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**“From the Critique of Reason to the Critique of Culture”:
The Concept of “Culture” in the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism**

“Culture means a whole of verbal and moral activities—of such activities as are not only conceived in an abstract way, but have the constant tendency and the energy of realization. It is this realization, this construction and reconstruction of the empirical world, that is involved in the very concept of culture and that makes up one of its essential and most characteristic features.”

(Cassirer, “Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture” (1936¹), p. 65)

Prefatory Remark: Cassirer and the Marburg School

Before beginning with the actual topic of this talk—the Neo-Kantian concept of culture—let me say that while in the following I focus on Cassirer and his philosophy of symbolic forms, I mean to treat of the Marburg School as a whole. The pragmatic reason for taking Cassirer as (*maxima*) *pars pro toto* is the time allotted. But this (pragmatic) procedure also contains a (systematic) thesis; namely, that I see Cassirer as a direct offspring of Marburg and Cassirer’s philosophy as the summit and richest expression of the Marburg School. I strongly believe that Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic formation is, in other words, not something that has departed from its heritage, as is oftentimes insinuated. To the contrary, while modifying certain parameters of his teachers, esp. Hermann Cohen (but also Natorp), he has remained faithful to that tradition and has,

moreover, brought it to its fullest fruition. He calls his project—a philosophy of the symbolic—a critique of culture, and it becomes one of the most interesting and far-reaching systematic sketches to come out of Kant’s transcendental philosophy (instead of just taking snippets from the Kantian corpus for one’s purposes—this is legitimate but does not commit oneself to the Kantian project). Having digested Kant, the German Idealists, and the entire tradition of transcendental philosophy in the 19th century, and with expertise in contemporary science (including the theory of relativity), Cassirer has come up with a most original, yet synthetic philosophical vision worthy to be pursued anew. When I, in the following, speak of Cassirer, I hence mean him as the peak of the entire Marburg School. Cohen and Natorp, just as much as Kant, Fichte and Hegel, have been *aufgehoben* in Cassirer’s system.

Introduction: Cassirer as (the Last?) Philosopher of Culture. *Culture* as Refuge or Problem?

An initial encounter with Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy and his writings leave one both pleased and frustrated. Pleased, because Cassirer is by all accounts an elegant writer—in both German and English—and has a talent for presenting difficult theories in an accessible manner. But one is also left frustrated, because the elegance and learnedness of this “last universal intellectual” make it hard to discern the true substance of his thought. It is hard to say, for instance, when he is simply presenting someone else’s thought and when he is speaking on his own terms. At most times, he is doing both. A concomitant, somewhat exasperating observation is that the key terms of his philosophy are rarely, if ever, defined. Their meaning is adumbrated and approximated through ever-new descriptions and references to other literature, both philosophical and extra-philosophical. To borrow a phrase used by Fink with respect to another author who faces the same verdict, Husserl, the key terms of Cassirer’s philosophy are “operative concepts,” which is to say, they are always already applied in the course of writing; they function operatively, in conjunction and collaboration with others, creating a matrix whose fullness of meaning is left to the reader to discover. As elegant and easy as

Cassirer's writing presents itself at first, as difficult is it, for the reasons mentioned, to detect its philosophical substance. For this reason it is understandable but also unfortunate that scholars have construed Cassirer's writings as belonging to intellectual history or the history of philosophy alone or, if they took on Cassirer on philosophical grounds, have missed the systematic point altogether.

If there is one such operative concept, where the reader is left in the dark, a term which is, nevertheless, *the* central notion of his system of symbolic formation, it is the term "culture." It is not hard to see *why* this is such an important concept, for it is nothing less than the entire project that is designated hereby, in his attempt, stated right at the outset of his system, to transform Kant's Critique of Reason into a *Critique of Culture* (PhsF I, 11/80²). If one sheds light on this key term, it will illuminate the entire system, at least in its main lines. It will turn out that "culture" is a transcendental concept within a philosophical project that is part of, and perhaps one of the most thorough realizations of, Kant's Copernican Turn.

To put my cards on the table, I believe Cassirer is one of the most original, interesting and also synthetic thinkers of the 20th century whose importance was once out of the question, but has been nearly forgotten and only lately is beginning to dawn on us contemporaries anew. But there are reasons, I believe, why he has been nearly forgotten. One of the reasons that his star has faded is precisely because it is his philosophy of culture, and the concept of culture that comes to realization in it, have appeared less appealing at a time, where wars are perceived as "culture wars," where the "two cultures" do not seem to be able to communicate any longer, and where any appeal to *one world culture* seems Eurocentric and even dangerous in the sometimes violent confrontation between the West and the Islamic world. Where "culture" is brought up, the threats of Westernism, Eurocentrism (and its derivatives Racism, Sexism or Logocentrism) loom large.

Let me, hence, approach the notion of "culture" by sketching the way I think it is understood today in quite a number of intellectual circles. It is no provocation to say that

it is treated here as an entirely *negative* concept. The origin of this negative understanding lies in a claim made by a recent interpreter to whom I shall return at the end, who claims that we are today “Heidegger’s children.” There is a certain truth to the observation that we seem to have digested certain tenets of his thought. There can be no doubt that Heidegger vilified the term (and similar ones) that seem to evoke an elitist “high culture.” In the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, and more pronouncedly in his later thought, “culture” is a term for inauthentic existence, the life of the big cities with its many foreigners and people not, or no longer, rooted in the soil of their origin. Culture is ruled by blind and unconcerned “busy-ness” and its mechanized manner of functioning, the *Betrieb*. “Culture” is one name for this inauthentic existence, according to which one does what “one” does: “one” goes to the movies to see the newest movie by so-and-so; “one” goes to this or that exhibition, not because one is truly interested but in order to be part of the learned chit-chat at cocktail parties. “Culture” is a term that only a member of the high bourgeoisie (the European *Bürgertum*) of the 19th century can appreciate.

