THORA ILIN BAYER

With an Introductory Essay by Donald Phillip Verene

Cassirer's Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms

A Philosophical Commentary

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Thora Ilin Bayer

With an Introductory Essay by

Donald Phillip Verene

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Laß den Anfang mit dem Ende
Sich in Eins zusammenziehn!
Schneller als die Gegenstände
Selber dich vorüberfliehn.
Danke, daß die Gunst der Musen
Unvergängliches verheißt,
Den Gehalt in deinem Busen
Und die Form in deinem Geist.

—Goethe, *Dauer im Wechsel*

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Cassirer's Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms

Introduction

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CASSIRER'S PHILOSOPHY

At his death in 1945 Cassirer left a quantity of unpublished papers, among which were manuscripts concerning a "metaphysics of symbolic forms." These manuscripts were on a topic not previously thought to be part of his conception of a philosophy of symbolic forms. They have only recently come to light, and their appearance invites a new perspective, a new understanding of Cassirer's philosophy.

Cassirer left his professorship at the University of Hamburg in May of 1933, following Hitler's appointment as chancellor of Germany in January. As a Jew, Cassirer had no future in his homeland, and two months later he was formally dismissed, in absentia, from his university position. Cassirer taught for two years (1933–1935) at All Souls College, Oxford, before taking up a professorship at the University of Göteborg, Sweden. In 1941 he accepted a position at Yale University, and that summer the Cassirers came to the United States on the last ship to leave Sweden. At the time of his death, Cassirer had moved to an appointment at Columbia University. He died suddenly of a heart attack on the Columbia campus on April 13, 1945.

In the summer of 1946, after the end of World War II, Mrs. Cassirer returned to Sweden and brought to the United States the papers which her husband had left on their departure. The papers remained in storage and unexamined by any Cassirer scholar until 1972, when I surveyed them. They are now per-

manently housed at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

My survey of the papers led to the publication of a volume of twelve of Cassirer's essays and lectures from the last decade of his life, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*.[1] These were pieces in which Cassirer summarized and introduced to new audiences, in Sweden and principally in the United States, his conception of culture and symbolic form. Most prominent among the papers remained two manuscripts marked as an unpublished text of a fourth volume to his three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* published in the 1920s and translated into English in the 1950s. The first of these three volumes concerns language, the second, mythical thought, and the third is a phenomenology of knowledge, showing the genesis of scientific thought from pretheoretical expressive and representational functions of consciousness.[2]

Cassirer's Unpublished Metaphysics

Missing in Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms was a treatment of the metaphysical principles that supported it. One of the principal criticisms made by Cassirer's first commentators, the contributors to a volume of twenty-three essays published on Cassirer's work in the Library of Living Philosophers series, was that Cassirer had no metaphysics or was in fact antimetaphysi-

1. For a description of the papers see *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935–1945,* ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 293–98.

2. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* 3 vols., trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953–1957). Hereinafter cited as *PSF.*

cal. Several of these essays make this point quite strongly.[3] Because Cassirer died during the preparation of this volume, which appeared in 1949, he made no reply to his critics as is usual in this series.

Cassirer had indicated in the preface to the third volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* that he intended to publish a discussion of the principles of spirit (*Geist*) and life (*Leben*).[4] He never did so, but in an essay on Max Scheler's philosophical anthropology that was printed in lieu of a reply in the Library of Living Philosophers volume, he made some leading comments about these two principles.[5] The view that Cassirer had a philosophy without a metaphysics reinforced the popular view that his philosophy of symbolic forms was basically an extension of Marburg neo-Kantianism.

The Marburg neo-Kantians had focused their account of knowledge quite narrowly on forms of scientific and theoretical cognition. Cassirer was understood as simply extending the principles of Kantian critique to noncognitive areas of symbolic formation as found in myth, religion, art, and history. His philosophy was commonly seen as a series of analyses of various areas of human culture to show how each employs Kantian categories in different ways and how each can be understood as a type of knowledge.

But what understanding of reality, especially human reality,

3. *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer,* ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, Ill.: Library of Living Philosophers, 1949); see the essays of William Curtis Swabey, Felix Kaufmann, Robert S. Hartman, and Wilbur M. Urban.

