

The Linguistic Turn in Philosophy: Ernst Cassirer

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the philosophical moorings that account for the contemporary valorisation of language as a site of critical inquiry. The paper highlights the contributions of philosopher Ernst Cassirer, particularly in light of his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-29). The paper considers Cassirer's acts of reflection on the subject of language, desediments its cultural relevance, and elucidates the philosophical significance of linguistic thought round which today's world of literary theory coalesces.

Keywords: language, form, schema, medium

1. Introduction

Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) is a German thinker with undisputed prominence in the history of the development of twentieth-century philosophy and culture. He is a prolific thinker whose concerns cover so wide an area of knowledge from foundational and epistemological issues

in the philosophy of mathematics and natural sciences to aesthetics, the philosophy of history, and other issues in the cultural sciences. Endowed with a massive intellectual calibre, Cassirer established edifices of knowledge that draw upon the resources of the past in its progressive march towards the future. The task of the philosopher, in this vision, is an endless quest for truth within the ongoing flow of the inexhaustible rhythms of life.

Cassirer acknowledged the informative influences of a galaxy of philosophers and thinkers on his own conceptions and insights. Kant stands out as the major source of insights for Cassirer. The other thinkers are mainly Vico, Herder, and Humboldt, all of whom in his view seek to expand the scope of language. Vico is the thinker who “first attempted a comprehensive, systematic outline of the cultural sciences,” and developed the concept of “poetic metaphysics,” in which he regards poetic tropes and metaphors as fundamental to the nature of language (Cassirer 1:149). Cassirer takes immense interest in Herder, because for Herder, language fuses the analytic elements and the emotional structures--language is both the “product of immediate sensation and at the same time entirely... a product of reflection: because reflection is not

something external that is merely added to the content of feeling; it enters into feeling as a constitutive factor” (1:153). For Cassirer, Herder represents “the transition from the older rationalistic concept of ‘reflective form’, which dominated the philosophy of the Enlightenment, to the Romantic concept of “organic form” (ibid). Cassirer, therefore, writes that “Herder may be called the Copernicus of history” (1:41). Moreover, the authority upon whom Cassirer first calls for support is Heinrich Hertz, who in his *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik* (1894) argues that the object of knowledge is defined only “through the medium of particular logical and conceptual structure” (Adams 202). And as “[Cassirer] ground[ed] his original ideas in their historical sources and in the fields he discusses” (Verene), he went on mapping across diverse disciplines and gaining momentum in order to seek new frontiers of thought that reside in the deeper structures of human cultural existence. Aspiring to strike a fresh ground of inquiry (Audi 120), he endeavoured to build on the existing literature in a creatively synthetic fashion of inquiry that set the stage for him to craft fresh speculative formulations and visions.

Cassirer has had a profound impact on renowned figures like “the art historian Erwin Panofsky, the theologian Paul Tillich, the aesthetician

Susanne Langer, and the Renaissance scholar Oskar Kristeller” (Krois ix). Cassirer's insights have contributed significantly to the development of so diverse areas like theological anthropology, structural linguistics, psychology, myth, and phenomenology (Audi 121).

Cassirer produced an enormous body of work. His contributions include *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (1927), *The Myth of the State* (1946), *An Essay on Man* (1944), *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923- 29) (Vol. 1, *Language*; Vol. 2, *Mythical Thought*; Vol. 3, *Phenomenology of Knowledge*), *Symbol, Myth, and Culture* (1979), *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Logic* (1995), *Language and Myth* (1946), *The Logic of the Humanities* (1942), *Substance and Function* (1923), *The Problem of Knowledge in Philosophy and Science in the Modern Age* (4 vols. 1906 – 20), *The Platonic Renaissance in England* (1932), *The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History since Hegel* (1952), *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932)

