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Ernst Cassirer and the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

Pedersen, Esther Oluffa

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SYMPOSIUM: 100TH ANNIVERSARY  
OF CASSIRER'S *THE PHILOSOPHY OF  
SYMBOLIC FORMS*

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# Critical Idealism as Method: Ernst Cassirer and the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

Esther Oluffa Pedersen 

Philosophy and Science Studies, DCA,  
University of Roskilde, Roskilde, Denmark

## Correspondence

Esther Oluffa Pedersen, Philosophy and  
Science Studies, DCA, University of Roskilde,  
Roskilde, Denmark.  
Email: [estherop@ruc.dk](mailto:estherop@ruc.dk)

## Abstract

To commemorate the centenary of Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* this essay focuses on how Cassirer in the development of a distinctive philosophical method analyzed the newest development within philosophy and science. Discussing Einstein's theory of relativity and Russell's formal logic Cassirer found tools to expand the critique of reason into a critique of culture. The course of argumentation is as follows. At the outset Cassirer's outline of the idea of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in the 1920 book *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* is presented as a reaction to the increasing distance between theoretical physics and ordinary experience. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* can be read as an answer to an inner methodological demand within critical idealism. I encircle this motif in Cassirer's comment that Plato's idealism, understood as the *dianoia* of thought, is reiterated in Kant's transcendental philosophy and Herman Cohen's reception of Kant. This leads to a discussion of how Cassirer breaks away from Cohen by the positive reception of Russell's symbolic logic. Finally, I present the theory of functional concepts developed by Cassirer (1910) in the book *Substance and Function* as a prerequisite for the conception of a plural but systematic philosophy of symbolic forms.

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## 1 | A CRITICAL THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

1919, the first year of the Weimar Republic Germany, Cassirer is called to a full professorship at the newly founded University of Hamburg. Here, he enmeshes himself in projecting *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The commencement hereof is somewhat surprisingly taken in the book *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* from August 1920. The proclaimed aim is to prepare “for a mutual understanding between the philosopher and the physicist on questions, concerning which they are still widely separated.” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 349/VII<sup>1</sup>) This pertains, in first line, the interpretation of mathematics, space, time, and matter considering modern physics. But more broadly, and here Cassirer's breaks new philosophical land, his analysis displays the immense interpretational power of physics and its explanatory limits. Cassirer's detailed discussion of Einstein culminates in critical philosophy gaining a double perspective. The critical theory of knowledge [*die kritische Theorie der Erkenntnis*] endeavors to comprehend and validate how the general theory of relativity advances to an explanation of nature in which “it seeks to resolve not only the differences of sensation but also those between spatial and temporal determinations into the unity of numerical determinations.” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 448/114) “The task of philosophy,” however, is to recognize “fully the logical meaning of the mathematical and physical concept of objectivity and thereby conceive this meaning in its logical limitedness.” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 450/116).

The *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is born out of this novel take on the methodological ideal for the neo-Kantian critical theory of knowledge. For Kantianism the theory of relativity, of course, poses a series of problems paradigmatically expressed in the supersession of Euclidian space. The older generation Marburg neo-Kantian philosophers—Herman Cohen and Paul Natorp—had reacted to the continuous development of science beyond the scope of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* by exclaiming that a critical theory of knowledge has the ongoing task of formulating the a priori principles that systematize the progression of science (see Renz, 2002). This entails a historical transformation of the a priori principles in lieu of the historical development of critical idealism and the sciences. In his discussion of the theory of relativity Cassirer follows this perspective. Rather than accommodating the content and results of the general theory of relativity, Cassirer emphasizes how the mathematical tools to comprehend space and time have enabled the complete abandonment of intuitive space and time in physics. Accordingly, he insists that the “determination of the four-dimensional space and time continuum [of the general theory of relativity] loses the appearance of paradox” as soon as we comprehend that it is “the final consequence and working out of the fundamental methodic idea on which rests mathematical analysis in general.” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 454/121) Physics' relative space–time is a progression within theoretical physics which has its condition of possibility in the independent developments of mathematics. So far Cassirer is in line with the ideals of a historical a priori formulated by Cohen. But the methodological conclusion points critical idealism in a new direction. Cassirer emphasizes how the explanation of space and time given by modern physics cannot claim to be the primary or foundational conception. It is rather only one among many paths to understand space and time. Psychological experience of subjective time and space is equally a path to comprehending the world. Therefore, Cassirer concludes that a critical theory of knowledge must aim to “make no normative decision as to the opposite aspects under which the continuum here appears” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 453/121) but to comprehend both as aspects of our understanding of the world:

In the complex that we call our “world,” that we call the being of our ego and of things, the two [psychologist and physicist concepts of continuum and experience] enter as equally unavoidable and necessary moments. We can cancel neither of them in favor of the other and exclude it from this complex, but we can refer each to its definite *place* in the whole. If the physicist, whose problem consists in objectification, affirms the superiority of “objective” space and time over “subjective” space and time; if the psychologist and metaphysician, who are directed upon the totality and immediacy of

<sup>1</sup>References to pagination of Cassirer's work are given with the English translation followed by the original German. When no translation exists, all translations are mine.

experience draw the opposite conclusion; then the two judgments express only a false “absolutization” of the norm of knowledge by which each of them determines and measures “reality.” In which direction this “absolutization” takes place and whether it is directed on the “outer” or the “inner” is a matter of indifference from the standpoint of pure epistemology.

(Cassirer, 1920, p. 454/122)

The *critical* purpose of critical idealism therefore consists in an epistemological critique of any version of “the realism of dogmatic metaphysics” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 447/113). It includes to show how the “symbols that the mathematician and physicist take as a basis in their view of the outer and the psychologist in his view of the inner, must both be understood as *symbols*” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 455/122). Against metaphysical absolutizations Cassirer advances what he calls the “true philosophical view, the view of the *whole*” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 455/123). This is the guiding ideal of reason and of continuous investigations, in the Kantian sense “an Idea, as the problem of a totality of determination in which each particular function of knowledge and consciousness must cooperate according to its character and within its definite limits” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 447/113). Thus, the mathematical natural sciences “stand in danger of permitting the real world to be identified with the world of their *measures*” while the psychological-metaphysical view of space and time “in seeking to narrow mathematics to practical goals, loses the sense of its purest and deepest *ideal* import” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 455/123). Against all such false absolutizations the critical view of the whole requires reciprocal respect for the variability of functions of knowledge. Cutting off subjective experience is just as much a dogmatic mistake as excluding the ideal import of mathematics as a genuine function of knowledge.

## 2 | CRITICAL IDEALISM AND THE POSTULATE OF THOUGHT

In *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* Cassirer traces a key feature of critical idealism as a method back to Plato's conception of reason as the *dianoia* of thought, the discursive ability to judge and decide on the interpretation of perception. He establishes a continuity from Plato to contemporary philosophy quoting Cohen (1918, p. 16) to underline how Plato's conception of the relation of thought and sensation is “one of the most fundamental thoughts in the evolution of the critique of knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 368/22). Plato's insistence on the supremacy of reason as “the ‘logic in us’ [which] is revealed in discriminating and judging what is given in perception” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 368/21) is an early formulation of the necessary spontaneity of reason in human comprehension of sensations. Neatly ordered perceptions without inner tensions do not stir inquiry; “only where [perceptions] contradict each other, where they threaten to cancel each other does thought's fundamental postulate, its unconditioned demand for unity stand forth and demand a transformation, a reshaping of experience itself” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 368/21). Cassirer thus underscores critical idealism as a philosophical method ranging from Plato over Kant to Cohen and himself. The historical lineage is—as in most of Cassirer's works—further expanded with Leibniz (Cassirer, 1920, p. 377/31), Descartes (pp. 395–6/54–55), Goethe (p. 375/29), Schiller (p. 424/86), and Poincaré (p. 431/28). Cassirer interprets them as heirs to Plato's original idea of the *dianoia* of thought as the ultimate arbiter of sensation.

