The sign is identified, as it were, with the signified. "They tend to think that a thing 'is' what it is called." Then there came a day in the life of each of these girls when they first fully realized the symbolic nature of speech. In Helen Keller's life the occasion was a dramatic one. While Helen was washing one morning, her teacher spelled the name "water" for her. Then, later in the day, the two of them stopped in the pump house and the teacher pumped while Helen held her cup under the spout. As the cold water gushed forth, the teacher again spelled "water" for Helen. The realization of the universality of speech came so suddenly that Helen dropped her cup, startled. Her teacher recalls that she stood as

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18 Ibid., p. 53.
19 Ibid., p. 57.
one transfixed with a new light on her face. Then, Helen spelled "water" several times before asking for the names of other things. From then on her vocabulary grew rapidly. She was eager to learn new words and to converse.20

The second characteristic of the symbol, then, is its universal nature. Thus, in summary up to this point, animal symbolicum can employ universal symbols to designate and describe objects.

Thirdly, specifically human speech is relational. This is not to say that relations cannot be grasped on the elementary perceptual (i.e., non-conceptual) level possible to other animals. Koehler has demonstrated that chimpanzees can select objects on the basis of size, shape, color, or other qualities. But it is not this "mere awareness of relations" that is claimed to be "a specific feature of human consciousness."21 Rather, we can dismiss this capacity of the higher animals as an "isolation of perceptual factors."22 As such it is restricted to the level of concrete sense data. No animal ever gave evidence of being able to grasp relations in themselves, relations in their abstract meaning. Cassirer cites the classic example of geometry to prove

20 Ibid., pp. 53-54, contains a full description of the entire episode.
21 Ibid., p. 59.
22 Ibid. Cassirer seems to be pointing out the standard differentiation between relatio and relata.
man's ability to regard the relation itself. "Even in elementary
gometry we are not bound to the apprehension of concrete indivi-
dual figures. We are not concerned with physical things or per-
ceptual objects, for we are studying universal spatial relations.
This indicates not that the symbol is merely relational, but that
it is abstract. No relational thought would be possible in geom-
etry without an adequate symbolism. And a symbolism expressive
of relations precisely as relations must be abstract.

These three characteristics of human thought and expression--
objectivity, universality, and abstractness--Cassirer points out
as demonstrative of the basic difference between the human world
and the animal. He has designated this difference as that be-
tween a capacity for signs and a capacity for symbols. An animal
can react to a concrete, individual sign, and can even express
his subjective self in signs. But man alone can grasp the ab-
stract, universal symbol and employ it to designate and describe
objects. In this sense, at least, man is an animal symbolicum,
an animal who can employ symbols in the sense described above.

\[23\] Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

FORM

An adequate definition of man must account for every aspect of man's cultural life. Myth and religion, language and art, science and history are expressions; they issue from man. So, somehow or other, they are linked together because they are all linked to man. Among these six cultural expressions, however, there seems to be a discontinuity and radical heterogeneity instead of a unity. Any valid definition of man, then, must break through these differences and furnish the thread that binds human culture together and to man; "the world of culture is not a mere aggregate of loose and detached facts."¹

An empirical study of the organic man cannot explain culture; culture, as was shown in the previous chapter, is not an organic effluence. The purely introspective, moreover, cannot give a full explanation. "Introspection reveals to us only that small sector of human life which is accessible to our individual experience."² Therefore, some method of study must be found which will reveal the inner, non-organic man and yet will go beyond the indi-

¹Ibid., p. 278.
²Ibid., p. 16; cf. also supra, pp. 26-27.
vidual to account for the whole gamut of humanity's specific activity.

There are, conceivably, two possible methods. One would be to begin with a partial sector of human consciousness—revealed either through introspection, as Cassirer understands the methods of Socrates and Descartes, or through some other way, i.e., the faith of the theologians or the arbitrary assumptions of certain biologists—derive a definition from this partial sector, and then apply it to those realms of culture which are not revealed in the individual consciousness.

This method Cassirer rejects. Knowledge, he asserts, is not one but many. Each cultural manifestation is an expression of a peculiar type of knowledge. To explain one in terms of another is to misconstrue the one being explained and virtually to destroy it.

Cassirer's emphasis on many valid types of knowing is a genetic question rather than one he logically demonstrates. His works indicate why he came to accept this position and what he means by many valid types of knowing.

In attempting to formulate a philosophy of mathematics, Cassirer encountered difficulties in comprehending "the fundamental conceptions of mathematics from the point of view of logic."³ When he found that the traditional logic of the concept could not

characterize the concepts of mathematics, he decided to seek a new, more fundamental form of the concept. The problem gained even more meaning when he realized that it "extended over the whole field of science."\(^4\)

The problem was paradoxical. Scientists bemoaned the barriers they had to surmount because of misconceptions bred by ignorance and even because of language. But ignorance is a lack of knowledge; "why should the mere absence of correct conceptions lead to misconceptions?"\(^5\) And language, as an expression of thought, "could not possibly be a hindrance to thought as such."\(^6\)

It would seem, rather, that behind what the scientists called ignorance and incorrect use of language, there is a definite meaning of a type other than scientific meaning. In other words, Cassirer felt that each mode of knowing was valid in its own right and not explicable in terms of any other mode.

He found this theory corroborated by his studies in myth and language. These two cultural expressions are found in the earliest stages of human culture, and "their relation is so close that it is almost impossible to separate the one from the other."\(^7\)

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\(^6\)Ibid.

\(^7\)Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 142.
Are they one or are they rather two different shoots from the same root?