4. *PSF,* 3: xvi.

5. " 'Spirit' and 'Life' in Contemporary Philosophy," trans. Robert Walter Bretall and Paul Arthur Schilpp, in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer,* 855–80.

did this entail? Cassirer seemed not to have given a reply to this. His thought appeared to his readers and commentators as an expansion of Kantian epistemology coupled with work in the history of thought, represented by the ground-breaking studies he had written on the problem of knowledge in modern philosophy, the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, the Platonic renaissance in England, and individual studies of various philosophers. Brand Blanshard, in a review of the last work Cassirer published, *An Essay on Man* (1944), saw Cassirer's philosophy still to be a series of scholarly researches not mobilized in the interest of any metaphysical theory.[6]

The manuscripts that make up the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* appeared in a German edition in 1995 as the first volume in what is planned to be a twenty-volume edition of Cassirer's unpublished papers.[7] The following year, this volume appeared in an American edition, which John Michael Krois and I edited.[8] Cassirer's title for this volume is *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms.* The first part of it, written in 1928 at the time he was finishing the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* concerns the principles of spirit (*Geist*) and life (*Leben*).

The second part, written in Sweden about 1940, shortly before his departure for the United States, introduces his concept of "basis phenomena" (*Basisphänomene*), an idea Cassirer writes of nowhere else in his published or unpublished works. These

6. *Philosophical Review* 54 (1945): 509–10.

7. *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen,* ed. John Michael Krois, vol. 1 of Ernst Cassirer, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte,* ed. John Michael Krois and Oswald Schwemmer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995).

8. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms,* ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

phenomena, for which Cassirer uses various terms, including "I," "action," and "the work," underlie all human experience and make human reality possible. The concept of basis phenomena, coupled with the great distinction between spirit and life, constitute Cassirer's metaphysics and offer the most that he has said about how his concept of symbolic form is grounded in a concept of the real.

It was a unique event in twentieth-century philosophy that an unknown major work of a major philosopher came to light so long after his death. The papers of figures such as Husserl and Peirce have, as a body, influenced the understanding of their thought. In Cassirer's case, here is a single, complicated work that changes one's opinion of his philosophy and how he ultimately understood his philosophy.

It is a work that requires a commentary, and the exposition by Thora Ilin Bayer that follows is extraordinarily useful—indeed, essential—for the comprehension of Cassirer's metaphysics. No other commentary currently exists on this work. Bayer's commentary is keyed to the text with references to the pages of the English and German editions, but it is also written as a narrative that can be read on its own, which allows the reader to see much of what Cassirer himself saw when reflecting on his own philosophy. Bayer does not propose to solve problems that may lie within Cassirer's metaphysics. Her method of commentary takes the reader progressively through Cassirer's claims, and she reminds the reader how each point stands in relation to the general themes of Cassirer's position.

The publication and analysis of Cassirer's metaphysics comes at a time of new international interest in Cassirer studies. Several of Cassirer's works of original philosophy have been continuously in print since their first publication in English. This has been true of the three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic*

Forms since their translation into English in the 1950s, and of *An Essay on Man* (1944) and *The Myth of the State* (1946).[9] These last two works, which Cassirer wrote in English while at Yale, have been translated into every major European and Asian language. This is a remarkable record of readership. Cassirer is one of those philosophers, along with Dewey, Whitehead, Nietzsche, and the Existentialists, to mention a few, whose works have attracted continual attention beyond professional philosophy and academics.

Almost since their publication, Cassirer's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* and *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* have been standard texts in the history of ideas.[10] But it is only within the last decade that Cassirer's original philosophy has begun to receive systematic scholarly attention. The beginning of this period is marked by the appearance of John Michael Krois's *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History,* for some time the only major study in English of Cassirer's philosophy.[11] Although before that some valuable critical writings on Cassirer had appeared, it is only in the past few years that a body of work on Cassirer has begun to accumulate and that a common interest in Cassirer's work has developed that has brought together scholars from various countries and in various fields.

Evidence of this is the formation in the last several years of an International Ernst Cassirer Society (*Internationale Ernst*

9. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1944); *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1946).

10. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment,* trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951); *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy,* trans. Mario Domandi (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

11. John Michael Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987).

Cassirer-Gesellschaft), which has been involved in several conferences and meetings held on Cassirer's philosophy in Europe and in the publication of various volumes of essays on Cassirer. A yearlong cycle of lectures on Cassirer was organized at the University of Hamburg, the papers of which have appeared as *Ernst Cassirers Wesen und Wirkung*.[12]

Two major international and interdisciplinary conferences held in the past few years brought together scholars principally from the United States, Germany, France, and Israel; one in October 1996 at Yale University, the other in May 1998 in Israel. Both of these focused attention on Cassirer's metaphysics, including his conceptions of symbol and culture. In addition to the edition of Cassirer's unpublished papers just mentioned, the publication of a twenty-five volume edition of all of Cassirer's previously published works has begun to appear in German.[13] New studies and editions of Cassirer's works continue to appear in Germany as well as in France and Italy.

All of this was inconceivable only a few years ago. The danger is that Cassirer will become an industry, as has occurred with other figures. But these publishing commitments and the memberships in the Cassirer society represent a genuine new interest in Cassirer's work, which attracts not only philosophers but scholars from across the humanities.

The cause of this pattern of interest is probably twofold. Perhaps one cause is simply that the existence and nature of an archive of unpublished work by a major thinker, who writes about

12. *Ernst Cassirers Wesen und Wirkung: Kultur und Philosophie,* ed. Dorothea Frede and Reinold Schmücker (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997).

13. Between 1998 and 2006, the complete edition is to appear, the first volume of which is Ernst Cassirer, *Gesammelte Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe,* ed. Birgit Recki, vol. 1, *Leibniz' System in seinen Wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen (1902)* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998).

topics of contemporary appeal, has been brought to light. This in itself excites interest. The second cause very possibly lies in the connection between Cassirer's thought and certain movements in contemporary thought, such as structuralism, phenomenology, linguistics, and hermeneutics. To cite one example, Cassirer's posthumous article in the first volume of the journal *Word,* titled "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics" (1946), became a source for the term "structuralism."[14]

Beyond its connections with these movements and their methods, which have strongly influenced the fields of the humanities, Cassirer's approach to culture offers a total philosophy. In Cassirer's philosophy the perennial questions are still alive. Cassirer's thought proceeds without a technical vocabulary and offers a way to consider the ancient Socratic questions about the nature of the human world and the nature of self-knowledge. Cassirer offers intellectual morale. His works are readable, and he brings the whole of human culture back into view, and with it the viability of a metaphysics of culture.

Beyond the incorporation of Cassirer's ideas in the works of Susanne Langer, no school of Cassirerian philosophy was ever formed. Cassirer had to leave Germany just at the time when many scholars there were beginning to study critically his volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.* He left Oxford after only two years for Göteborg and six years later came to the United States, while the war was still in progress. Cassirer never had a proper place or a good situation in which to present his new philosophy in a sustained manner to advanced students or to colleagues. He would in all likelihood have enjoyed more favorable conditions in the United States following the war, but his sudden, untimely death precluded him from doing so.

14. Cassirer, "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics," *Word* 1 (1946): 99–120.

To approach Cassirer's metaphysics, which is a new key to his thought, the reader may wish to have in mind the development of his philosophy. Cassirer published more than 125 books and articles in a period of nearly fifty years, including several items that appeared posthumously. These works comprise 11,380 pages, not including Cassirer's unpublished papers — more pages than the Prussian Academy edition of Kant's collected works. In what follows I have divided Cassirer's work into four periods. Within each of these, and throughout his career, there is a dialectic between his works of systematic philosophy and his historical studies. Each of these supplements the other.

Cassirer never wished to "throw his ideas into empty space" but always saw the need to ground his philosophy in the history of thought. This dialectic between philosophy proper and history is both Cassirer's strength and his weakness. The meaning and originality of his philosophical ideas are revealed through their connections with the thought of others, yet his continual quotations and historical discussions tend to absorb his ideas and inhibit his ability to develop further statements of them on their own terms. This is his style of thought, even in his work on metaphysics. One of the virtues of the commentary that follows is that it allows us to focus on the ideas themselves and their structure. Because Cassirer moved back and forth throughout his career between so many subjects, the four divisions that follow should not be regarded as sharp divisions in his thought. They are general positions from which most of the various threads of his thought can be grasped.