Critical idealism is a method within philosophy. It gradually develops gaining new tools of thought throughout history. Kant's central significance pertains to the methodological stance of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, that is the formulation of a transcendental question, rather than its concrete explanations or content. Kant's starting point from the *factum* of the mathematical natural sciences asking for their condition of possibility endures all the while that critical philosophy for its continuous relevance must confront and come to terms with the historical developments within the sciences. In this manner, Cassirer insists that the search after the *dianoia* of thought pertains all the while that the *factum* of the sciences evolves. Kant's Archimedean point, the Euclidian conception of geometry, “no longer offers an unconditionally fixed basis” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 353/3). Consequently, it would be a backlash for critical idealism to insist on Kant's relation to the sciences as the unquestioned starting point. Modern mathematics and physics “offer a new scientific problem by which critical philosophy must be tested anew” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 355/5).

### 3 | THE HISTORICAL A PRIORI

The relation of critical philosophy to the progress of exact science is of “complete methodic independence.” Cassirer quotes Kant in the *Foreword* to the first Critique to describe how critical philosophy is “to be taught by [science] ... as an appointed judge, who compels the witnesses to answer the questions which he himself proposes” (Kant, 1787, B XIII quoted in Cassirer, 1920, p. 355/6). This methodological starting point leads critical philosophy and critical epistemology

to the insight that what the various sciences call the “object” is nothing given in itself, fixed once and for all, but that it is first determined by some standpoint of knowledge. ... It is thus always necessary to recognize, in what the individual sciences offer us as their objects and “things,” the specific logical conditions on the ground of which they were established. ... Thus the content of each particular field of knowledge is determined by the characteristic form of judgment and question from which knowledge proceeds

(Cassirer, 1920, p. 356/7)

The general lesson for the critical theory of knowledge to learn from the development of the exact sciences is that the “fixed Archimedean point of the former view of the world moves” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 365/18). And thus “the concrete movement of thought, the continual oscillation between experience and concept, between facts and hypothesis in the history of physics, forms a perpetually new source of instruction” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 365-6/18). The task of critical philosophy becomes to “seek to indicate the ideal center and turning-point around which [each new physical theory] causes the totality of phenomena, the real and possible observations, to revolve” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 366/19). Cassirer interprets the theory of relativity as “the triumph of the critical and functional concept over the naïve notion of things and substance” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 405/65).

With the theory of general relativity, a new and compelling argument against philosophies of substance as well as other versions of realism of dogmatic metaphysics is formulated. It articulates the ideal of Kant's critical philosophy

all the more sharply ... in the form of a system of valid relations. ... It is obvious that we are not concerned here with the expression of an empirically observed fact, but with a principle which the understanding uses hypothetically as a norm of investigation in the interpretation of experience ... The physicist now depends neither on the constancy of those objects with which the naïve sensuous view of the world rests nor on the constancy of particular spatial and temporal measurements gained from a particular system, but he affirms, as a condition of his science, the existence of “universal constants” and universal laws, which retain the same values for all systems of measurement.

(Cassirer, 1920, p. 415-16/76-77)

The universal constants and laws of modern physics are the systematic unity and the historically developed form of the synthetic a priori or the *dianoia* of thought.

### 4 | THE ROUTE TO A PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

The greater part of the book on *Einstein* focuses narrowly on the developments within mathematics and physics. The conclusion, however, has a wider scope as Cassirer employs the theory of relativity in physics as a platform to expound, in first line, a critique of what he calls “the ordinary view of the world's” naïve realism and empiricism. Expanding on this critique Cassirer exposes what he thinks are dogmatic metaphysical assumptions in interpretations of modern physics and any other brand of science which proclaims to be the final theory of foundational realism: “Whether we characterize this ultimate being as “matter” or “life,” “nature” or “History,” there always results for us

in the end confusion in our view of the world, because certain spiritual functions, that cooperate in its construction, are excluded and others are over-emphasized" (Cassirer, 1920, p. 447/113).