2. Historicising Philosophy

Cassirer's *magnum opus*, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, launches a fresh ground of inquiry into the philosophical questions of the times,

through which he proposed to develop a systematic philosophy based on his interpretations of the history of philosophy from the Renaissance to Hegel. He sought to reconstruct twentieth-century philosophy by integrating the science-oriented philosophy and '*Lebensphilosophie*' (philosophy of life)¹ in a challenging move to “reverse the direction of inquiry”—to construe life on philosophical grounds, to represent philosophical ideas as living forces in historical epochs, and to develop an alternative philosophical tradition (Cassirer 1:113).¹ His proposed trajectory is theorized as follows:

If we take the opposite direction, we do not pursue the idea of a passive intuition of spiritual reality, but situate ourselves in the midst of its function and energies of formation, we shall find certain common and typical principles of formation, diverse and dissimilar as the forms may be. If philosophy of culture succeeds in apprehending and elucidating such basic principles, it will have fulfilled, in a new sense, its task of demonstrating the unity of the spirit as opposed to the multiplicity of its manifestations. For the clearest evidence of this unity is precisely that the diversity of the product of the human spirit does not impair the unity of its productive process, but rather sustains and confirms it. (1:114)

In order to "reverse the direction of inquiry" (Cassirer 1:113), Cassirer underlined the urge to initially review the history of philosophical speculation. This would help him gain insights into the complex

¹ The figure 1 in parenthetical documentation refers to Cassirer's book *Language as* volume I of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.

ramifications of philosophical pronouncements. For such a purpose, he adopted a developmental approach that enabled him to trace arguments and counter-arguments, and to bring about the appropriate reconciliation of ideas in congruence with his own formulae of thought.

2.1. Metaphysical Philosophy

“The Logos becomes the principle of the universe and the first principle of human knowledge” (Cassirer, *Essay on Man* 111)—Having had this medieval thought as his point of departure, Cassirer commenced his book *Language* with the statement: “Philosophical speculation began with the concept of being” (1:73). The medieval conception of being was at first taken concretely. The early Pre-Socratic philosophers attempted to determine the beginning and origin, the ultimate “foundation” of all being: the question was stated clearly, but the concrete, fixed solutions supplied were not adequate to grasp the mysterious essence of being (Cassirer 1: 74).² With Plato, the question of being had assumed a different trajectory in terms of the concept and its associated problems (ibid). Plato, as Cassirer continued to elaborate, had reformulated the problem by showing the conflict between Parmenides’ distinction of being and nonbeing, pointing out that in discourse the distinction is

dissolved. In the course of differentiating among things in language “what is not, in some respect has being, and conversely that what is, in a way is not” (ibid). For Cassirer, this paradox and the limits of Greek and medieval ontology stemmed from their conception of being as a substance, an immutable reality. Even Aristotle’s purely logical theories, as Cassirer's argument runs, had hinged on the basic conception of substance. Scholasticism too had remained within the framework of the metaphysical conception of substance.

The Renaissance humanism announced the arrival of a fresh dawn wrought upon medieval speculative thought. In its divorce from the fixity of the medieval conceptions of being (essentialist, substantial, and non-historical metaphysics) to its engagement with the broad ideals of the Renaissance, human thought had accomplished its quantum leap towards modernity. For Cassirer, the Renaissance was not a mere rejuvenation of the philosophy of the past, but a genuine, new beginning that had captured the signals of the paradigmatic move from the medieval theo-centric universe to the modern anthro-po-centric universe (1:77). Modern emancipation from the shackles of medievalism had embraced wide promises and opened up fresh avenues of investigation. The collapse of faith in some mysterious power in full control of everything

amounted to the rise of the belief in the human being as an agent in the conduct of the different walks of life. The search for truth and meaning was thus redefined in terms of the human being as the centre of attention of the universe and as a subject with a shaping force of everything existing in the phenomenal world. Everything needed to be measured against, or in terms of, a background that is predicated on human individuality.