But there is also a deeper reason for rejecting “culture.” Culture has also been understood as the field or sphere where modern humanity roams, with the music, the high literature, and, finally, philosophy. Culture belongs together with the modern concept of reason. “Culture,” hence, is closely linked to the ideal of the Enlightenment. But, so the “standard story” goes (as told by Heidegger), modern reason has become corrupted and has suffered a decline. To put it drastically: Culture is what led us to the world wars and ultimately to Auschwitz. The crisis of culture is equally the crisis of reason. If this is true, and if culture is the playing field of reason, then culture is precisely that which has gotten us into the situation we are in today. Culture is no “savior” or “safe ground” for us, but is precisely, or has turned into, the *problem*. Culture is not, or no longer, the playing field for enlightened humanity and the sphere of freedom, but precisely that which has *alienated* us from our original existence. As setting up abstract rules that seem to hold for everybody, but nobody in particular, it is precisely the opposite of freedom, its strictures spell unfreedom. Culture is a corset that stifles us and does not allow us to breathe free. It is in this intellectual climate that people begin to embrace nature, as witnessed, e.g. in Germany, by the many “movements”: the *Wandervögel*, *Frei-Körper-*

Kultur (!, the Nudist Movement), not to mention the fashion of discovering the great frontiers of this planet. It is in this climate as well that something like Heidegger's philosophy itself, along with its other existential siblings, can flourish. Where reason withers, Romanticism grows.

Fast forward to today. This sentiment towards culture is oftentimes implied by those who reject "culture" as the field of inauthentic, or let us better say, traditional and conservative opinions and attitudes. "Culture" is equated with "tradition," which in turn implies "conservatism." Setting up of ideals that count for culture, and in so doing excluding culture's other, it is by that very token exclusionary. It is this "general culture" against which "grass roots" organizations or "sub-cultures" rise up; against which regional interest groups team up to chip away at this general culture or establish sub-cultures in which they create their niches to feel at home and "themselves." If this state has been reached, then there is no longer the need to even talk to the ones "at the center" or "up above." Communication suffers a breakdown, because everybody speaks one's own language. What was once culture has been replaced by individualized, self-encapsulated sub-cultures who nourish their own projects, speak their own languages and celebrate their own life-styles. It is this sentiment that has largely driven post-modernism and is oftentimes the way in which leisure time at liberal arts colleges is organized (under the heading of "diversity"). The fracturing of the erstwhile "culture" is celebrated in regionalized sub-cultures who only have in common that they—positively put—tolerate each other and "get along." Negatively, they ignore one another and wear mutual blinders. The attempt at dialogue has been given up. This tendency reaches ultimately philosophy itself, as the erstwhile high point of culture. Anybody who has been at an APA conference and has moved between parallel sessions knows what I mean. None of what I say is meant as a value statement, but as a description of what happens when culture is perceived as the problem instead of the solution to the *conditio humana*.

Against this negative image that culture has received stands Cassirer's concept of culture. While it is true that his philosophy remains largely untouched by notions such as "crisis of reason" or "crisis of culture" and has no inkling of the "culture wars" that swept over

us, it would be unfair or a simplification to think that his notion of “culture” stands for a “conservative” understanding or that he means by culture something like an exclusivist “high culture.” But Cassirer is oftentimes regarded as one of the Godfathers of a form of culture that “we” today reject. To use a phrase preferred by the Marburg School, “culture” is for him the *terminus ad quem* of cultural activity. Cassirer’s notion of culture is anything but normative but rather descriptive. Or, normativity can only grow implicitly out of Cassirer’s account. But to fully appreciate it, one needs to understand Cassirer before the backdrop of Kant’s philosophy which Cassirer terms, characteristically, “idealism.” “Culture,” thus, only becomes understandable after the Copernican turn, and is a *transcendental* concept. As such, “culture” and “critique” form a correlation, and the critique of culture turns out to be a peculiar shape of enlightenment philosophy. I shall hence reconstruct Cassirer’s philosophy of culture from Kant’s transcendental philosophy, *in the way Cassirer understands* the latter.

To make Cassirer interesting for us today, my task needs to be to show that his concept of culture does *not* fit the description of those who reject its traditional understanding; positively, that his concept of culture can be a viable and interesting notion for us, “us” meaning those who feel committed to the idea of modernity as an “unfinished project.”

I. From Kant to Cohen: The Critique of Reason as Critique of Culture

Methodologically, we need to start from Kant, the way Cassirer understood him. In his self-understanding, Cassirer never departed from being a “good Kantian.” Cassirer’s global understanding of Kant is that Kant had *the* decisive insight in his Copernican turn and his subsequent conception of transcendental idealism, but that the scope of his transcendental turn and that to which it is applied was by far too narrow. Kant himself, in Cassirer’s reading, came to see in the course of fleshing out his critical system in the following two Critiques and his other “critical” writings, that his philosophical scope, contrary to his systematic vision, was too constricted and attempted to broaden it in the course of working out his system (cf. PhsF I, 10/79). Kant effectively modified his

system as he was working it out. But this insight came too late, and his approach was too narrow, to do justice to the grand plan he envisioned. Kant had opened a door, but, to use a metaphor used by Goethe, he was blinded by the light that shone through it. (Goethe said that when he read Kant, he felt like entering a “brightly lit room.”) So what was, to Cassirer, Kant’s key insight that manifested itself in the Copernican turn?