The project of a *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* rises from this methodological conclusion as an inner progressive demand of critical idealism. Cassirer proclaims "the task of systematic philosophy [to be] to free the idea of the world from this one-sidedness. It has to grasp the *whole system* of symbolic forms, the application of which produces for us the concept of an ordered reality, and by virtue of which subject and object, ego and world are separated and opposed to each other in definite form, and it must refer each individual in this totality to its fixed place" (Cassirer, 1920, p. 447/113-14). Without repudiating the epistemological results, Cassirer discards modern physics' contention that it provides the ultimate foundation of knowledge. Physics—like any other form of knowledge—is imposed an "immanent limit" within "the systematic totality" of symbolic forms. Resuming this line of thought in the introduction to the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer underlines that "as long as philosophical contemplation only takes up the analysis of the pure *form of knowledge* [*Erkenntnis*] and limits itself to this task, the force of the naïve-realistic view of the world cannot be completely discredited." (Cassirer, 1923, p. 9/9) Consequently the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* reads as a confrontation with scientific foundationalism.

From the vantage point of a critical philosophical scrutiny of the general theory of relativity Cassirer argues for the immanent and logical limitedness of physics. The ever more specialized explanation of mathematical physics contains and supplies critical philosophy with the epistemological resources to comprehend the limited scope of any theory of knowledge solely preoccupied with the mathematical natural sciences. Cassirer's crucial methodological originality consists in this insistence on an immanent relation and limitation of all branches of knowledge from the perspective of the ideal whole. In 1929, in the final chapter of volume three of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer reiterates the result reached in the 1920 book on Einstein:

The basic physical concepts are genuinely synthetic concepts in the sense defined by Kant ... If, however, the demonstration [*Aufweisung*] of this reciprocal relation between concept form and object form, between "nature" in the formal and material significance, is sufficient for the *critique of knowledge* [*Erkenntniskritik*] the philosophy of symbolic forms must, from the start, envisage this problem in a far wider ambit. If we inquire into the possibility of the mathematical science of nature, we look upon this science only as a special case of objectivization in general. For the philosophy of symbolic forms, the world of exact science does not appear as the beginning but as the end of a process of objectivization, whose roots reach down into other and earlier strata of configuration. The task now arises for us to compare the ideal "consistent existence" [*Bestand*] of the physical world with the "consistent existence" [*Bestand*] of those earlier strata—to inquire into their connections and separation, their community and specific difference [*Differenz*]."

(Cassirer, 1929, p. 521/518-19)

A prerequisite for Cassirer's move toward the multidimensional comprehension of reality as a system of symbolic forms is—as shown above—the confrontation with the theory of relativity. But just as important is Cassirer's early reception of Bertrand Russell's symbolic logic. As the abandonment of Euclidian space could be viewed as a devastating rebuttal of Kant's theoretical philosophy, the new relational logic could as well. Cassirer, however, interprets both as confirmations of the principal idea of synthetic a priori as the *dianoia* of thought.

## 5 | FORMAL LOGIC

In *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* Cassirer notes that "modern science and modern logic are both involved" in the refutation of skepticism "not by showing a way to a possible fulfilment of its demands, but by understanding and thus rendering ineffective the dogmatic import of these demands themselves" (Cassirer, 1920, p. 389/45). Traditional

sylogistic logic—which Cassirer in a seldom condescending remark in his 1907 interpretation of the significance of Russell's symbolic logic names “the proper reactionary and inhibiting moment” (Cassirer, 1907, p. 42)—is prone to such skepticism as it relies on “the *metaphysical* foundations of the Aristotelian teaching: because the *substance* is the highest reality and anything else only appear afterwards and secondary to the substance, *judgement*, which only has the assignment of repeating and mirroring the relations of the *existent parts* [Seienden], can therefore only embark from fixed *subjects* in order to distribute these with various *predicates* one after the other” (Cassirer, 1907, p. 42). The demands of skepticism turn on the nagging question whether judgment really achieves a true mirroring of being. Accordingly, the development of modern symbolic logic is the ultimate freeing of reason from the constraints of syllogistic logic. Russell's formulation of symbolic logic turns judgment itself “into a pure doctrine of form and relation” because the determination of the content of knowledge is “not reducible to mere relations of subsumption but include equally all the different possible types of relational construction and connection of elements of thought” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 389/45).