The seeds of the budding thought of the centrality of human subjectivity had found a nurturing ground in Kant's philosophy: "the world of being is transformed into a world of deed" (Cassirer 1: 79). Philosophical inquiry refocused its attention to the dynamic and mutable "world of deeds" as the most deserving object of analysis and reflection. This implied the fact that understanding the matters concerning the process through which human actions take place laid the ground for the construction of knowledge. That is, to understand the process of knowledge-making was more significant than having knowledge per se as the ultimate end product of any effort. The critical spirit had now to focus on the very process of knowledge-formation, precisely because

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ensuring the success of the measures and steps to carry out any project would guarantee the success of the final outcome.

The shift of attention to process meant an emphasis on 'praxis' in lieu of 'logos', which reflected part of the qualitative changes that modern thought went through in its attempt to find answers to the enigmatic questions of the larger meanings of human pilgrimage on earth. That the philosophical quest no longer concerns end-oriented metaphysical questions but process-oriented thinking modes constituted the essence of the directions of modern spectrums of thought..

However, the pendulum swung back towards the philosophy of substance in Hegel's philosophy, which brought the modern epoch to a kind of end with the equation of "substance" and "subject" , as Cassirer's philosophy indicated (1: 84). In Hegel's system, the historical process "stands still," entailing consequently the rigidity of the medieval outlook by conjoining the metaphysics of substance with the centrality of the subjective domain.³ Yet, it is significant to state that post-Hegelian philosophy underwent a radical reorientation (ibid).

2.2. Existing Philosophical Orientations

Cassirer emerged on the scene of philosophy at a time when this branch of inquiry was dominated by science-oriented theories on the one

hand, and the transcendental idealism of the Marburg neo-Kantianism on the other. The stage was yet seized by another school of philosophy, '*Lebensphilosophie*' (philosophy of life), to which Cassirer paid considerable tribute.

The science-oriented philosophy is characterised by ductionism, whereby diverse forms of human cultural activity are reduced to mere logical and mathematical terms (Cassirer 1: 84). In line with Descartes' 'cognition', the scientific discourse exercises dominance by diminishing consciousness to pure thought, stripped of any other sense, while consciousness becomes a "bare skeleton" (Warren 702). In addition to its anti-metaphysical attitude, science shrinks philosophy to logical principles of a conceptual system with no heed paid to historical contingencies or cultural dynamics.

The neo-Kantian idealist school attempts to bring a reorientation in philosophy by reducing the multitude of human life and its diverse proliferations to certain structures of logical unity. Reductionist in its approach towards the diversity of cultural activities, this school represents itself as an unquestioned authority on the then existing theory of knowledge, providing no space for negotiation or dialogue (Krois 34).

Thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Heidegger represent 'the philosophy of life' that repudiates neo-Kantianism, and attempts to conceive reality in exclusively existentialist terms. In its preoccupation with different versions of fathoming the ontological dimensions of the material world, *'Lebensphilosophie'* relegates epistemology to marginality, however.

3. Crisis and Beyond

3.1. Unfolding Crisis

Having thus mapped the various phases of philosophical speculation, Cassirer diagnosed the crisis in modern epistemological thought: "[G]eneral epistemology, with its traditional form and limitations, does not provide an adequate methodological basis for the cultural sciences" (1:69). The crisis stemmed from the limitations of the then existing models to adequately address the growing challenges and requirements of the times. Scientific positivism, neo-Kantianism, and the philosophy of life offer interpretations of reality that do not furnish sufficient answers that are vitalized with critically epistemic approaches to, or comprehensive visions of, the knowledge-making process. Such reductionist or authoritarian discourses, in Cassirer's lines of refutation, invite interrogation, and urge revision and reorientation.

Cassirer attempted to transform the course of epistemic philosophy through some strategic processes of dismantling traditional philosophy and reassembling the useful fragments (ibid). A revitalization of the selected structures was to follow by dint of enlarging the scope of epistemology as to encompass fresh avenues of thought. His method, one could argue, was dialectical in its orientation; he attempted to synthesize opposing forces into a new whole that was yet to be taken on a further step through some reinvigorating expansion of horizons. The following sections illustrate Cassirer's route to evolving a rigorous epistemological paradigm, culminating in the construction of his philosophy of symbolic forms.