All previous theories tried to explain myth in terms of language, by categorizing myths in terms of their linguistic counterparts. "All the attempts," Cassirer maintains, "of the various schools of comparative mythology to unify the mythological ideas were bound to end in failure." Since myth is non-theoretical, it can never have philosophical meaning. And, indeed, all attempts to find such meaning in it have apparently failed. The Stoics regarded myth as a conscious fiction and developed elaborate techniques of allegorical interpretation. The moderns were inclined to smile at this, but their refined methods merely changed myth from a conscious to an unconscious fiction. Thus, the moderns deserve the same criticism they accord the Stoics.

These positions, moreover, do not explain the mythological phenomena; they deny it. "The mythical world appears as an artificial world, as a pretense for something else." And the same evaluation is valid for Muller's "monstrosity" theory of myth. "F. Max Muller developed a curious theory by which myth was explained as a mere by-product of language." According to Muller, myth was an aberration of language, made possible by the inherent

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8 Ibid., p. 98.
9 Ibid., p. 99.
10 Ibid., p. 142.
ambiguity of words. Since abstract ideas could be expressed in ancient language only concretely by metaphors, it was only natural that myth would spring up objectifying the literal sense of the metaphor.

Cassirer objects to this view that "to regard a fundamental human activity as a mere monstrosity, as a sort of mental disease, can scarcely pass muster as an adequate explanation of it."\(^{11}\) And it must be a fundamental human activity, since "the whole realm of mythical concepts is too great a phenomenon to be accounted for as a 'mistake' due to the absence of logically recorded facts. Mere ignorance should be agnostic--empty and negative--not exciting and irrepressible."\(^{12}\) Myth, then, should not be considered as a linguistic phenomenon but as an independent form of knowledge, valid in itself.

The individual consciousness, then, is aware of its own form (or forms) of knowledge. To apply this consciousness to forms of knowledge which are alien to it would be to contort the alien form. A scientist qua scientist, for example, can never appreciate art qua art. And one who lives in our advanced culture cannot fully appreciate the mythic consciousness if he reduces it to his own way of thinking.


The only other analysis, then, to which man in his cultural life would be open, is the one Cassirer actually employs. Down through the ages, man has given expression to his conscious life in various external devices, both verbal and non-verbal. These external expressions can be collected by the empirical sciences. All that remains for the philosopher, then, is to find the Ariadne's thread, the common element, that runs through all these cultural manifestations. This will issue according to Cassirer not only in a unification of culture but also in a definition of man. An understanding of this position requires an analysis of a basic term in Cassirer's philosophy, viz., "form".

The various cultural expressions of man are symbols, i.e., they are external signs, for the most part arbitrarily employed, which have meaning.\textsuperscript{13} It is in their meaning that they are culturally relevant; as physical entities they are investigated by the empirical sciences. Now meaning, according to Cassirer, can be considered under its formal aspect or under its material aspect. The question arises, then, under which of these aspects is a unity to be found in culture.

Previous attempts to find a unity have taken a material view; they have sought to unify each cultural manifestation according to what is expressed. According to Cassirer, they all failed. These

\textsuperscript{13}This notion of the symbol is more or less derived from the discussion of Chapter III above. It seems to the present author to be one which is universally acceptable.
failures are not sufficiently indicated by Cassirer in the Essay on Man; the question is open to doubt. But his discussion on this point clarifies what he means by a material approach and how it differs from a formal one.

Mythologists, e.g., have long sought to classify the objects of mythical thinking and thereby to discover the "one single object . . . that contains and comprises all the others." There have been lunar, solar, and meteorological mythologists, each trying to make his chosen object the ultimate object of all myths. But none of them could reach his goal, "without constantly pressing and stretching the facts for the sake of rendering the theory a homogeneous whole." Here, material approach seems to be one which classifies the objects to which the symbols refer. And Cassirer states that he is "inquiring not into the subject matter but into the form of mythical imagination." So, too, is there controversy in unifying the subject matter of religion. "The articles of faith, the dogmatic creeds, the theological systems are engaged in an interminable struggle. Even the ethical ideals of different religions are widely divergent and scarcely reconcilable with each other." Aquinas tried to

14 Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 100.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 98.
17 Ibid.
show that the mysteries of faith could not be known by reason alone and yet were not irrational. But Tertullian's *credo quia absurdum*, Pascal's *Deus absconditus*, and Kierkegaard's great paradox of religious life are equally typical positions. Nevertheless, contradictions in subject matter, according to Cassirer, do "not affect the specific form . . . and inner unity"\(^\text{18}\) present in all religious feeling and thought. The symbols may change; the religious form remains always the same. Again, the material approach seeks a unity in what is believed.

In language, too, the unification of meaning took a material approach. Meaning, in early Greek philosophies of language, had to be explained in terms of being, since truth is linked with reality. If a word meant a thing, there had to be some identity between the two. In other words, the "connection between the symbol and its object must be a natural, not a merely conventual one."\(^\text{19}\) This, indeed, was a great advance over the primitive view that the word is the thing.\(^\text{20}\) There could be no problem of meaning before the realization that in language "the decisive feature is not its physical but its logical character."\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{18}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{19}\text{Ibid., p. 146.}\)
But a natural connection between word and thing is indefensible, because of the "variety of individual idioms and the heterogeneity of linguistic types." So philosophy of language is confronted with the same dilemma as appears in a material analysis of myth and religion. We must accept the diversity of facts and we must account for the unity. And this unity is not to be found in the relation between word and object.