While the natural sciences with use of mathematical descriptions moved beyond the determination of knowledge by means of subsumption of predicates to a substance, logic stagnated (Cassirer, 1907, p. 42). With Russell's formulation of symbolic logic reason has obtained a new and powerful tool to express formations of knowledge. It “offers a richer plan to conceive of the problems of the theory of knowledge [Erkenntnistheorie] and contains a more secure *guideline* than what Kant possessed in the traditional logic of his time” (Cassirer, 1907, p. 43). As such formal logic constitutes an immense progress.

In the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer emphasizes this achievement of modern logic as “the expression of ‘relatedness in general’—under which all individual varieties of relation, the ‘transitive’ as well as the ‘intransitive’, the symmetrical as well as the non-symmetrical, are subsumed as special cases” (Cassirer, 1929, p. 408/401). Symbolic logic describes the concept as well as the act of judgment as functional operations liberated from the idea of ultimately having to mirror existing parts of the world. The “reign of the logical form” implies “that by repeated application of the basic relation, every element of the manifold may be reached in a regulated sequence of steps of thought and be ‘defined’ by means of this sequence” (Cassirer, 1929, p. 409/402).

## 6 | A LOGIC OF OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

The early philosophical discussion of symbolic logic of 1907 confers Cassirer with a new methodological tool and a complete novel vision of how to justify different manners of determinability of judgments. The functional concept formation of formal logic turns into a basic means of orientation which Cassirer in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* applies to differentiate between the various laws of determinability within different symbolic forms. A prerequisite, however, is that Cassirer in 1907 interprets symbolic logic as a “logic of objective knowledge” [*Logik der gegenständlichen Erkenntnis*] (Cassirer, 1907, p. 77). Cassirer insists “that the same basic syntheses which logic and mathematics are based upon also govern the scientific structure of the experiential sciences” (Cassirer, 1929, p. 78). From the point of view of a critical theory of knowledge logic and mathematics must vindicate themselves in lieu of “the explanation of the possibility of synthetic judgments ... [and] the conditions and the domain of their validity” (Cassirer, 1907, pp. 77–78 quotes Kant, 1787, p. B193). Thus, they must be comprehended in their relation to experience. In the early discussion of 1907, this is described as a shift in perspective from formal to transcendental logic.

From the vantage point of transcendental logic Russell's empiricist interpretation of the epistemological status of formal logic reveals itself as a reintroduction of skepticism. According to Cassirer Russell views logic as merely “a system of hypothetical presuppositions, about which we never can know whether they are validated in some experience ... [since] logic and mathematics are only concerned with the order of concepts; the order or confusion of the objects cannot contest them and need not mislead them.” (Cassirer, 1907, p. 76) This is poignantly expressed in Russell's claim that “mathematics may be defined as the subject in which we never know what we are talking about, nor whether what we are saying is true” (Cassirer, 1907, pp. 80–81 quotes Russell, 1901, p. 75). Such arbitrariness

reintroduces skepticism as it reopens “the gap between the law of reason and the facts” (Cassirer, 1907, p. 78). Furthermore, it also breaks with the historical development of mathematics.

Russell and others, Cassirer underscores, are right in demanding that the mathematician as well as the logician be granted complete freedom to develop and unfold their principles regardless of applicability or relation to any experience. Nevertheless, it is “undeniable that in the manner of conjecturing [of principles in mathematics] no mere caprice rules, that these principles do not occur haphazardly, but that ‘intuition’ stands for us as the final goal which our concepts must satisfy. It is beyond doubt that the geometers hitherto have ‘meant’ something definite by speaking of points, straight lines, and planes” (Cassirer, 1907, p. 80). Cassirer admonishes that Russell unwarranted breaks the connecting “vinculum substantiale” between concept and experience which previously guided the development (see Cassirer, 1929, p. 61/51 for elaboration). In contrast, the position of critical idealism does not trouble itself with isolating “the content of the mathematical principles but with comprehending the role which mathematics plays in the structure of our concept of an ‘objective’ reality. One can, bluntly and paradoxically expressed, claim that the vision of philosophy should neither be directed specifically toward mathematics nor physics; it ought rightly to direct itself toward the interconnection of both domains” (Cassirer, 1907, p. 81). Philosophical explication is required exactly for the oscillation between experience and concept. Russell’s isolation of mathematics and logic as an arbitrary play with symbols not only misses how mathematics historically has developed but also the role mathematical concept formation concurrently plays for the experiential sciences.