3.1.1. Form as Formative

In the "Introduction" to Cassirer's *Language*, Charles W. Hendel began with an account of Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) in terms of his [Kant's] idea of knowledge as a 'construction' of thought, its conditions of possibility, and purport.⁴ In Kant's philosophy, knowledge is conceived as a 'construct' made in accordance with *a priori* concepts which determine whatever is relevant to the matter at hand. The *a priori* elements, as Hendel explained, are considered an organic unity, and are

the conditions of possibility for all knowledge that bears the true mark of universality and necessity (1: 3)⁵. Kant's *a priori* concepts are 'forms' of reason against which assumptions can be tested (ibid). As such, these forms are 'constitutive' of the whole range of the experiences of the world. Thereupon, for any activity to lay claim to validity, it has to conform to the constitutive forms of intuition and understanding as laid down in Kantian philosophy.

The constitutive function of form is the fulcrum for Cassirer's explorations. Cassirer, as Hendel went on to explain, followed in the steps of Kant's epistemic philosophy in which a reciprocal relationship characterizes the various elements of intuition and understanding (1: 22). The different elements of the human spirit (i.e. intuition and understanding) are conceived as intertwined in a unity that does not, however, efface their singularities. Essentially irreducible to its separate parts, this whole constitutes the condition of possibility for the mode of existence of the respective parts: "The whole is prior to the parts" (Cassirer, *Essay on Man* 143).⁶

3.1.2. Schema as Synthetic

Most important of all, as Hendel elucidated, is Kant's notion of 'schema'. In Kant's philosophy, schema is perceived as a 'synthetic medium'

between experience (sensuous intuition) and the *a priori* concepts of understanding (1:14). As a sensuous-intellectual structure that has something of both in its very nature, schema is a “real phenomenal presence” and, in Hendel's words, is “the focal point of the constructive thought” (ibid). Reflecting on Cassirer’s views of schema, Hendel further stated that “language possesses a schema” as “a monograph of the pure imagination *a priori*” (1: 15), and therefore language has the potential to represent itself as the site of the interface of the empiricist focus on the senses and the rationalist reason.⁷ This displays the synthetic structure of language as a schematic entity that integrates perceptual and cognitive conduits of thought.

3.1.3. Theory of Language

Predicated upon the assumption that language is synthetic in nature, John Michael Krois stated that Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms is a transformation of transcendental philosophy (38). Cassirer directed philosophical inquiry into the more comprehensive question of meaning, and by implication, to language, whose intersubjective nature of understanding serves as the launching pad for any exploration into the avenues of this philosophy. The decisive fact for Cassirer was that

language, and of course other symbolic forms, provides “a bridge from individual to individual” (Krois 43). On par with Kant’s schema, Cassirer's symbolic form of language is so crucial as a medium:

The characteristic meaning of language is not contained in the opposition between the two extremes of the sensuous and the intellectual, because in all its achievements and in every particular phase of its progress, language shows itself to be at once a sensuous and intellectual form of expression. (Cassirer 1:319)

Language, in Cassirer, functions as a transformative catalyst of 'disjunctive diversity' into 'conjunctive unity' (to borrow Alfred North Whitehead 's terms) that essentially stems from an “identification between the subject and the object” (Warren 699). The dichotomy of subject and object, the sensuous and the intellectual, is thus dissolved into a new synthetic composition, and languages becomes the site of the confluence of such dualistic modes of interaction. Cassirer stated: 'The subjectivity of language no longer appears as a barrier that prevents us from apprehending objective being but rather as a means of forming, of “objectifying” sensory impressions' (1: 158). In *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (1983), Hazard Adams remarked that Cassirer seemed to have attempted a mediation between Kant and Schelling, enlarging Kantian objectivity and differentiating modes of knowledge that

Schelling had tended to blend in a single spiritual act (203). Cassirer's creative crossing is, therefore, a transformation of transcendental philosophy from a critique of knowledge to a critique of meaning.