Here we need to turn to Cohen’s influential interpretation of Kant. Cohen became the head of the Marburg School by virtue of this interpretation. Its basic insights are valid for Natorp’s transcendental psychology as well as Cassirer theory of the symbolic. Cohen’s famous reading of the First Critique, in his *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* [*Kant’s Theory of Experience*], is stated as a thesis in the title of the work: Kant had discovered a novel concept of *experience*. The experience Kant was talking about, and which he set out to justify, was not ordinary experience, a purely passive reception of sense data; instead, the experience Kant meant was that of the scientist who applies formulae to nature. The object of the scientist’s experience are, to use Cohen’s example, “not the stars in the heavens..., but the astronomical calculations; those facts of scientific reality are, as it were, the real that is to be accounted for, as that at which the transcendental gaze is directed.”³ The content of the scientist’s experience, hence, is already the result of an active forming. The scientist’s “receptivity” is in truth a form of spontaneity. Critically against Kant, Cohen asserts that Kant’s dualism of receptivity of sensibility and spontaneity of the understanding is an empiricist legacy, which Kant ought to have overcome following his own insight into the transcendental turn, which is nothing other than the fact that we can only cognize in nature what we lay into it with our own capacities, the capacity to apply concepts to what is experienced. What we experience as scientists of nature is, effectively, something that we have formed. Experiencing and understanding nature is looking into a mirror and seeing our own mind applied and engaged with nature. There is no “raw” nature but nature as formed by our rational capacities as law-governed. Reality is “always already” formed by our mind, and is not, accordingly, something given and *then* cognized in order to be real. Instead, the given, insofar as it is not yet understood, is the *task* for our minds to reveal. Hence, Cohen’s famous phrase that nature is not *given* (*gegeben*), but *given as a task* (*aufgegeben*); it is

incumbent upon us to cognize reality in its entirety. Reality as fully cognized is *aufgegeben*, never fully realized; full cognition is a regulative idea. Hence the (in)famous “thing in itself” is nothing but the regulative idea of reality as fully and completely cognized. This is the task of the scientist, and every scientist stands under this idea; not having this idea as the guiding star would be a betrayal of the very deed of the scientist.

Cohen’s focus is on the activity of the mind in its ever-ongoing deed of cognition. This doing, however, manifests itself in science itself. The *factum* as the point of departure is hence the *factum* of the sciences (*das Faktum der Wissenschaften*), which is, as Natorp emphasizes, a *fieri*, a doing⁴. However, this doing can only ever be made explicit *regressively*, from the *factum* of the scientific theories. Making this doing explicit is the task of philosophy as a method. The “transcendental method” devised by Cohen has, hence, the task of clarifying the *conditions of the possibility* that govern the activities of the scientist. Yet with “activities” Cohen does not mean their cognitive actions, but the logic governing and animating them. These are the concepts and laws that govern or cognition of reality—and hence reality itself. After the Copernican turn, laws cannot be laws of nature, but of the cognition of nature. Kant’s “transcendental subject” is, hence, dissolved in “pure thought” (*reines Denken*). Just as Kant had shunned psychology from transcendental philosophy, so, too, Cohen dissolves any “inwardness” of the subjective into laws of pure thought that rule the grounding terms, logical inferences and conclusions reached in the sciences. The transcendental method—if this term may be understood in the sense just explicated—clarifies the “logic of scientific discovery” that has become “crystallized” in the scientific theories as *facta*. As Kant had emphasized, a science is rigorous inasmuch it contains logic. The transcendental method, hence, discovers or makes explicit regressively the laws, concepts and internal structures that are involved in the sciences as they experience reality, or which is the same, as they cognize reality as law-governed. Sciences are apriori to the extent that they are governed by laws of thought, to the extent that they are “rational.”

One can call these elements in Cohen's interpretation of Kant "Fichteian" and "Hegelian," respectively. The Fichteian element emphasizes that human reason is first and foremost something active, "positing," and that what Kant meant with the Copernican turn is, essentially, that the human mind is able to cognize that of the world what it itself posits into it as a *Nicht-Ich*. What Kant modestly calls "laying into" is blown up in Fichte to an active, confident *doing* as a constructing of reality as law-governed. Cohen is a clear constructivist, as becomes evident by exposing his Hegelianism. The Hegelian element consists in undercutting the two-stem doctrine. Experiencing is at bottom already a positing or application of concepts. There is no pure experiencing, but there is always already a *factum*, something *made*, that is the *product* of our active positing of subjectivity—laws—into the objective world. The world is, from the lowest level, already *constructed* from human activity in positing and that means, projecting subjectivity in the form of laws onto the world. Reality is already such a *factum*. Reality is experienced to the extent that the human mind finds itself, and that is, rules and structures, in the world. This amounts to a radicalization of the Copernican turn. It means that the sciences, in their activity, if they truly understand what they are factually doing, are actually *performing* transcendental idealism. What they do is to project subjectivity onto the world. But it also means that to cognize nature is to cognize the rational mind as it has *always already* projected itself onto the world.

But to Cohen, science is just one, albeit the highest realization, of the human mind in its capacity for "pure thought." One of the biggest misconceptions of Cohen, and the Marburg School in general, is to think that the transcendental method, and hence the transcendental philosophical program pursued in the Marburg School, is a theory of the sciences, the natural sciences specifically, with the addition that this orientation to the scientific *factum* reduces philosophy to a "handmaiden of the sciences." What is true is that Cohen always seeks to make explicit the rational, logical forms and elements of the *factum* that he analyzes; but as little as Kant does Cohen stop in his transcendental clarification of the natural (Newtonian) sciences, but moves on to clarify the transcendental conditions of possibility of action and artistic experience. Simply looking at Cohen's commentaries on all three of Kant's Critiques and his three-partite system of

philosophy show evidence to the contrary. Morality and aesthetics, as well as religious experience are analyzed as well by utilizing the transcendental method. The method functions the same in all cases: it is a regressive reconstruction of the purely conceptual from a scientific *factum*. To give an example, to clarify morality, one needs to start out from that scientific *factum* that went into creating a legal system: this *factum* is *jurisprudence* as the crystallization, ideally, of the logic of ethical and moral behavior of humanity.