## 7 | THE FUNCTIONAL CONCEPT AND THE SYMBOLIC FORMS

Cassirer’s early confrontation with how to interpret symbolic logic generates the intellectual impetus to the systematic interpretation of scientific concept formation in *Substance and Function* from 1910. From a generalization of the logical calculus of Russell Cassirer argues for the inadequacy of the theory of abstraction in concept construction:

The ordinary schema of the construction of concepts, therefore, calls for a thorough-going transformation, even in its outer form; for in it the qualities of things and the pure aspect of relation are placed on the same level and fused without distinction. Once this identification has taken place, it can indeed appear as if the work of thought were limited to selecting from a series of perceptions  $a\alpha$ ,  $a\beta$ ,  $a\gamma$  ... the common element  $a$ . In truth, however, the connection of the members of a series by the possession of a common “property” is only a special example of logically possible connections in general. The connection of the members is in every case produced by some general *law of arrangement* through which a thoroughgoing rule of succession is established. That which binds the elements of the series  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ , ... together is not itself a new element, that was factually blended with them, but it is the rule of progression, which remains the same, no matter in which member it is represented.

(Cassirer, 1910, pp. 16–17/15–16).

Cassirer underscores how the function of the concept as a law of arrangement exists apart from the series all the while that it is the sine qua non condition of establishing the series. A concept is a rule for picking out and connecting the particulars that make up its extension by highlighting marks to be united in that series. The concept is what Cassirer calls a reference system [*Bezugssystem*]. As such it “consists exclusively in the logical determination by which it is clearly differentiated from other possible serial forms  $\phi$ ,  $\psi$  ...; and this determination can only be expressed by a synthetic act of definition, and not by a simple sensuous intuition” (Cassirer, 1910, p. 26/26). In *Substance and Function*, Cassirer unfolds a transcendental interpretation of such concept formation as reference systems in the natural sciences and thus rebukes empiricism’s ideal of likeness in the sensuous material as the basis for our understanding of reality. Rather than *materia nuda* revealing itself for our conceptual thinking we must comprehend all concepts as constructions springing from the *dianoia* of thought. Cassirer underlines how “the ‘spontaneity’ of thought is ... not the opposite but the necessary



correlate of ‘objectivity’, which can only be reached by means of it” (Cassirer, 1910, p. 317/343). Concepts are not copies of realities presented in themselves. They express “ideal orders by which the connection of experiences is established and guaranteed” (Cassirer, 1910, p. 319/345). The *functionality* of the concept united with specific sensible signs produces the series of marks that constitute the denoted “subject.”

The generalization of the logical calculus as a theory of meaning formation points Cassirer in the direction of the uniting band of the symbolic forms. In the works from the first discussion of Russell's symbolic logic from 1907 and up until 1920 Cassirer's analysis of concept formation is confined to the theory of knowledge for the mathematical natural sciences. With *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* Cassirer generalizes and expands this analysis to pertain to what is normally seen as the domain of the humanities as he lays out a plan for a philosophy of symbolic forms with the task to survey “this wealth of nuances of intellectual meaning” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 456/124). The logic of the sign and the laws of concept formation vary in myth, religion, language, art, science. But—as Cassirer underscores in the introduction to the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*—all are and remain dependent upon sensible signs as the medium of expression:

the sign is no mere accidental cloak of thought but rather its necessary and essential organ. Not only does it serve for the communication of an already-finished given product of the content of thought, but it is also an instrument, by virtue of which this content developed and by virtue of which it initially gained its full determinacy. The act of conceptual determination of a content goes hand in hand with the act of its fixation in some characteristic sign.