Among the rationalists, the reduction of all contents of cognition to their simple ideas and the designation of these ideas signifies a return to ultimate and universal principles of knowledge; among the empiricists, it stands for the derivation of all complex intellectual notions from the immediate data of the inward or outward senses, from the elements of "sensation" and reflection".

But with this the objectivity of language, as of all cognition, has become a problem in an entirely new sense. (Cassirer 1: 135)

Cassirer contended that language constitutes a crucial site for any investigation into the interiority of all symbolic cultural forms (1:155). The primacy that Cassirer attached to language over other symbolic constituents, as Adams observed, is attributable to the capacity of language to enshrine the wider underpinnings of other cultural forms (208). The linguistic medium provides the fundamental framework that informs the diverse cultural manifestations; language is pregnant with the larger worldviews upon which hinge other symbolic forms like religion, myth, and literature. The implication is that in order to carry out any inquiry into such areas of thought (cultural products), it is indisputably unattainable with no access gained to the linguistic realm (language). As

Cassirer wrote: 'The real difference between languages is not a difference of sounds or signs but one of "world-perspectives" (*Weltansichten*). A language is not simply a mechanical aggregate of terms' (*Essay on Man* 120). Language is thus valorized as a crucial medium that bears the essential foundations of culture at large.

The inaccessibility to other symbolic forms of culture is but via the linguistic medium is further substantiated in Cassirer's philosophy of language as a platform for self-reflexivity. According to this philosophy, language offers its users epistemic perspectives that empower them to distance themselves from their lived experiences and to initiate fresh acts of reflection on their own historical realities. Such a self-critical exercise that develops from the shift from "living in" to "thinking about" the ambient matrix, as Cassirer argued, is grounded and possible only on linguistic frontiers of thought (1: 286). It is in and through language that one can be in a position to think of his or her own thinking. "Language as a *sensorum commune*," as he continued to theorize, initiates its subjects to embark on such critically challenging tasks that are tantamount to awareness-raising campaigns and communally-consolidating visions (ibid).

Furthermore, Cassirer established the view that language renders three functions along the temporal continuum of human history.

First is the 'expressive' function (*Ausdrucksfunktion*) of language that characterizes the mythic consciousness with its little concern for the distinction between appearance and reality (Cassirer 1: 178). As the most rudimentary and primitive kind of thought, the expressivity of language resonates with the affectivity of that mind-set that conceives of the external world as a mysterious complex of incidents that defy any interpretation beyond the emotional. This peculiarity of language strikes a similar note in *The Great Code* (1982), in which Northrop Frye maintained that in most Greek literature before Plato, more especially in Homer, in the pre-Biblical cultures of the Near East, and in much of the Old Testament itself there occurred a conception of language as 'poetic' and 'hieroglyphic.' In these periods, continued Frye, there was little emphasis on subject-object dichotomy; the emphasis fell rather on the feeling that subject and object were linked by a common power or energy (6). All words in this phase of language are concrete (Frye 8).

Second is the 'representative' function (*Darstellungsfunktion*) of language. According to Cassirer, this function serves in the domain of

purely logical relations (1: 315). Defying the sheer expressive character of understanding, language is employed here to establish analogies. He demonstrates that the copula 'is' provides the clearest example of the function of representation. Even languages that have no copula can be used representatively, but they must employ constructions with a purely material content, for example, “the city big” for “the city is big” (Cassirer 1: 316). The 'significative' (*Bedeutungsfunktion*) stands as the third function of language whereby the scientific discourse exercises its activities in a purely conceptual framework. Unbound by the perceptible world of understanding, this significative character of language fulfills its task within the relational-functional conception of the external world of reality (Cassirer 1: 319).