Science, morality and aesthetics, or their *teloi*, the true, the good, the beautiful, are, traditionally, seen as the sum total of human capacities, of humanity as a whole. The term for the sum total of these capacities is *culture*. To use the term “culture” for the totality of human “deeds” is nothing new and amounts to a fairly traditional understanding of culture. But what makes this understanding of culture original is to connect culture with rationality, to almost identify both. Culture is cultural to the extent that it is rational. Accordingly, the notion of critique pertains not only to reason but culture as a whole. Put differently, explicating the rationality or rational basic elements in these different forms of culture is to make them *apt* or *receptive* to critique, and thereby to philosophy, which is in itself both a scientific discipline as well as part of culture. Although philosophy is the highest form of culture, it is also related to the different forms of culture and renders them rational to the extent that only philosophy is able to discern their rational elements. Only a philosophical look at culture in the way indicated can satisfy the modern project of the Enlightenment, to create an *intrinsic connection between culture, critique and rationality*. Culture is rational to the extent that its forms can withstand a rational justification through critique. Culture is rational, and hence justifiable, to the extent that through the transcendental method its rational elements can be explicated. This amounts to discerning the *facta* of rationality, namely as science, in each form of culture. This is the task of philosophy. Philosophy, by employing the transcendental method, *reconstructs* the rational elements in each form of culture. This is a *task*, not something that is immediately evident.

(1) „Diese eine Grundfactum – die Vieldeutigkeit des Begriffs der Wissenschaft in der Cultur – beweist die Notwendigkeit der Philosophie. Das bedeutet die Philosophie, dass sie diese Vieldeutigkeit aufhebt, den Begriff der Wissenschaft zur prinzipiellen Bestimmung bringt, den constanten Factor der Wissenschaft in allen verschiedenen Richtungen auszeichnet.

Damit ist Philosophie die Reconstruction der Cultur in all ihren Richtungen aus diesem constanten Faktor der Wissenschaft.“

(1) “This one basic *factum*—the plurality of the notion ‘science’ in culture—proves the necessity of philosophy. This is the definition of philosophy that it sublates this plurality, determines in principle the concept of science, that it discerns the constant factor of science in all different directions.

Thereby, philosophy is the reconstruction of culture in all of its directions from this constant factor of science.” (Cassirer Papers, Beinecke, Signature B 56, F 1107, from Cassirer’s lecture notes of Cohen’s lecture course of 1889.)

Cohen broadens the Kantian notion of critique and applies it to culture as the general term for all of humanity’s activities. Culture is the *terminus ad quem*, i.e., it is the task of the philosopher to discern the rational elements in the different manifestations of culture. Cohen is very rigid when it comes to this definition of culture—as being a manifestation of rationality in one form or another—and with respect to what he deems “cultural,” i.e., moral action, artistic expression, religious belief and the highest manifestation of culture, philosophy itself. In at least these two respects, thus, Cohen may appear rather old-fashioned; but one can glean the outlines of the project of a transcendental critique of culture. To Cohen, Kant had already begun it, but did not have a consistent method in place to carry it through; Cohen supplies the transcendental method to discern the rational elements in each cultural formation, by using the different *facta* as starting points for the regressive analysis. A transcendental analysis is, to Cohen, essentially *regressive*.

For everything to follow, one needs to keep in mind that Cassirer subscribes to this general project. But in one decisive element Cassirer breaks with his teacher’s paradigm, and this will open up the scope for his own original furthering of the general project of a

critique of culture, which is, so far, a mix of Kant, Fichte and Hegel along with a scientific or “rationalistic” view of culture. Cassirer breaks with his teacher’s rationalistic or lawful fixation on science as that which makes a cultural form an element of culture. To Cohen, a human deed in the broadest sense can only qualify as such when it exhibits lawful, rational structures in its manifestations. Or differently put, rational structures *are* those of lawfully governed “pure thought,” whereby the critique of culture discerns the *purity* in pure thought, pure feeling and pure willing. Cohen’s position is, hence, highly formalistic, which, one may surmise, does not do justice to the material facts of culture as they are experienced.

II. From Cohen to Cassirer, From Function to Symbol

Cassirer approaches the topic of culture from a side angle. His first systematic work appears as a rather dry academic exercise in the history of scientific concept formation, though it purports to contribute to the “basic questions of the critique of cognition [*Erkenntniskritik*].” The thesis regarding the manner in which concept formation occurs, can be seen in the title, *Substance and Function*, which might better be called “*from substance to function*.” Cassirer’s observation, in his studies of the philosophy of Renaissance and Modernity, is that what is new in Modernity, as opposed to the scientific practice from Antiquity (essentially Aristotle) through the Middle Ages, is that scientific concept formation follows or mirrors a certain ontology. This is in itself no original thesis, as Cassirer knows; what is new is that a change in concept formation can change an ontological predicament, and vice versa. To state that words and things form a correlation is the expression of Cassirer’s idealistic standpoint.

Ancient concept formation follows Aristotle’s substance ontology, whereby an individual *tode ti* is a substance with attributes. Accordingly, a concept describing such a thing is a substantial or thingly concept (*Dingbegriff*). However, in the modern scientific worldview, the phenomena described are no longer things but instead—*relations*. Accordingly, a concept can be construed as a relational concept (*Relationsbegriff*),

whereby the concept represents, not a thing, but a *function*. In this sense, a concept stands for a relational, functional state of affairs, due to the nature of the “thing” in question. As stating a relational state of affairs, a concept can be constructed as an image or a pictorial model. A famous concept is the notion of the atom in modern physics. We need not be physicists to know that the entity for which “atom” stands is not “really” the way we picture it. The image of the atom is a *pictorial model* for the relation between different molecules. A functional term such as “atom” is hence a concept that describes a relational state of affairs, whereby the term is merely an image or a representative of the functional line (*Reihe*), which is expressed in mathematical terms as $F(x)$.