By the material aspect of the symbol, then, Cassirer means its correspondence to the object it symbolizes. This correspondence has never been established, he claims, to such an extent that it has achieved a unity of meaning. Suppose, however, that such a unity in terms of object or subject matter could be achieved. According to Cassirer, this would not show precisely what the particular consciousness--mythic, scientific, etc.--sees in that object. Suppose, for example, it were possible to reduce all myths to one basic object; even then this would not solve the real problem which mythology presents to philosophy, but at best would push it back one step. For mythical formulation as such cannot be understood and appreciated simply by determining the object on which it is immediately and originally centered. It is, and remains, the same miracle of the spirit and the same mystery, no matter whether it deals with the interpretation and articulation of physical processes or physical things, and in the latter case, just what particular things these may be. Even though it were possible to resolve all mythology to a basic astral mythology--what the mythical consciousness derives from contemplation of the stars, what it sees in them directly, would still be something radically different from

\[22\text{Ibid.}, p. 167.\]
the view they present to empirical observation or the way they figure in theoretical speculation and scientific explanations of natural phenomena.²³

What Cassirer is saying is that when the same reality is presented to different types of consciousnesses, the expression that results depends on what the type of consciousness is that apprehends the reality. This subjective element Cassirer illustrated at great length and in great detail by the example of a black line drawing perceived formally in different ways. At first, this black line-drawing is only a perceptual experience, a simple combination of lines.

Yet, while I still follow the various lines of the drawing in their visual relations, their light and dark, their contrast from the background, their up-and-down movements, the lines become, so to speak, alive. The spatial form becomes an aesthetic form: I grasp in it the character of a certain ornament. . . . I can remain absorbed in the pure contemplation of this ornament, but I can also apprehend in and through it something else; it represents to me an expressive segment of an artistic language, in which I recognize the language of a certain time, the style of an historical period. Again, the 'mode of sight' may change, in so far as, what was manifest as an ornament, is now disclosed to me as a vehicle of a mythico-religious significance, as a magical sign. By a further shift in perspective, the lines function as a sensuous vehicle for a purely conceptual structure-context. To the mathematician, they become the intuitive representation of a specific functional connection.

. . . Where, in the aesthetic sight, one may see them perhaps as Hogarth beauty-lines, they picture to the mathematician a certain trigonometric function, viz., the picture of a sine-curve, whereas the mathematical physicist may perhaps see in this curve the law of some natural process, such as, e.g., the law of a periodic oscillation.²⁴

²³Cassirer, Language and Myth, pp. 10-11.

In brief, then, a material inquiry asks the question: what do the symbols refer to. A formal inquiry, on the other hand, asks: how are the symbols formed. The former would destroy the autonomy of the various types of consciousness by ignoring the specific differences in formation; besides, it has never succeeded in achieving any sort of unity. The latter accepts this autonomy, seeks to define the specific mode of formation in each cultural type, and eventually tries to determine the common element that binds all culture together; because this approach ignores material differences, e.g., the various conflicting dogmatic tenets of schools of theology, it can achieve a unity.

Up to this point, Cassirer's philosophic method has been presented by comparison and contrast with other methods of founding a theoretical anthropology. The general nature of the inquiry is clear. There remains, however, the nature of the unity that is to result, the nature of the definition of man that such a unity provides, as well as the actual working out of the philosophy.
CHAPTER V

FUNCTION

For his raw material, Cassirer takes the facts of human culture that the exact sciences have placed at his disposal. It is his conviction that, in each cultural type, "the varied and seemingly dispersed rays may be gathered together into a common focus."\(^1\) To achieve this common focus, he reduces the facts to forms—the form of myth, of religion, of language, etc.—and shows that each possesses a unity of formation in spite of a diversity in subject matter.\(^2\) But in so doing, he has "to stress all along the specific character and structure"\(^3\) of each form. Has he not destroyed all possibility of the unity he sought to establish in culture? The answer is no; and the explanation lies in the nature of the forms his formal approach has determined.

Myth is a form and the various mythic symbols are forms

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\(^1\) Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 278.

\(^2\) The reader should understand this statement as Cassirer's claim and not as something which has been or will be demonstrated in this thesis. As a methodological study, this thesis is interested only in the nature of the process and not in the validity of the conclusions.

\(^3\) Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, p. 278.
which designate objects. In what sense are they forms? Is the mythological form a substantial form of man, in the sense of an absolute idealism? Are the mythic symbols forms which determine the substantiality of objects in a realistic context? Is Cassirer investigating, in brief, substances? If so, man must have a plurality of substantial forms which must be unified; or objects must have this plurality.

Cassirer is not an ontologist or metaphysician; he states that he is a critical philosopher. The cultural forms and their constitutive symbols do not designate the substance of man or of things but rather the function of man. Cassirer's forms are functions; and their unification derives from their all being functions of man. Function, then, and its opposition to substance have an important place in Cassirer's thought and must be investigated.

This emphasis on function in place of substance—as well as the emphasis on form instead of matter—is Kantian and is recognized as such by Cassirer. "Kant does not stand merely in a position of dependence on the factual stuff of knowledge, the material offered by the various sciences. Kant's basic conviction consists rather in this, that there is a universal and essential form of knowledge and that philosophy is called upon and qualified to discover this form and establish it with certainty. The cri-

tique of reason achieves this by reflective thought upon the function of knowledge instead of upon its content.\textsuperscript{5}

Cassirer's major departure from Kant, as he understands Kant, on this point, is his emphasis on forms; knowledge is not one but many for Cassirer. Each cultural manifestation is an expression of a peculiar type of knowledge. Cassirer desires to find the specific nature which makes it such. "For the fundamental principle of critical thinking, the principle of the 'primacy' of the function over the object, assumes in each special field a new form and demands a new and independent explanation. Along with the pure form of cognition we must seek to understand the function of mythical and religious thinking, and the function of artistic perception, in such a way as to disclose how in all of them there is attained an entirely determinate formation."\textsuperscript{6} Hence, to understand Cassirer's notion of form, we must first understand Kant's notion of function and Cassirer's application of it.