Krois also remarked that the three symbolic functions of expression, representation, and significance enabled Cassirer to draw a clear line of demarcation between the world of expression, the perceptual world of things, and the world of theory. In this way, Cassirer undercut one of the most widespread views of myth among philosophers and anthropologists-- the view that myth is “primitive science” (Krois 92).

3.1.4. Philosophy of Symbol

Having furnished Cassirer's view of the centrality of language as a medium for all forms of human activity, the need now is to critically engage with his pronouncements upon the symbol and its profound meanings. In Cassirer, symbolism is a phenomenon that "recurs in each basic cultural form but in no two of them takes the exact shape" (1: 84). The notion of the symbol is introduced as a vital intermediary link with a potential to assert the ideal relation between divergent forms, "without losing the incomparable particularity of any one of them" (ibid). All the constituent components of culture-- language, art, religion, myth, and science-- are symbolic forms by dint of which human consciousness is able to realize meaning. As modes of knowledge and representations of the worlds of experience, the diverse symbolic structures of culture "provide the building stones from which the world of 'reality' is constructed for us, as well as that of the human spirit, in sum the World-of-the-I" (Cassirer 1: 91). Pregnant with cultural associations, the symbolic forms translate the raw flux of actuality into meaningful bodies of "human knowledge [which] can nowhere dispense with symbols and signs; but it is precisely this that characterizes it as human" (Cassirer 1:112). The significance accorded to the symbolic forms hinges basically

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on their constitutive role as instrumental in rendering meaningful the varied activities in the realm of human experience. This formative character of the symbolic forms is also reflected on in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1985), in which Umberto Eco observed: “The symbolic activity does not ‘name’ an already known world, but establishes the very condition for knowing it. Symbols are not translations of our thought; they are its organs” (135). In Cassirer, the symbol as a notion is vital to the knowledge-making process of the whole spectrum of human social and political existence in entirety.

3.1.4. Static into Dynamic

In addition to the constitutive role of forms, the pervasive presence of the symbol, and the synthetic dynamic of language, Cassirer deployed the term “philosophy of life” in a systematic sense by broadening its standard meaning as to signify post-idealistic thought that is representative of a broad fundamental shift in philosophical thinking (Krois 35). Since the *'Lebensphilosophie'* investigates the concrete world of temporal human existence of historical reality, Cassirer maintained the view that this type of philosophy shifted the emphasis to *'Leben'* (life) and, by implication, to *praxis* (action) (1: 285). In his concerted effort to stave off stasis and revitalize philosophical reflection, Cassirer redrafted the orientation

towards action, activity, dynamicity as the basis for investigation into truth. As he wrote: "Language must be looked upon as an *energeia* (activity) rather than an *ergon* (work)... a continuous process" (*Essay on Man* 121). Remarkable as it is as a contribution to epistemology, Cassirer's emphasis on dynamicity in lieu of fixity in the formation of thought and meaning has had a profound impact on the subsequent developments of contemporary human thinking. In the words of Krois:

No other philosopher has given as much emphasis to the plurality of the "worlds" we experience- the worlds perceived through language, art, science, myth, and other forms of interpretation.... No other philosopher has based his work on the analysis of meaning in the way that Cassirer has done, focusing on expression, rather than reference, while at the same time including both, along with abstract symbolism, in a comprehensive theory of sign and meaning. (4)

3.1.5. Critique of Culture

Subsequent to the shift to praxis-oriented epistemology, "the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture" (Cassirer 1:80). Culture evolves in the materiality of collective existence. In the praxis of culture, language, religion, myth, art, and science evolve, too. Here Cassirer regarded culture as "the system of human activity" (*Essay on Man* 68); culture is the totality of activities that crystallize human history.