(Cassirer, 1923, pp. 15–16/16)

With reference to Ewald Hering's and David Katz' pioneering experiential-psychological work on thing- and surface-color Cassirer displays in volume three of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* how even our most basic sensuous concepts such as color are symbolic formations. A given color, for example “red,” is not simply “present” by means of mere sensation but at the same time “representative” of the ideal concept “red.” It is experienced as an exemplar of the conceptual idea of red: “It is so embedded in a total series of shades of red that it appears to belong to and be ordered within the series, and by virtue of this correlation, it can bring the totality of the series to presentation. Without this relation, not even the impression would be determined as ‘precisely this one’, as *τοῦδε τι* in the Aristotelian sense” (Cassirer, 1929, pp. 156–57/153). Depending whether the color sensation is of a thing- or surface-color it will be recognized as either stable or mutable. Things are perceived to have permanent color because the concept of say a red dress is prioritized as “point of reference” and lighting effects which obstruct the color permanency of the dress are reduced in importance. The microscopic gestalt shifts that occur in our recognition and representation of color exemplify the often-hidden influence of conceptual systems of reference in our interaction with reality.

According to Cassirer just as the sciences develop and progress from substantial to functional and law-based theories philosophical analysis of functional concepts is also a historical development: “Whereas precritical metaphysics believed it had found an ultimate *answer*, Kant discovered a new and perhaps the most difficult *task* for all philosophical cognition [*Erkenntnis*]. For him, what was at stake was not only to *carry out* theoretical sense-bestowing, as it exhibits itself in science and philosophy, but also to *comprehend* [*begreifen*] it for what it is” (Cassirer, 1929, p. 6/6). To meet this is an ongoing task which Cassirer attempts to answer in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The move from critique of reason to a critique of culture is a generalization of the domain or—as noted in the preface to the first volume—it makes “the investigations that are summed up in ... *Substance and Function* ... which focused essentially on the structure of mathematical and natural-scientific thinking [applicable] to the problems that concern the *human sciences* [*Geisteswissenschaften*]” (Cassirer, 1923, p. xxix/vii). It is made possible and shaped by the new tools of thought which Cassirer has acquired in the discussion of modern logic and mathematics. Cassirer can now examine the symbolic forms myth and language in their similarity to science because he interprets all concept formation of human sense making as dependent on the process where “a certain sensible individual content can be made into the bearer of a general spiritual ‘signification’” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 24/25).

Critical philosophy, so Cassirer insists, has the task to comprehend the sense-bestowing of myth, religion, language, science for what it is. Philosophy discloses how “the sign, in contrast to the real alteration of the individual contents of consciousness, has a certain ideal *signification* that endures as such” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 20/20). As a result, philosophy interprets the symbolic function of consciousness as it manifests itself in sensible signs and “operates in language, art, and myth, [in which] certain constant basic *gestalts* that are of a partly conceptual nature as well as a purely intuitive nature are lifted out of the stream of consciousness; [and] a self-contained and enduring unity of form takes the place of fleeting contents” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 20/20). It is worth noticing how Cassirer here reiterates the theme of concept formation as an enduring oscillation between experience (here intuitive nature) and concept. In the form of a concept the sign mediates between sensuous experience and rational ideas. Neither pole is reducible but conjoined into a sensible sign which for its part is dependent upon the larger system of reference [*Bezugssystem*] or symbolic form in order to be a means of orientation.

## 8 | A HEGELIAN AND HERACLITAN TROPE

As Cassirer embarks on the vast project of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Form* he adds another precursor to the lineage of critical idealism, namely Hegel. In the introduction to the first volume Cassirer highlights: “More sharply than any thinker before him, Hegel set out the demand to think the whole of spirit as a *concrete* whole and, thus, not to stop with its simple concept but rather to develop it into the totality [*Gesamtheit*] of its manifestations [*Äußerungen*]” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 13/13). We recognize the aspiration to “the true philosophical view, the view of the *whole*” (Cassirer, 1920, p. 455/123) from the exposition of the plan for the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in 1920 in this invocation of Hegel. Adopting Hegel's ambition of capturing the whole of human culture Cassirer argues that it will be possible to turn the critique of reason into a critique of culture that seeks “to understand and demonstrate how the content of culture, insofar as it is more than a merely individual content ... presupposes an original act of spirit. Herein the basic thesis of idealism finds its true and complete confirmation” (Cassirer, 1923, p.9/9). However, Cassirer just as quickly distances himself from Hegel remarking: “And yet the phenomenology of spirit, which strove to fulfil this demand, prepared only the terrain for *logic* and the way to it. The manifold of spiritual forms, as they are set up in the phenomenology, finally culminate in a highest logical summit, and it is only in this endpoint that they attain their consummate ‘truth’ and essential being [*Wesenheit*]” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 13/13).