"Weary of the dogmatism that teaches us nothing and of the scepticism that does not even promist anything, Kant raised the fundamental critical question 'Is any metaphysics possible?"\textsuperscript{7}


Whether or not Kant answered this question, Cassirer does not say. What is important for Cassirer is the new philosophic method Kant introduced. "Kant's transcendental method starts from the fact of (scientific) experience and seeks to determine how this fact is possible." Instead of taking the product of scientific knowledge, Kant turned back to the function of such knowledge. And this function turned out to be, not to copy being, but to constitute an object. The object constituted, however, Cassirer warns, is not the absolute object, which would lead to an absolute idealism, but a "phenomenal object, conditioned by this very function" of being constituted.

Function, then, seems to be synonymous with task, purpose, role, operation, end, in the usual usage of the word. In this sense, Kant can speak of the function of scientific knowledge. And Cassirer, to whom science is just one form of knowledge, can speak of the functions of the various forms.

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8 Cassirer appears to have a general commitment to Kant's thesis that all knowledge is mediate, with the object constituted by the subject. But the foundation of this position and its validity, Cassirer never investigates or even discusses. It seems that he accepts Kant as a basis, valid or invalid as it may be in itself, merely as a starting point. "That aspect of Cassirer's general contention, then, according to which there can be no objectivity outside the contexts established by the sciences, arts, myths, etc., instead of being explicitly demonstrated, constitutes his basic commitment to Kant's viewpoint (Hamburg, p. 86.)."


10 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, III, 5.
But each form or type of knowledge has within it various forms—

for Kant, the categories of the pure understanding and the ideas of pure reason; for Cassirer, the mythic symbols, religious symbols, etc. Form in this sense of category, idea of pure reason, or symbol may be said to have a function in the above sense of function; they may be said to have a role in the formation of the phenomenal object.

But the term function, when referring to the symbol, not only means that the symbol has a role or function but that the role or function is functional. The symbolic form, in other words, at least when it is formally and not materially studied,\(^{11}\) does not assert a substance but rather a function or relation. Function in this sense is a term usually applied to mathematical concepts; Cassirer extends its use to all concepts. And thus he maintains that the symbol expresses not essences but relations.\(^{12}\)

Describing the Kantian critique of scientific knowledge, Cassirer states that "we know the object when we have achieved synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition."\(^{13}\) In other words, we know an object when we have succeeded in expressing it as a part of a given context, as related to the other symbols in that context.

\(^{11}\)Cf. supra, pp. 46-51, for this distinction.

\(^{12}\)Slochower, p. 638.

\(^{13}\)Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, III, 5.
To ask, therefore, for a functional unity is to ask "what are the conditions according to which one element is arranged and connected with another." Or as Cassirer describes it in its mathematical formulation: "A totality of members a, b, c, d, . . . are to be recognized as belonging together, are to be linked by a rule on the basis of which the production of the one from the other can be determined and foreseen. . . . We attempt to order the elements a, b, c, d, . . . in such a way that they can be thought of as members in a series x₁, x₂, x₃, x₄, . . . which is characterized by a determinate 'universal member.'"  

Applying this notion of function as relation to non-mathematical forms of knowledge brings the assertion that "each individual impression has meaning and significance only in and through the context within which we view it." Or, as Cassirer expresses it symbolically: "We see, then, that in order to characterize a given form of relation . . . we must . . . define the system in which it stands. If we designate the various kinds of relations . . . as R₁, R₂, R₃, we must assign to each one a special 'index of modality,' as ₁, ₂, ₃, denoting the context of function and meaning in which it is to be taken. For each of

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14 Slochower, p. 636.

15 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, III, 414.

these contexts, language as well as scientific cognition, art as well as myth, possess its own constitutive principle which sets its stamp, as it were, on all the particular forms within it."  

So, for Cassirer, the symbol is a symbolic function which is to be defined as a member of "a succession of terms connected with one another by a certain criterion," which criterion is different for each of the symbolic forms or types of knowledge. Each symbolic form, then, is unified by this criterion or constitutive principle, which is akin to the generative principle of integers, n, n+1, etc. And if the criteria of the various cultural forms manifest the same basic function (= role), then we will have a functional unity of all symbolic forms as well as a definition of man as functioning through these forms.

Symbol, form, and function, therefore, are the key notions which determine the specific difference of Cassirer's neo-Kantian brand of philosophy. They designate the subject matter of the investigation, i.e., the symbols which man uses to express his consciousness; the aspect under which the subject matter is to be investigated, i.e., the form of the symbols rather than the matter they designate; and the nature of the unity that will result, i.e., unity in the functions the forms perform rather in the objects.

17 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, I, 97.

designated through the forms.