Exploring this history, in Cassirer's context, takes the form of an inquiry into the inwardness of culture *per se* (1:84). This exploration is a progressively reflective engagement with the phenomenology of culture with a view to dissecting the inner modes of existence of the cultural body and understanding the various activities occurring in the human realm. To fathom into culture is represented as a key to internalizing the human phenomena as whole. The justification for unfolding the interiority of culture is premised upon the following rationale:

In truth, the meaning of each form cannot be sought in what it expresses, but only in the manner and modality, the inner law of the expression itself. In this law of formation, and consequently not in proximity to the immediate given but in progressive removal from it, lie the value and the specific character of linguistic as of artistic formation. This distance from immediate reality and immediate experience is the condition of their being perceived, of our spiritual awareness of them. Language, too, begins only where our immediate relation to sensory impression and sensory affectivity ceases. The uttered sound is not yet speech as long as it purports to be mere repetition; as long as the specific factor of signification and the will to “signification” are lacking. The aim of repetition lies in identity- the aim of linguistic designation lies in difference.... The synthesis effected can only be a synthesis of different elements, not of elements that are alike or similar in any respect. The more the sound resembles what it expresses; the more it continues to “be” the other, the less it can “signify” that other. (Cassirer 1:189) The extract displays how the internal structures of culture are so intertwined with its external manifestations that knowledge of the former is a prerequisite to attaining grasp of the latter. In Cassirer’s philosophy, being is not divorced from the way of having a world; ontology cannot be

separated from the philosophy of culture. Such symbolic forms of culture as religion, myth, literature, and language are ways in which the world has being, and are perspectives on this being as such. In other words, not only does language help to construct the epistemological reality for its users, but it also functions as a medium for discourse about such reality including the very concept of being itself. This perhaps explains why Cassirer commenced his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* with a discussion of language and being.

4. Conclusion

Cassirer problematized the history of philosophy in its quest for truth, refashioned the search into the arena of language, and set the stage for culture to assume its pivotal role in the meaning-making process. Crossing the borders of rigidity and paving the way for an alternative discourse to emerge on the landscape of philosophy and to establish relevance to humanity, individually and collectively, represent the germ of Cassirer's creativity.

The focus on language as the site of the confluence of diverse symbolic forms has had an enormous impact on the development of different areas of thought across the board. Critical approaches like Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Reader-Response Theory, Feminism, Post-colonialism, New Historicism, Cultural Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, and other literary and critical forays in contemporary

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epistemology owe much to Cassirer's insights into language and culture.

The Renaissance of the medium that found expression in Cassirer has, therefore, established its academic foothold, and has breathed a fresh lease of life into the humanities.

As regards his objective as to "reverse the direction of inquiry" (1: 113), Cassirer's assertion that "philosophical awareness arises in and through language" (1: 117) fulfills the task of valorizing the need for a reversal of the Platonic epistemology. For the knowledge-making process to crystallize into structures of meaning and incarnations of truth, the search needs not to commence with speculations over the static notion of being that resides in some transcendental realm of the unknown; it is rather the other way around.

First, no longer is language regarded as a 'shadow' or 'copy' of some transcendental 'Idea'; the quest for truth has now to be initiated from within language itself as a vital symbolic embodiment of all aspects and realities of human pilgrimage on earth. This pluridimensional character of language renders it indispensable to all acts of reflection.

Language since then has been taken to be a model of investigation in so many fields, and the theory of language has revolutionized so many approaches in psychology, anthropology, and political theory, to say nothing of literary criticism itself, that no one can any longer regard the humanistic concern with language as

separable or even distinguishable from other concerns. (Frye xviii)

Formative of epistemological reality and synthetic of all the symbolic forms of culture, language now represents the point of departure for any inquiry into the manifold manifestations of the human phenomena.

Secondly, no longer is the search end-focused; it is now process-oriented. In lieu of passively awaiting some ready-made, packaged interpretations to be bestowed on the all consuming human being, the stress falls now on the inner activities of the knowing subject that give shape and meaning to everything in the phenomenal world. The traditionally-held images of the passivity of the human mind invite radical interrogation, and are now replaced by representations of the human subject as an agent in the construction and configuration of all walks of life. All structures of knowledge and forms of experience are now thought to owe their origins to the expressions of consciousness. "Human consciousness," in Cassirer, "is in essence an activity. Consciousness takes some given as signifying a universe of meaning beyond itself and of which the content is symbolic representation. Consciousness is a symbolizing activity" (1: 57). This activity is what

essentially confers meaning upon life in all its abundant forms, and as a result, investigating the 'morphology' of this activity is worthwhile.