Cassirer's contention with Hegel centers on a familiar theme, namely absolutization of one direction of thought. Cassirer laments how Hegel subordinates the richness of the content in his phenomenology “to a single and, in a certain sense, uniform law—the law of dialectical method ... of all the spiritual forms, only that of the form of the logical, the form of the concept and of cognition, appears to have been ascribed a real, true *autonomy*” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 13/13). The hegemony of logic and of conceptual thinking which Cassirer observes in Hegel's phenomenology arises from an elementary contention of critical idealism, namely the principle of unity and systematicity inherent in the ideal of a philosophical explanation. Learning *ex negativo* from Hegel Cassirer insists that this ideal must be rethought to allow for difference and suggests with reference to Heraclitus to conceive of unity as one differentiated in itself.<sup>2</sup> Such is the unity and systematic center in “the symbolic function of consciousness itself” because it expresses the “presentation and mediation of an opposition that is given and grounded in the simple concept of consciousness itself” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 44/44). The symbolic function of consciousness must be able to contain the persistent transition of moments of duration and moments of alteration as these take place in consciousness:

<sup>2</sup>This elementary thought is famously captured in Cassirer's reference to Heraclitus' fragment 51 of the harmony in contrariety as the bow and the lyre (Cassirer, 1944, p. 244). Already in (Cassirer, 1923, pp. 57/55) however, Cassirer employs the fragment to underline how “the individual word [just as Heraclitus' positing of the individual object in the stream of becoming for it at once to be destroyed and preserved] should relate to the whole of ‘speech’ in the same way. Even the inner ambiguity that adheres to the word is, therefore, not a mere lacuna of language but rather an essential and positive element that is situated in the force of expression.”

This general demand is fulfilled in different ways in the formations of language, myth, and art and in the intellectual symbols of science. All of these formations appear, as it were, to immediately belong to the living, constantly renewed process of consciousness, and yet at the same time, there prevails in them the spiritual striving to obtain fixed points or resting places in this process. Thus, consciousness retains in them a character of continuous flow; however, it does not lapse into the indeterminate but structures itself around fixed centers of form and signification. ... In the creation and use of the different groups and systems of symbolic signs, both conditions are fulfilled, insofar as here an individual-sensible content, without ceasing to be such, in fact acquires the force to depict a general validity for consciousness.

(Cassirer, 1923, pp. 44/44–45)

Cassirer inscribes Heraclitus' contention that systematic unity is never uniform but a plurality and even a labile equi-<sup>3</sup>poise into the heart of the central notion of the symbolic function of consciousness. In the last posthumous book, *The Myth of the State*, he famously calls politics a “labile equipoise” (Cassirer, 1946, p. 275). This is consistent with and not a break away from the methodology of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Thus, the greatest difference between Cassirer's “critique of culture” from the 1920s and his explicit confrontation with German politics of the Nazi regime in 1946 concerns the fact that Cassirer in the former analyses the continuous pitfalls of absolutization within the system of culture as an inherent trait which he from a methodological perspective and in *sotto voce* advises to avoid as so many examples of dogmatic metaphysics. In the latter, on the other hand, Cassirer experiences and warns against this same pitfall of dogmatic metaphysics as it has achieved to become a ruling power. As such, I believe, Cassirer formulated a strong method for any future philosophy of culture. Though we may not wish to reiterate the concrete explanations and content the methodology endures 100 years after its formulation as a crucial tool to understand and orient oneself in human culture.

## ORCID

Esther Oluffa Pedersen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8963-9860>

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<sup>3</sup>See (Cassirer, 1929, pp. 429/421) where Cassirer calls the modern mathematical discussion of theory of sets a labile equipoise—in the English version “der labile Gleichgewicht” is wrongly translated into “shifting balance.”