There now remains for Cassirer the actual working out of his system and the achievement of the unity he seeks in terms of the functions of the symbolic forms. Whether or not he actually succeeded in unifying culture by his method is open to debate; it appears that he never fully succeeded.\textsuperscript{19} And even if he had, an analysis of this unity would be properly philosophical and beyond the scope of methodology. Still, the working out of his system along general lines as well as indications of the functions as unifiers will clarify somewhat the aims and procedures, terms and basic approach that characterize Cassirer. This is the task of the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{19}Cf. supra, p. 6.
CHAPTER VI

UNITY

The philosophy of symbolic forms starts with an assumption, a presupposition. The assumption, from a historical viewpoint, is that Kant was correct in his so-called Copernican revolution. More concretely, it is that man cannot be defined in terms of a metaphysical principle or inborn faculty. Man has but one outstanding character that is susceptible of investigation, i.e., his work, his cultural activity.¹

This is not to say that man is not a physical fact and could not be studied as a physical fact. But man's physical being does not mark his specific character. Man, according to Wilhelm Dilthey, "becomes an object for human studies only in so far as human states are consciously lived, in so far as human states find expression in living utterances, and in so far as these utterances are understood."² So, he "who would know man must observe him in his creative power and his creative achievement, i.e., his

¹Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 93.
²Quoted in Bidney, p. 488.
civilization."³

But there is a multiplicity and disparateness in civilization. The cultural symbols used by different persons and different peoples in various places at various times expressed contents which conflict with one another. This conflict is a fact; and the Kantian approach does not destroy facts; facts are valid because they are facts.⁴ So man in his civilization has no nature; he has history. "His being," as Ortega y Gasset puts it, "is not one but many and manifold, different in each time and in each place."⁵

To preserve these differences, content must be ignored. "It is the basic function of speech, of myth, of art, of religion that we must seek far behind their innumerable shapes and utterances, and that in the last analysis we must trace back to a common origin."⁶

How, then, is the basic function of each symbolic form to be determined? And where is the common origin of the overall unifying function? It is the symbol, as would be expected, that unifies each symbolic form, distinguishes each from the others,

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⁵Quoted ibid., p. 491.
⁶Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 93.
and yet serves—as the thread running through all—to make all of culture somehow one.

Man differs from the animals, according to Cassirer, because man's responses to stimuli are "interrupted and retarded by a slow and complicated process of thought" which is made outwardly manifest by symbols. Man has, as it were, set up a screen between himself and the world. "No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face."

Now, the individual symbolic forms "are organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension." They are not copies of reality. Cassirer need not lean on Kant in making this assertion. By virtue of the fact that he claims each form of knowledge is valid in its own right and that none of them has a privileged status, he cannot recognize one of them as a copy of reality without destroying the validity of the others.

Besides, he asserts that he is interested in the function of the various forms and not in their content. By ignoring content he is ignoring that aspect of the symbol which connects it with reality. A photograph and a Rouault may both be visual repre-

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7 Ibid., p. 45.
8 Cf. supra, pp. 31-40.
9 Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 45.
10 Cassirer, Language and Myth, p. 8.
sentations of the same reality, the same content; but the one differs from the other in function, i.e., in mode of representation. Thus, according to their functions alone, the symbols are organs of reality. All of them, then, symbolize reality; yet each has "its individual assignments,"\(^{11}\) "an original way and tendency of expression,"\(^{12}\) which is found in its "spontaneous law of generation."\(^{13}\)

Each law of generation is proper to one symbolic form. Can it be further said that one symbolic form causes the generation of another symbolic form? Is this chain of generation perhaps the unity that binds all the forms together? This solution is indicated by Cassirer's view of the nature of symbol. He considers man's mediate cognition of reality "a questionable gain"\(^{14}\) over the animal's immediate response to reality, or "a deterioration of human nature to exceed the boundaries of organic life."\(^{15}\) According to Cassirer, man is forced by his symbolic system to live, not in direct contact with the world, but "in the midst of imaginary emotions, in hopes and fears, in illusions and

\(^{11}\text{Ibid.}, p. 9.\)
\(^{12}\text{Ibid.}, p. 8.\)
\(^{13}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{14}\text{Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 43.}\)
\(^{15}\text{Ibid.}\)
disillusions, in his fantasies and dreams."\textsuperscript{16}

How better, therefore, than to define culture itself "as the process of man's progressive self-liberation."\textsuperscript{17} The function of each new cultural development, then, is a step closer to man's ultimate liberation. But it is not a liberation from the symbol to a direct awareness of the world. It is, rather, the symbol's liberation from the world through man's "power to build up a world of his own, an 'ideal' world,"\textsuperscript{18} that man is freed from the imaginary emotions, hopes, fears, etc., that plague the more primitive attempts of man in creating a culture through a symbolic form.

This progressive self-liberation is not a hypothesis in Cassirer's philosophy. It is a trend that he finds in the historical development of culture through a functional study of the various symbolic forms. It is not a conjecture that determines his methodology but a fruit of the application of that methodology. Whether or not it is a complete and accurate picture is a matter to be determined by experts in the various fields; and this thesis makes no pretense of such an evaluation. But to the extent that method may be separated from philosophy, Cassirer's discussion of the historical development of culture illustrates

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 286. \\
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
the application of his approach to the data of empirical science that he works with.

Basically, there are two phases or aspects to this functional study. The symbol functionally united in an individual symbolic form is coextensive with the objective aspect of the function; subjectively considered, the function unifies the various forms in their dialectical evolution.