Hence, in modern concept formation, the term stands for a function, expressed in an image, which is a representation of this functional context as a whole. The term stands for this line as an individual, it is not a metaphor or an analogy. The concept “atom” is a term for the image or model of the atom, but a representative of the world of atoms altogether. Another example would be the number 3, which is only a term that makes sense in the line of natural numbers between 2 and 4. Its “self-standing” status is merely an abstraction from the process of counting 2, 3, 4 etc. This is not to reduce the number 3 to a psychic phenomenon, which would be a fall-back into psychologism. But the ontological status of the number 3 is that it is only conceivable as the representative of the line of natural numbers. But this line of numbers is nevertheless something *constructed*, in the sense in which scientific truths are something constructed by the human mind, and the reconstructive clarification via the transcendental method is to reconstruct the *functional connections* or *laws* that govern something like the line of natural numbers. Hence, the Cohenian principle of construction recurs on the level of concept formation. This insight makes Cassirer’s reconstruction of modern concept formation in effect an epistemological consideration:

(2) “It [this epistemological consideration] does not seek out thinking where it merely receptively takes in the already-finished nexus of judgment and re-casts [*nachbildet*] it within itself; but where it creates and constructs [*aufbaut*] a meaningful totality of propositions.” (SuF, 459)

To repeat, this viewpoint is not a matter of psychology, but already a transcendental consideration. Concept formation as a matter of creatively constructing terms as representatives of functional nexuses, is a deed of pure thought. Scientific terms are merely the static end points of the fluid and dynamic process of thought. Thought (literally) terminates in terms that in turn mirror images, which function as representatives of the functional nexus described.

The step from here to Cassirer's insight into the symbolic, and his departure from Cohen, is not great. The basic insight here is that what Cassirer described in painstaking detail for concept formation in scientific practice is a general rule of the mind. The new term he uses for this type of entity that stands as a representative of a context is *symbol*. What he means with the term is not a completely new phenomenon, nor does he invent it. To the contrary, the learned scholar Cassirer notices how the notion of symbol crops up in different scientific areas, where it means in all cases the same thing: concept formation, or simply conceptualization, is the creative mental formation of generating symbols as images or representatives for nexuses of phenomena. Cassirer approvingly cites the scientist Heinrich Hertz in his *Principles of Mechanics*:

(3) "The images of which we are speaking [in generating these 'inner fictions'] are our ideas of things; they have with things the one essential agreement which lies in the fulfillment of the stated requirement, but further agreement with things is not necessary to their purpose. Actually we do not know and have no means of finding out whether our ideas of things accord with them in any other respect than in this one fundamental relation." (Hertz, quoted by Cassirer in PhsF I, 5 f./75)

The philosophical point to be derived from this insight is that this practice is nothing but a further development of transcendental idealism. It is a consequence of the Copernican turn, to lay our minds into things, *not* merely by applying concepts, but already more primitively, by generating images of things, where there is no issue of correspondence between concept and thing, but rather where the only decisive point is the internal coherence between the relation itself ("in" the mind). The general term for these images that are generated or constructed in our minds is, hence, *symbol*. A symbol is, as the literal meaning says (*sym-ballein*), a throwing together of the individual and the general,

the subjective and the objective. The symbol mediates between our individual image of something and its general meaning, which is nothing but the ideal or general nexus in which the image *functions* as representing the whole. This is Cassirer's restatement of transcendental idealism: the symbol is something generated by thought, which represents the context *of* the symbol, its functional relational nexus, as a whole. It hence always oscillates between the individuality of the subjective image and the generality of the objective nexus. To take the image of the atom again, it is an individual image, but it represents the lawful structure governing between molecules. It is *both* something individual *and* general. (This idea of the symbol as being an ontological hybrid stems, as Cassirer acknowledges, from Goethe.) Another indication for the mind's constructing character is that a certain symbol can stand for different contexts, depending on the viewpoint: the sine curve can stand for an artistic ornament or a mathematical law.

Symbolic formation as the activity of the mind is that which forms *sensible* individual contents into bearers of a general *mental* or *spiritual* meaning. There is no such thing as an individual, pre-conceptual or pre-symbolic receptive perception of a single thing that *then* receives a symbolic "stamp"; this would be the position of a naïve realism. Instead, perception is already a formation, not merely by forms of intuition, but *symbolic* formation in the sense described, as fitting something individual with something general. Seeing is always already a "seeing-as," whereby something individual is seen as belonging to a certain meaningful context, whose functional connection is generated by the mind. This functional connection Cassirer terms, reminiscent of Kant, a *symbolic form*, and for once we receive a definition of "symbolic form":

(4) "Unter einer ‚symbolischen Form‘ soll jene Energie des Geistes verstanden werden, durch welche ein geistiger Bedeutungsgehalt an ein konkretes sinnliches Zeichen geknüpft und diesem innerlich zugeeignet wird."

"A 'symbolic form' is to signify any energy of spirit, through with a spiritual meaning content is connected with a concrete sensible sign and is intrinsically endowed with it."

But this holds for all forms of culture, not just science. The shift from Cohen occurs in applying symbolic formation to *all* forms of culture. Hence, Cassirer outwardly restates

his teacher's main tenet, "the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture," but subtly deviates from him when he describes the project thusly:

(5) "It seeks to understand and to show how *every* content of culture, in so far as it is more than a mere isolated content, in so far as it is grounded in a universal principle of form, presupposes an original act of the human spirit. Herein the basic thesis of idealism finds its true and complete confirmation." (PhsF I, 11/80)

As in Cohen, Cassirer acknowledges a plurality of cultural expressions, but in Cassirer it becomes a "symbolic universe" inhabited by the human being as "*animal symbolicum*." The decisive break with Cohen is that Cassirer "relaxes" the rigid, law-oriented consideration of Cohen, replacing his scientific paradigm with the functional paradigm. A functional nexus is not necessarily a *lawful* one, but a matter of *meaning*. This allows Cassirer to focus on more and different cultural forms and permits a much more far-reaching scope of what belongs to a transcendental theory of culture. The criterion for what counts as a symbolic form is the actively forming spiritual activity in it, as far as it can be reconstructed from its *facta*. A spiritual activity is a truly forming, not re-forming activity:

(6) "Every authentic function of the human spirit has this decisive characteristic in common with cognition: it does not merely copy [*nachbildend*] but rather embodies [*bildend*] an original, formative power. It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present but contains an independent energy of the human spirit through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite 'meaning', a particular ideational content." (PhsF I, 9/78)

To summarize, first where Cassirer agrees with his teacher Cohen:

- the critique of reason needs to be construed as a critique or theory of culture;
- culture is the term for the sum total of human activities, culture is a matter of human construction or activity;

- what makes different forms of culture what they are is that they all follow a certain “inner logic” that can be discerned *regressively* or *reconstructively* from their *facta*.