Marburg Neo-Kantianism and the Problem of Knowledge

Cassirer wrote his doctoral dissertation under Hermann Cohen at the University of Marburg in 1899, "Descartes' Critique of

Mathematical and Natural Scientific Knowledge."[15] This became the introduction to his first book, which appeared three years later, *Leibniz' System* (1902).[16] Cohen had founded the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism about 1870. When Cassirer came to Marburg to attend Cohen's seminars, he had already read Cohen's works on Kant; he regarded Cohen as the most important interpreter of Kant in Germany. Neo-Kantianism had developed in the last half of the nineteenth century as a reaction to Hegelianism, from a belief that Hegelian philosophy attempts to grasp all of human knowledge in one swoop, in a total system developed from the top down, leaving the specific bases of the individual fields of knowledge insufficiently examined. Hegelian speculation was thought to have turned its back too quickly on the method of critical philosophy.

The roots of this return to Kant lie in the works of Hermann von Helmholtz, Friedrich Albert Lange, Eduard Zeller, and Otto Liebmann. Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp were the central figures of the Marburg school, which emphasized the epistemology of the natural sciences. Another tendency of neo-Kantianism, known as the Southwest (Baden) school, was founded by Wilhelm Windelband and carried on by Heinrich Rickert. It focused on the logical problems of history and the cultural sciences.

Cassirer, in his article "Neo-Kantianism" for the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1928) said, of the various forms of the neo-Kantian movement, "But, not withstanding differences of detail, there is a certain methodical principle

15. "Descartes' Kritik der mathematischen und naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis" (inaugural dissertation, Marburg, 1899). I have given all titles of Cassirer's works in the text in English.

16. *Leibniz' System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (Marburg: Elwert, 1902).

common to all of them. They all see in philosophy not merely a personal conviction, an individual view of the world, but they enquire into the possibility of *philosophy as a science* with the intention of formulating its conditions." Cassirer says that it was "in Hermann Cohen that neo-Kantianism reached its climax." Cohen's exposition of the fundamental doctrines of Kant, Cassirer said, brought "one single systematic idea into the centre of the investigation. This idea is that of the 'transcendental method.' "[17]

Cassirer's thought developed from this neo-Kantian position. In textbooks and discussions of twentieth-century philosophy, his philosophy is commonly typed simply as neo-Kantian. In his famous debate with Heidegger at Davos, Switzerland, in 1929 concerning Kant and the problem of human freedom, Heidegger begins by questioning Cassirer about neo-Kantianism.[18] Cassirer sees that Heidegger, by bringing up neo-Kantianism, is attempting to reduce his philosophy of symbolic forms to its origin, to create the impression that it is just a narrow form of Kantianism.

Cassirer bristles at this implication and replies that neo-Kantianism must be understood in "functional terms," meaning that although his philosophy began at Marburg, he does not intend an understanding of his philosophy to end there. Cassirer reiterates this claim that neo-Kantianism must be understood in functional terms in the preface to his later work in the philosophy of science—*Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics* (1936), in which he wishes to show how the Kantian position can be revised to offer an account of the new non-Newtonian conceptions of causality and quantum theory.[19]

17. *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 14th ed., s.v. "Neo-Kantianism."

18. See *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 36–42.

19. *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics: Historical and*

Cassirer's origins are certainly in the Marburg tradition. The use of the term "critique" in relation to Descartes in the title of his doctoral dissertation is no accident. His interpretations of Descartes and Leibniz are crucial for bringing the perspective of critical philosophy to bear on an understanding of modern philosophy. At Cassirer's hands, Descartes and Leibniz appear not simply as formulators of rationalist metaphysics but as fundamental sources for the approach to knowledge of critical philosophy.