Objectively considered, "for Cassirer a symbol is an expression which refers back to an intuited, universal meaning."\(^{19}\) The symbol is thus an instrument which when communicated among those who share a common cultural perspective will engender in others the universal meaning one wishes to communicate. The symbol within a given form could serve as such a means of communication because of the unified context of which it was an element. The context was unified in that a given symbolic form which served as the context had one function and only one function, viz., to give some creative expression to a definite type of psychological reaction to the external world.\(^{20}\) In thus correlating the historically-evolved cultural categories with the ego, Cassirer succeeds in "binding together man and the symbolic world of his creation."\(^{21}\)

\(^{19}\)Bidney, p. 511. The terms "objective" and "subjective" are Bidney's. Cassirer never explicitly differentiates between the two aspects of the unifying function.

\(^{20}\)Ibid., p. 506.

\(^{21}\)Ibid., p. 542.
And because of this capacity for creating symbols as a means of communicating his subjective self, "man may be said to be a symbol-making or symbolizing animal."\(^{22}\)

But Cassirer defines man as an \textit{animal symbolicum} or symbolized animal,\(^{23}\) according to the subjective aspect of function, which unifies the whole of human culture under the aspect of man's functioning through culture. In so far as the symbol is an expression of a psychological reaction to the outside world that is common to a group sharing a cultural perspective, it is just an organ of communication, pointing to the external world. But in so far as this expression proceeds from humanity, it is an organ of thought, an objectification of the spirit, "a reflection of human psycho-biological impulses and interests."\(^{24}\) And as such it points to mankind in a given stage of cultural evolution and to all of culture's "common end or function in making for progressive objectification of the human spirit and for 'self-liberation.'\(^{25}\) This subjective aspect of symbol accounts for Cassirer's placing man in a symbolic universe and stating that man "is in a sense constantly conversing with himself"\(^{26}\) by means

\(^{22}\)Ibid., p. 505.

\(^{23}\)Cassirer, \textit{Essay on Man}, p. 44.

\(^{24}\)Bidney, p. 512.

\(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 542.

\(^{26}\)Cassirer, \textit{Essay on Man}, p. 43.
of symbols. Thus, "man is said to be an 'animal symbolicum' or symbolized animal, since man does not know himself directly but only through the cultural symbols which humanity has created historically." 27

In summary, then, there are "for Cassirer, two sources of unity of function in human culture, namely, psychological or genetic unity of motive for each cultural discipline, and teleological unity of function in achieving a common harmony for . . . the culture of humanity as a whole." 28 How this works out in practice remains to be indicated more specifically.

A symbolic form may have any one of three different functions. These three are: (1) the expressive or emotive function; (2) the representative or intuitional; (3) the theoretical or conceptual. 29 Myth, according to Cassirer, is an example of the first; language, of the second; and science, of the third. A consideration of these three is sufficient to illustrate Cassirer's unity of function, though Cassirer does recognize others, e.g., art, history, religion.

27Bidney, p. 505.
28Ibid., p. 542.
29Cassirer has no hard and fast usage in the terms differentiating these three functions. The terms given here seem to be the ones used most frequently in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, volume III. They are, moreover, indicative in themselves of the functions they designate. Hamburg (pp. 113-114) cites terms which differ slightly from those given above. This discrepancy is due to the fact that Cassirer in no one place lists the functions.
Language, however, is not completely separable from myth and science. Myth and science in its early formation use language as a medium. But it is precisely this overlapping that enables Cassirer to posit a teleological unity through genetic development. Language, before it achieves its own autonomy through its proper function of representation, is mythic. And the first stages of science are representational through language rather than purely conceptual.

In its proper form, myth has the function of pure expression, i.e., it gives expression to the totality of a here-and-now state of consciousness. It expresses, therefore, not just the objective, but also the emotive response to the objective. As Cassirer puts it, "it is never directed exclusively toward the 'what' of the object, but encompasses the mode of its total manifestation—the character of the luring or the menacing, the familiar or the uncanny, the soothing or frightening." This emotive character of the consciousness is not something over and above consciousness of the object; it is not deduced or inferred from the object. Mythic consciousness is a totality; thus the thing "is in itself gloomy or joyful, agitating or soothing, pacifying or terrifying."

30 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, III, 69.
31 Ibid., p. 67.
32 Ibid., p. 68.
33 Ibid., p. 72.
in the very moment of its confronting the person.

Moreover, myth is wholly expressive of the here and now given; it is never representational.\(^{34}\) Since the symbol expresses the totality of the consciousness, if in the next confrontation with the thing there is a different emotive character to the state of consciousness, a new symbol will have to be employed. "Reality—corporeal or psychic—has not yet become stabilized but preserves a peculiar fluidity."\(^{35}\) So, in myth, there are not yet "things" but only states of consciousness.

Eventually, however, "instead of giving himself wholly to the actuality, the simple presence of the sensuous content, man succeeds in taking it as representative of another"\(^{36}\) sensuous content. Man has become aware of the representative function of the symbol. The objects, as it were, stand out as apart from the emotive character of consciousness, recede "into the distance: into a distance where they can be 'looked at,' 'intuited,' in which they can be actualized in their spatial outlines and independent qualitative determinations."\(^{37}\)

What has happened is that man has taken the symbol for one sensory consciousness, recognized it as a symbol, and applied it

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 68.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 71.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 112.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 113.
to many other sensory consciousnesses. Again, Cassirer cites the case of Helen Keller as an illustration. In the flow of consciousness, permanent and stable content are seized upon. Then "certain favored points are gradually singled out, and around them the other members group themselves." Thus, for example, not only can the most diverse color phenomena with all the variety of tonality, brightness, etc., that they disclose be taken as instances of red, green, etc., but 'red' and 'green' themselves appear in turn as special instances, as representatives of 'color pure and simple.'