But Cassirer breaks with Cohen in that:

- this “inner logic” needs to be construed, not in terms of laws and “pure thought,” and hence the regressive question need not depart from a science, but instead this inner logic is a functional nexus or context;

- this “relaxing” of the transcendental method allows for a much more open and encompassing view of culture; yet this theory of culture never ceases to be a *transcendental* consideration, insofar as these forms of cultural formation are regressive clarifications of the *condition of the possibilities* (in plural!) of cultural formation. But if “culture” is what replaces “reason” as the object of critique, “culture” is the title for *all* human actions and forms of human existence insofar as they exhibit a general structure and not some personal or individual habit—*if* such a thing exists.

To complete our overview over Cassirer’s system of symbolic forms, we need to introduce the different symbolic forms and expose their general functional structure. To conclude the exegetical part, I shall spell out the meta-philosophical implications of Cassirer’s philosophy of the symbolic.

III. From Symbol to the System of Symbolic Formation. Culture as the Condition of the Possibility of Freedom and Morality

The net result of Cassirer’s replacing the lawful with the functional paradigm is an opening up of the transcendental viewpoint on forms of culture that were not part of the purview before—neither Kant’s *nor* Cohen’s. “Culture” is the totality of symbolic forms, and a symbolic form is discernable through functional relations, which are visible in the facts that we see around us. The way to distinguish different forms of culture one may

call phenomenological: the open-minded individual looks around to contemplate the different forms of life that humans are engaged in, and attempts to discern the functional relations, the “inner logic” of each of them. As human beings, as *animalia symbolica*, we live in “spaces of meaning” that are generated by, for, and along with, other individuals. We live in different meaningful spaces, pursue different projects, have different interests (knowledge among others), and these spaces of meaning define who we are, respectively. Whether we join a club, pursue a career in politics, or play cards with friends, in all of these “contexts” we share common practices, pursue common goals, follow common rules. This is why Cassirer prefers the Hegelian talk of human “spirit” instead of subjectivity. We live, to Cassirer, in symbolic forms, which can be described as spaces of meaning that are commonly shared, with their own internal logic and manner of functioning. We are who we are through shared projects.

But as should be clear from the trajectory from Kant to Cohen, this is not a form of cultural anthropology. It is a transcendental account of the manner in which we live in culture, as the condition of the possibility of a life of meaning. Cassirer would be a bad Kantian if the order of symbolic forms were random or could be accounted for by mere enumeration. What makes Cassirer’s transcendental philosophy of culture a systematic account is his thesis that the symbolic forms display a certain systematic order or structure, which Cassirer only begins to describe in his 3-volume work. Symbolic forms themselves are no static entities, as should be clear from the functional paradigm, but dynamic “ways of world-making.” To account for this dynamics within each form, Cassirer distinguishes a three-partite structure, which is realized in each to a greater or lesser extent: the phenomena of *impression*, *expression*, and *meaning*, which are organized hierarchically. In each symbolic form, hence, there is some level of each; to take an example of the symbolic form of language: Language is first and foremost a mental phenomenon that takes in impressions “from the outside,” as witnessed in onomatopoeic phenomena; but the mimetic term is also applicable to other phenomena and even to abstract meanings, hence it has an *analogical* or expressive function. But ultimately, the term can also be the bearer of an abstract, ideal meaning, in which case the “material foundation” has been forgotten or left behind.⁵

With this general distinction of the “internal workings” of symbolic forms, we may consider the system or schema of symbolic forms. Following the regressive method, Cassirer looks at cultural phenomena and attempts to analyze them functionally and to systematize them, and he describes this procedure as follows:

(7) “Critical idealism does not confine itself within the sphere of mere facts; it attempts to understand these facts, and that means to order them according to general rules. ... What we are searching for are not the historical phenomena themselves. We try to analyze and to understand the fundamental modes of thinking, of conceiving, of representing, imagining, and picturing that are contained in language, myth, art, religion, and even in science.

Instead of following up the phenomena singly and stringing them together on the thread of history, instead of considering them in their succession or in their connection of cause and effect, we inquire into the nature of the different functions on which the phenomena, taken as a whole, depend. We are no longer studying the works of art, the products of mythical or religious thought, but the working powers, the mental activities that are required in order to produce these works. If we succeed in gaining an insight into the character of these powers, if we understand them, not in their historical origin, but in their structure, if we conceive in what way they are different from each other and nevertheless cooperating with each other, we have reached a new knowledge about the character of human culture. We can understand the work of human civilization not only in its historical but also in its systematic conditions; we have entered, so to speak, into a new dimension of thought.” (Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture, pp. 80 f.)

The symbolic forms that Cassirer analyzes are, accordingly, language, myth, science, art and religion. Their order is such that they may be visualized in the form of the “flower schema” with myth at the basis or core of each symbolic formation. Myth or mythical consciousness is, in Hegelian terms, the first rung on the ladder, the consciousness of the “this,” which is the origin for each higher form, but also has to be overcome in each subsequent symbolic form.⁶

Many questions raise themselves, which may be indicated briefly: Although Cassirer only analyzes in detail the forms of language, myth and science (though, of course, art and religion are touched as being close to the former three), the first question is whether this list is exhaustive. As one can see on the schema, there are other forms, which

Cassirer mentions in passing, but to which he does not devote a separate analysis. It is an open question in Cassirer scholarship, whether there is some kind of “super structure” to the system of symbolic formation, or whether Cassirer construed his account as some kind of “open system,” in a loose phenomenological description, whereby it is conceivable that new symbolic forms can be generated, as new cultural forms arise. One such obvious candidate would be the Internet. It certainly arises from language as a tool for communication, but has taken on a quality of its own, with certain novel forms of etiquette and behavior, whereby one could possibly justify it as being a new symbolic form. The system of symbolic formation does not, in other words, have to be construed as fixed and static, as each symbolic form is in itself a fluid and mutating medium of meaning. As in Cohen, who construed the system of categories by which we cognize the world as open and ever-developing, so, too, might one understand Cassirer’s system of symbolic formation as an “open system.”⁷ But this does not mean that Cassirer claims to lay bare the basic structures of human behavior as forming culture.