While editing an edition of Leibniz's works, Cassirer began to publish his multivolume work *The Problem of Knowledge in Philosophy and Science in the Modern Age,* the first two volumes of which appeared in 1906–1907.[20] His aim was to show how the problem of knowledge developed, from the speculations of Nicholas of Cusa, regarded as the first modern philosopher, to the critical philosophy of Kant. The problem of knowledge, conceived as the central problem of modern philosophy, culminates in the stage of *Erkenntniskritik,* and this culmination can be understood only by comprehending the interconnections between the conceptions of knowledge within the development of modern philosophy and those present in the rise of modern science.

These two volumes were an enormous accomplishment of learning and philosophical scholarship. Later, Cassirer decided to continue his treatment of the problem of knowledge in a third volume, published in 1920, taking his history through the figures of post-Kantian thought, especially Hegel.[21] The very full treat-

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Systematic Studies of the Problem of Causality, trans. O. T. Benfrey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956), xxiii-xxiv.

20. *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neuern Zeit,* 2 vols. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1906–1907).

21. *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neuern Zeit,* vol. 3, *Die Nachkantischen Systeme* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1920).

ment of Hegel's philosophy in this volume has a resonance with his use of Hegel as a source for the phenomenology of knowledge in the third volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* which was written in 1927 but published in 1929.[22] While in Sweden, Cassirer wrote a final, fourth volume of *The Problem of Knowledge,* treating developments since Hegel up to 1932 and expanding his discussion to the areas of biology and history.[23]

Three years after the appearance of the second volume of *The Problem of Knowledge,* Cassirer's first work of original philosophy, *Substance and Function* (1910), was published.[24] This contained a philosophy of science, but it was more than this, for it had the subtitle "Investigations Concerning the Fundamental Questions of the Critique of Knowledge [*Erkenntniskritik*]." The first chapter demonstrated that Aristotelian class logic based on a metaphysics of substance could not account for the way in which mathematically based concepts were employed in modern science.

Cassirer shows that substance-based logic must be replaced with a new theory of the concept, based on the idea of the functional order of a series. Cassirer's model was F(a,b,c . . .), in which *F* is the principle or law by which the series is constructed and the variables are the particulars, each of which is fixed in a determinate position within the series by the law of the series. The *F* can also stand as a variable in some other series, and thus an ever-expanding system of serial orders is conceivable in which

22. *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen,* vol. 3, *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1929).

23. *The Problem of Knowledge: Philosophy, Science, and History Since Hegel,* trans. William H. Woglom and Charles W. Hendel (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950).

24. *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity,* trans. William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey (Chicago: Open Court, 1923).

each variable in each series is completely determined, yet the system itself and the series within it have ultimately no set limits.

This model of the functional concept in which the universal element is held in an inseparable bond with the serial particular becomes the master key to Cassirer's later conceptions of the symbol itself and to his sense of a system of symbolic forms in which the whole of culture is ordered in terms of its own set of functional relations, harmoniously grasped and portrayed by philosophy. This conception of a system of symbolic forms does not appear in *Substance and Function,* nor does the concept of symbolic form itself, but Hermann Cohen, on reading this work, felt that Cassirer had departed from the Marburg neo-Kantian epistemology. He was dissuaded by friends from pursuing this view, but in retrospect Cohen was certainly right that Cassirer was moving in a new direction.

Cassirer had laid the groundwork for taking the "transcendental method" further than the elucidation of the principles of cognition and scientific thought to which Marburg neo-Kantianism was tied. In these same years Cassirer was following his practice of combining scholarly work and original philosophy by preparing his ten-volume edition of *Kant's Works* (1912), to which he later added a volume on *Kant's Life and Work* (1918).[25] This contains his highly original discussion of Kant's third *Critique,* in which he shows the connection between aesthetic and organic form that is crucial for his own conception of culture as a system of symbolic forms. In the literature on Kant, Cassirer's discussion of the third *Critique* remains the best work written on it to date.

25. *Immanuel Kants Werke,* 10 vols. (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1912); *Kant's Life and Thought,* trans. James Haden (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981).

Cassirer said that the entire conception of the philosophy of symbolic forms flashed before his mind in 1917 as he entered a streetcar in Berlin. This was while he held his first academic position at the University of Berlin (1906–1919), before he accepted his professorship at the University of Hamburg. He was already at work on what was to be his magnum opus when he arrived in Hamburg. There he encountered the Warburg Library, the extraordinary collection of books and materials assembled by Aby Warburg and organized according to a concept of culture nearly parallel to that of Cassirer. The library placed emphasis on myth as the basis of human culture and displayed through the order of its shelf-classifications the basic forms of symbolism upon which all culture rests.