Third is Cassirer's emphasis on praxis, which proves substantially fruitful to the humanities in reconsidering postulates and stimulating activities and interactivities. With praxis, life is represented as an ongoing flow of diverse symphonies of meaning that interact with one another with a view to affirming the inexhaustible potentialities of human pilgrimage on earth. Hence, it is praxis that essentially defines human consciousness. In Hendel's words, 'the nature of man is defined by his "work"... it is the system of human activities, which define and determine the circle of humanity (1: 44). Therefore, Cassirer raises the banner of praxis in an effort to liberate human thought from the shackles of the domineering logos of fixity and rigidity. In a nutshell, the philosophy of symbolic forms is a disenchantment with the dogmatic visions of metaphysics, and is an invitation to conduct epistemic explorations of the pluralistic possibilities of meaning potentially available in life.

As a corollary, Cassirer's philosophy marks the signals of the paradigm shift towards the poetics of progressive constructivism that calls into question the premises of Plato's 'mimesis', and offers an

alternative epistemological route to knowledge. From the passive duplication of some given reality to the vibrant constructions of manifold realities perhaps sums up Cassirer's mission as to "reverse the direction of inquiry" (1: 113).

It is also instructive to remark how Cassirer redefines the nature of the nexus of dualistic entities. Instead of the dominance-suppression framework of the former philosophies, he charted an interactive approach whereby the past and the present, whole and part, thesis and antithesis, science and the humanities, tradition and innovation, and the self and 'the Other' are perceived as so correlated and intertwined that understanding one hinges primarily on the other. Here Cassirer emerged as a precursor for today's calls for thinking together differently, dialogue across cultures, alliance of civilizations, and unity in diversity. It is a profound vision that celebrates difference and includes traditionally represented hostile entities.

Fathoming Cassirer's crossing of boundaries bears relevance to every attempt to come to terms with the convolutions that arise in any encounter with contemporary epistemology. His systematic unfolding of the history of philosophy, reorientation of research to the medium of

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language, and accent on the symbolically-informed and informing dimensions of culture represent the progressively accumulated body of thought that feeds into the current epistemic paradigm. Realizing the profundity of the philosophy of symbolic forms, internalizing its shades of meaning, and appreciating the value of epistemic revolutions in the world of knowledge result in dispelling any cognitive perplexity from human consciousness and attaining not only self-knowledge but also recognition of 'the Other'. Hence, for such "groundbreaking works in intellectual history" (Audi 121), Cassirer's contributions embody his creative genius.

Notes

¹ For a good grasp on this philosophy, see Martin Heidegger. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.

² It is interesting to observe that the claim of inadequacy or circularity in philosophical investigations has been the basis of the criticism of earlier philosophies as well as the point of departure for any new philosophy to emerge. On this point, see Richard M. Rorty, ed. *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*. 1967. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

³ In response to this "regression to precritical modes of thinking," Allen Speight offers a different perspective on Hegel in *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency*. Boston: Cambridge UP, n.d.

⁴ In the other sections of the "Introduction," Hendel addresses different issues vis-à-vis Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Judgment*. He also elucidates Kant's contribution to the development of eighteenth-century thought, and the continuing relevance of his emphasis on form to theoretical biology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, Hendel briefly dwells upon Goethe's 'metamorphosis' and Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, and shows their impact upon and relevance to Cassirer's conception of symbolic forms.

⁵ For more on Kant, see Henry Allison and Peter Heath, eds. *Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

⁶ It is interesting to note that this insight finds an echo in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979) in which Frank Kermode remarks: "Without some fore-understanding of the whole, we can make no sense of the part; and our fore-understanding of the whole is largely constructed from our present understanding of the part" (5).

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