But these open questions concerning the systematic character of Cassirer’s account need not concern us here, as I shall attempt to spell out, in conclusion, some metaphilosophical consequences that arise from such a transcendental theory of culture. To begin with, one question that has been put to Cassirer soon after publishing his three tomes (between 1923 and 1929) was where and how Cassirer can ground an ethics within his system. Indeed, one searches in vain for an explicit ethics or moral philosophy in Cassirer. But as he makes clear in his paper “Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture” (of 1936), where he responds to precisely this critique, such an ethics is implicit in his system and does not need to be explicitly formulated. Ethical implications are evident, when one follows through to the consequences of his system of symbolic formation. The question of how one is to act, comes down to question concerning the nature of the human being. Hence one has to ask for Cassirer’s definition of the human being within this transcendental theory of culture, but the answer is fairly obvious. What a human being is, comes down to defining him in terms of his place in culture. The position of the human being in culture is, following the transcendental-regressive method, the manifestation of one’s nature as a cultural being. Being a human being is the capacity

to partake in culture. This, in turn, means to define the human being as being part of or fulfilling a symbolic form. There is no normativity involved in this account. One does not *have* to become a scientist or philosopher, but a human being is human, which is equal to being cultural, inasmuch as one has left behind the strictures of one's individual existence, one's private affairs, and becomes part of the world of culture, which is in each case a world of common affairs. By leaving behind one's local affairs and one's inherited tradition—*that* is inauthentic life!—and empowering oneself to be part of culture as a communal affair, one realizes human beings' true nature, namely the autonomy of reason, which is equal to freedom, for Kant. Thus, Cassirer concludes, is the aim of a philosophy of culture:

(8) “All these various problems of a philosophy of culture may, therefore, be summed up and concentrated in the question, In which way and by what means this autonomy is to be reached?” (Critical Idealism as..., p. 84).

The realization and articulation of one's nature as a human, cultural being is, of course, spelled out by culture itself and by culture's consciousness, which is the theoretical articulation on the part of the philosopher. This meta-view on culture, hence, holds the view that culture is the constant progress of human self-liberation (without ever reaching the point of an absolute standpoint!). One becomes free to the extent that one commits oneself to one or several cultural projects as that which liberates the individual, finite human being from being forgotten in the tides of time. Hence, the highest expression of this form of idealism is also the answer to the question, how am I to act? The goal is autonomy, and this means, negatively, a self-liberation of the individual as being given over to external powers and an anonymous fate; positively, it is the call to participation in communal affairs, which are realizations of the human capacity for culture, in so far as these are projects that can be critiqued and must account for and justify themselves in the face of common goals and common projects.

(9) “Idealism in all its various forms rejects the conception that mind submits to an outward fate. Mind must realize and actualize its own freedom in order to possess it, and the whole work of culture is this very process of self-realization.” (Critical Idealism as..., p. 89)

Regarding the question of a concrete ethics, if one understands the anthropological determinants of the human being as a being capable of becoming cultural, whereby the process of acculturation is one of self-liberation and becoming autonomous, the questions concerning concrete maxims and imperatives become questions of a rather pragmatic sort, as questions how one is able to acculturate oneself into certain symbolic forms and function within them, furthering them. The only clear imperative is to overcome one's local and individual perspective, this much is clear. The positive impact is the call to join the forces of common humanity to keep barbarism at bay and to further cultural projects, which are justified if and only if they withstand mutual critique and mutual checks and balances. Freedom and autonomy are not reached in the pose of reflection, but in the act of dealing with communal affairs in the world of symbols, which is the world created and formed by human spirit. The human being comes into one's own and flourishes in the universe of the symbolic, where one's facticity and mortality is overcome as realizing oneself as a link in the eternal chain of cultural creation.⁸ Culture, in the sense outlined here, is the element of the human being and is the condition of the possibility of becoming human.

Epilogue: Philosophy of Culture: A Dated Project?

Undoubtedly, Cassirer's philosophy of culture is an optimistic, confident look at human affairs and human culture. But is it by that token a dated project? Are we justified in thinking, as a recent interpreter does, that it is merely the product of a "humane and happy dream" (Sidelsky⁹), which is over (*ausgeträumt*¹⁰)? Is our situation really the one that is described by this critic, who claims:

"We have inherited Cassirer's liberal political attitudes, but not the cultural sensibility that underlay them. With our skepticism toward progress, our distaste for 'bourgeois' formalities, our fascination with charisma, and our endless talk of commitment, authenticity, and roots, we remain, consciously or not, Heidegger's children." (Sidelsky, p. 8)?

Of course, nobody can be scolded for committing oneself to a certain philosopher; after all, what kind of a philosophy one subscribes to depends on what kind of a human being one is. But in summarizing what has been said, and spelling out some of the consequences that follow, one can at least dispel some of the worst misconceptions concerning Cassirer's philosophy of culture:

For one, Cassirer's account is a *transcendental* theory of culture. That is, it is not a form of cultural or historical anthropology, but an account that clarifies the conditions of the possibilities of being a human being and living in the world, as a world of culture, that is, of communal meaning and communal values. It is in this sense self-confidently not an account of a certain human culture, for instance, the Western culture, whose ideals of culture are imposed on other cultures from the high horse of cultural superiority. Instead, Cassirer claims to have articulated the structural and functional manners in which culture is constructed by human beings *in general*. It is an account that at least purports to cover all human beings and all human cultures, purely descriptively. One upshot of such a look at culture would be that it accords with a newly emerging tendency within cultural anthropology which seems to become a commonplace in this discipline: that cultures really have more things in common than one thinks.¹¹ If this is correct, cultural anthropology confirms empirically what Cassirer has exposed structurally. In this sense, anthropological research can aid a transcendental account of culture such as Cassirer's, and *vice versa*. This would be an ideal scenario for the Neo-Kantian Cassirer is: that philosophy and the sciences are not two essentially different accounts, but belong together intimately, whereby the philosopher is different from the scientist only in the sense that the former has a broader view on culture than the latter, who has a more restricted sphere of investigation. And, more often than not, both are combined in the same person.