With language, then, humanity has taken a step forward in facilitating conscious life. Representational symbols "enable us to communicate our thoughts and to coordinate our practical activities" more easily. Language, furthermore, furnishes the first stage of science, the natural history stage. Science is here concerned with apprehending; its concepts are concepts by Quoting F. S. C. Northrop, Cassirer defines this type of concept as "one the complete meaning of which is given by something immed-

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39 Ibid., p. 115.
40 Ibid., p. 116.
41 Ibid., p. 115.
42 Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 263.
This stage of scientific activity gathers facts; it "contents itself with simply translating into its own language what is given in perception or intuition." In its symbols it merely represents what consciousness sees, limiting its function to simply surveying the world of objects and reflecting the order in the world of objects.

But can science content itself with merely reflecting order as given? Are the representational symbols of language a sufficient instrument for science? Cassirer replies in the negative. Language describes detached and isolated observable facts; it is limited to immediate experience. And no extension, enlargement, or enrichment of experience will give a total picture, a comprehensive view of the order of things.

It is precisely the total picture of reality that science seeks. And "total" for Cassirer signifies not merely extensive completeness of data but also systematization. Now representational language cannot furnish a system because it lacks in itself true systematic order. The language symbol has as its primary function to represent; only secondarily—in so far as the

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43 Ibid., p. 273.
44 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, III, 282.
46 Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 263.
47 Ibid., p. 266.
things represented are seen to possess order—does it unify. Science requires a symbol whose primary function is to symbolize and which represents only secondarily. Thus, the symbols of science must themselves possess a systematic order; and the only symbolism that is intrinsically ordered is number.

Cassirer terms the scientific symbol—the number—a pure symbol. In itself, number has no objective meaning, no reference to an object. It has no meaning or its own. "Its meaning is defined by the position it occupies in the whole numerical system." It is not a response to "the ready-made configurations ... from the world of intuition." It is a pure creation. "For what we have here are no longer detached words but terms that proceed according to one and the same fundamental plan and that, therefore, show us a clear and definite structural law."

The scientific consciousness, therefore, looks away from reality. "No theory ... is possible unless pure thought detaches itself from the matrix of intuition, unless it progresses to structures which are fundamentally unintuitive in nature."

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48 Ibid., p. 270.
49 Ibid., p. 267.
50 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, III, 285.
52 Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, III, 283.
53 Ibid., p. 320.
The symbols "are not imposed upon thought by objects, but must be created by independent activities of thought."\(^5^4\)

But the purpose of science— as of all conscious activity—is to achieve a "desired closeness to reality."\(^5^5\) It cannot, therefore, "remain in the vacuum of sheer abstract thinking."\(^5^6\) The created rule of determination that is the number system "must be confirmed in the intuitive sphere."\(^5^7\) The number is not a being, not a fact; "it is a regulative maxim for our observation and classification of natural phenomena."\(^5^8\) And, thus, the "scientist cannot achieve his end without strict obedience to the facts of nature."\(^5^9\)

And so, the scientist closes his eyes to reality and creates in pure thought a symbol system whose only determinant is order. He then returns to reality and is able to grasp the systematization of reality in so far as reality correlates with the created systematization. And in this way has man achieved "the summit and consummation of all our human activities."\(^6^0\)

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 284.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 283.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 285.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 282.

\(^{58}\) Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 264.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 278.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 261.
These, in summary, are the unities Cassirer claims to find in human culture. The symbols of myth express; the symbols of language represent; the symbols of science systematize. But humanity also progresses toward a purer and purer symbolism. Myth is bound up with the subject's emotive state; language breaks away from its subject; science abandons even the object in the formation of its symbols.

Each symbolic form possesses its unique psychological activity, motive, function. But the development from one form to another manifests a progressive movement toward a pure symbol, one freed from all relation to reality. Each symbolic form is made one in genetic function; the forms are united in turn by their teleological function.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

To evaluate Cassirer's contributions to learning through his philosophy of symbolic forms—both as an all-embracing theory and as a specific method for approaching the various cultural disciplines—and to do this properly and adequately would be an enormous task. Detailed criticism by any but specialists in the various fields Cassirer handles is "difficult if not impossible" because his treatments are distinguished "by the union of wide erudition and penetrating philosophical insight." ¹ Any conclusions, therefore, must be tentative ones. "If Plato found it hard to distinguish between a sophist and a philosopher when he met one, we need perhaps not be ashamed if we require a little more time and space to arrive at a full view... of Ernst Cassirer's philosophical thought."²

This thesis, however, has not pretended to be anything more than an elucidation of Cassirer's methodology and, where necessary to clarify the method, an illustration of Cassirer's basic thought.

² Solmitz, p. 756.
What can be said about Cassirer's method considered apart from his doctrine is the only topic that this paper may validly discuss. But how far may method be analysed apart from doctrine?

First of all, the timeliness of the approach may be discussed. That the symbol as a cultural entity needs to be studied and the findings of such a study incorporated even into scholastic thought is an assertion found in present day writings. Father Walter Ong, S.J., refers to theurgency of Catholic theology's analysing symbolic valence and assimilating this study. And he notes "the great progress made in the past few decades in the elucidation of the architypal symbolism on which human conscious activity builds." 3

Next, the bearing of Cassirer's thought on the specific cultural disciplines may be observed. Gaging this impact by the comments of experts in each field, Cassirer's contributions appear to have proven fruitful. Cassirer's approach to science, for example, shows "power and productivity." 4 With regard to the philosophy of science, "One feels that the disagreements among philosophers need not persist unabated." 5 His theory of art is also

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4 Lewin, p. 272.