Hence, if such a unified vision of human culture can be made plausible, or confirmed in empirical research, the postmodern paradigm, which articulated by our critic and so natural to us today, that we should emphasize "difference" and that a unified view is a form of cultural imperialism because such commonalities do not exist, could turn out to

be simply incorrect. Despite the manifest differences of cultures and customs, there seem to be underlying anthropological invariances that trump all differences. The postmodern view of human culture would turn out to be more a matter of political correctness than of truth. A study of the human being, aided by such a vision of culture, would be a study of the commonalities that we share *despite* our differences. Sub-cultures that resist a common discourse reveal themselves as essentially undemocratic and anti-enlightenment. But this also means that a common human culture would have to ensure that the voices of the oppressed be heard. Insisting on a common human culture does not equate insisting on one superior and thus imperialist discourse. The critique voiced by feminists and others, that certain voices in the history of humanity have not been heard, such as those of women and other oppressed groups, is well taken, but should not lead to a fragmentation of culture, but, to the contrary, to a larger scope and view of culture to include all voices. To vanish into an encapsulated sub-culture is to leave the common discourse of humanity and ultimately achieves the opposite of what such an attempt set out to do.

To judge Cassirer's vision of culture as dated means to have committed oneself to the sentiment expressed by this recent interpreter, that we are all "Heidegger's children." But why does this have to be so? Is this not more of a tacit "group think" than anything else? One sometimes gets the impression that such a sentiment is more or less a commonplace by acclamation rather than the result of a sustained argument. The least one is forced to do is to justify such a sentiment. But if one does this, one enters again the "space of meaning," where one commits oneself to common principles of discourse. Culture is inescapable.

But let us not talk theory but roll up our sleeves and do the descriptive work! This is the spirit that breathes through Cassirer's work: such a theory of culture is not wishful thinking but the result of concrete work on the phenomena of culture. The transcendental theory is not something imposed from above but arises from within the world we live in as a world of meaning that are forced to make sense of. The facts are primary, transcendental clarifications are always *post factum*, but for that reason no intellectual

games; instead, it is the sincere attempt to explain them from common principles and to justify them through critique.

If one frees oneself from this postmodern sentiment, one will see in Cassirer's philosophy of culture a daring and timely synthetic vision of culture and of the place of the human being in culture. It is an original reformulation of Kant's critical project and at the same time a view that accounts for the plurality of human activity and takes it into the common house of philosophy as an essentially justificatory enterprise. It is a call to return from the brink of a fragmented view of what we share in common and to get back to work on the common project of humanity, which is the creation of culture. Such a project cannot be denied without committing a performative self-contradiction.

Endnotes:

¹ “Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture,” in: *Symbol, Myth and Culture. Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945*, D. P. Verene, ed., New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979, 64-94. This talk was delivered in English at the Warburg Institute in London.

² *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen. Erster Teil: Die Sprache. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1923.* English translation: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. I: Language*, R. Manheim, trans., New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1955. I quote Cassirer in the German first, then the English translation.

³ *Kants Begründung der Ethik.* Berlin: Dümmler, 1877, pp. 20 f.

⁴ To emphasize the active character of this fieri is already a certain interpretation of Cohen’s that will pave the way for Natorp’s own project, a transcendental psychology. Cf. Natorp’s *Allgemeine Psychologie nach Kritischer Methode* (Tübingen: Siebeck, 1912).

⁵ As Husserl saw, this structure is also at work in the process of idealization.

⁶ In Cassirer’s last work, *The Myth of the State*, this theoretical construction is the basis for his critique of fascism: the fact that fascist societies have found systematic (rhetorical) devices of bringing myth back into the public sphere.

⁷ The idea of an “open system” is a Neo-Kantian trope that can be found in Cohen but also Rickert. It may be read as an anticipation of the Popperian principle of science as ever expanding and correcting old assumptions and their categorial and conceptual predicaments.

⁸ This is also the crucial point of disagreement between Cassirer and Heidegger in 1929: the ontology of the human being must be construed, in Cassirer, as an element of the system of symbolic forms, as his version of transcendental idealism; for Heidegger, the ontology of human existence (*Dasein*) is a hermeneutics of facticity (free from cultural “strictures” as discussed in the Introduction).

⁹ Edward Sidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer. The Last Philosopher of Culture.* Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. I have also reviewed this book in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, no. 48:1 (January 2010), pp. 116-117.

¹⁰ The dream metaphor might be reminiscent of Husserl’s talk, in *Crisis*, of the dream of philosophy as a rigorous science is “*ausgeträumt*” (dreamt out), but one should emphasize the context of this phrase: this is *not*, as the passage is commonly read, Husserl’s opinion, but one that he puts in the mouth of his opponents.

¹¹ Cf. Christoph Antweiler, *Heimat Mensch. Was Uns Alle Verbindet*, Hamburg: Murmann, 2009. Antweiler, a leading cultural anthropologist in Germany, masters several fields of investigation of his discipline (morality, sexuality, customs, etc.) and shows, to this author convincingly, how the differences in cultures that one seems to discern, and which were also commonplace in his discipline, in effect are non-existent. I cannot judge, however, to what extent he merely formulates a newly emerging “synthetic” tendency of his field, or whether he completely breaks with the paradigms of his discipline and is hence ostracized by his peers. But my above point is, if it can be shown *empirically* that we have cultural things, and hence culture, in common across the board, there should be at least hope that a transcendental theory—a theory, that is, with the intention of *justifying* empirical claims—is not a “happy dream” but a concrete project.