5 Kaufmann, p. 213.
satisfactory. In linguistics he commands our admiration. And there is no doubt of his contribution to mythology.

And lastly, the method may be presented and discussed in itself in the hope that further studies of Cassirer will not misunderstand Cassirer especially by reading into him a position that is specifically eliminated by Cassirer because of the limited nature of his method. Presentation of Cassirer's method has been the only aim of this thesis. So, in conclusion, this thesis will merely assert what Cassirer's method is not and then will pose a problem by way of illustrating areas that are beyond Cassirer's avowed method.

In what sense, it may be asked, is Cassirer a disciple of Kant? Kant, of course, was a starting point, a frame of reference that proved suggestive of many possibilities. "Whenever he [Cassirer] started from any goal he went back to the philosophy of Kant as a base from which to proceed." But Cassirer "is surely not to be interpreted as a neo-Kantian in any limited sense."

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7 Urban, p. 403.

8 Mantagu, pp. 376-377.


10 Gutman, p. 446.
Though his viewpoint derives historically from Kant, it "lacks the fatal rigidity of the latter's system."\(^{11}\) The "narrow apriorism" of Kant is lacking in Cassirer.\(^{12}\) In fact, it is claimed that Cassirer accomplished so much so solid and enduring worth "rather in spite of misleading associations and entanglements [with Kant] than because of any positive guidance accruing from such a source."\(^{13}\)

Unqualifiedly identifying Cassirer with Kant, therefore, would be fatal. First of all, Kant must be understood as Cassirer understood him. Then, Kant must be ignored in so far as Cassirer ignored him. In short, Cassirer's thought should be understood by itself and not crammed into a predetermined category.

One philosopher regards Cassirer with "the gratitude which we owe to a great scholar." But he has "grave misgivings" on the validity of Cassirer's principles. "An unshakeable conviction," he states, "underlies all our thinking, in every-day life, in science, and in philosophy. We know we are placed amidst a world of real things—things not made by man. And we know that we respond to the challenge of this real world by what we do and

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13Smart, p. 267.
Now, does Cassirer deny this "unshakeable conviction"? Such was the charge also of his examiners at the University of Berlin. And his response on that occasion was an emphatic denial.  

Perhaps, however, Cassirer's system cannot avoid denying the existence of extra-mental reality. It would seem that in his philosophy "the understanding makes nature," to use Kant's phrase. Indeed, at times Cassirer's manner of speaking gives this impression. But what does he mean by such words? 

This question cannot be fully discussed in a methodological study. But the question must be understood in terms of Cassirer's method before a valid answer can be given. "Understanding" is not a faculty in man for Cassirer; nor is "nature" being. Cassirer's study has been limited to symbols and further limited to not what we see through a symbolic perspective but to the perspective itself. And perspectives, viewpoints, frames of reference are not beings.

Philosophers have pointed out that Cassirer is too wrapped

14 Helmut Kuhn, "Review: Cassirer, An Essay on Man," in Jour-

nal of Philosophy (New York), XLII (1945), 503.

15 Gawronsky, "Cassirer, His Life and His Work," pp. 16-17.

16 Hendel, p. 9.

17 Cassirer, Language and Myth, p. 8.
in analyses and too little concerned with speculation. Cassirer's approach is lacking in precisely those elements that would determine the theory to either a pro- or an anti-metaphysical position; he is rather a-metaphysical. He ignores substance and content and seeks unity in terms of function and form.

Such a question, then, as to whether the function is in man or in things would determine whether Cassirer is an idealist or a realist. But the question itself has no place in Cassirer's thought. It is the perspective itself that is unified; not the object seen through the perspective nor the man who does the seeing.

But culture does involve a "see-er" and a "seen". And their entity, in so far as it is independent of the perspective, does not concern Cassirer. Should it? Do they pose a problem that Cassirer should have been concerned with and was not? The rise of Hitler in Germany and the Nazi myth was a personal problem to Cassirer the Jew; but could Cassirer the philosopher explain this problem in terms of his philosophy?

Cassirer was interested only in the fact of a cultural phenomenon, of a cultural perspective. The question arises: is facticity truth? If it is not, then Cassirer's philosophy must be

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supplemented by one which seeks truth, by one which goes beyond function to substance by studying content as well as form.

The mythic perspective as a cultural phenomenon is a fact; is it true? Is it a valid norm for action? In 1933, Cassirer "knew that there was nothing for him to do in the 'new' Germany, and he decided to emigrate." Some time later he devoted a book to the study of political myth so that we may understand the adversary and know how to fight him. In this volume he refers to the "darkness" of myth and its threat to mankind.

It would seem then that even Cassirer recognized the fact that fact is not truth. But where is the norm whereby to distinguish fact that is true from fact that is false? Or better, how can we distinguish fact from the artifact of culture? These are questions that seem to go beyond a mere study of functional perspectives.

This thesis cannot but conclude that Cassirer has made a signal contribution to philosophy, but a contribution that leaves many questions unanswered. What direction Cassirer's thought would have taken in answering these questions remains forever hidden. But one wonders what insights might come if the philosophy of symbolic forms were to be completed by the philosophia perennis.

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19 Gawronsky, "Cassirer, His Life and His Work," p. 28.
21 Ibid., p. 375.
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B. ARTICLES


The thesis submitted by Peter J. Roslovich, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

June 11, 1959

Date

Signature of Adviser