Cassirer gave his first definition of symbolic form in an essay that appeared in one of the publications of the Warburg Library, "The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Formation of the Cultural Sciences" (1921–1922): "Under a 'symbolic form' should be understood each energy of spirit [*Geist*] through which a spiritual [*geistig*] content or meaning is connected with a concrete, sensory sign and is internally adapted to this sign."[26] A symbolic form, then, has as its internal structure a bond between a universal meaning and the particular sensory sign in which the meaning inheres. This parallels the two elements of the functional concept of *Substance and Function:* the principle of order of a series and the particular that is ordered by it. A symbol is at once inseparably "spiritual" (*geistig*) and "sensible" (*sinnlich*).

In the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1929),

26. "Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften," in *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956), 175.

Cassirer ties this to the idea of "symbolic pregnance" (*symbolische Prägnanz*), a term Cassirer takes from the "law of pregnance" of Gestalt psychology. There Cassirer says: "By symbolic pregnance we mean the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely presents."[27]

In the final chapter, titled "The Theory of Relativity and the Problem of Reality," of his *Einstein's Theory of Relativity Considered from the Epistemological Standpoint* (1921), Cassirer spoke of a system of symbolic forms in which theoretical as well as ethical, aesthetic, and religious understanding would be included. He says: "It is the task of a systematic philosophy, which extends far beyond the theory of knowledge, to free the idea of the world from this one-sidedness. It has to grasp the *whole system* of symbolic forms."[28]

The term "symbolic form" is Cassirer's own. It is the one term that is wholly characteristic of his philosophy. Its source is twofold. One source is in the field of aesthetics—an essay by the Hegelian aesthetician Friedrich Theodor Vischer, "Das Symbol," that appeared in a Festschrift for Eduard Zeller in 1887.[29] In this important and influential essay, Vischer uses the term *der Symbolbegriff* and similar formulations, but never does he precisely use *die symbolische Form.* Cassirer refers to Vischer in the same passage in the 1921–1922 essay quoted earlier, in which he first defines the term "symbolic form."

The other source is in the field of science, in the work of Heinrich Hertz. In presenting the concept of his philosophy of

27. *PSF,* 3: 202.

28. *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity,* 447.

29. Friedrich Theodor Vischer, "Das Symbol," in *Philosophische Aufsätze: Eduard Zeller, zu seinem fünfzigjährigen Doctor-Jubiläum gewidmet* (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1887), see esp. 169–73, 192–93.

symbolic forms in the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923), Cassirer says: "Mathematicians and physicists were first to gain a clear awareness of this symbolic character of their basic implements. This new ideal of knowledge to which this whole development points, was brilliantly formulated by Heinrich Hertz in the introduction to his *Principles of Mechanics.*"[30] Hertz understood that scientists do not grasp the object of their investigations in its immediacy but grasp the world by means of the system of their symbols.

If not by 1910, in *Substance and Function,* then certainly by the beginning of the 1920s Cassirer was well beyond the Marburg neo-Kantianism of Cohen, but throughout his career he always held Cohen in the highest regard. He had not abandoned the central principle that the Marburg school took from Kant, the "transcendental method." In his general introduction to his philosophy in the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* he states that in the philosophy of symbolic forms "the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture."[31] He sees Kant as having educed, through his transcendental method, the forms of science, ethical life, aesthetics, and organic natural forms. Through the medium of the symbol Cassirer intends to extend this approach to include myth, religion, art, and language, to show that these traditionally noncognitive forms which use symbols in different but fundamentally related ways are in fact forms of knowledge.

In *An Essay on Man* (1944), he reinforces the importance of art as a symbolic form by writing a chapter on it, and he adds history to his original list. In the preface to the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* he mentions the possibility of, but does not discuss, various symbolic forms of social life: economics

30. *PSF,* 1: 75.
31. *PSF,* 1: 80.

(*die Wirtschaft*), technology (*die Technik*), ethics (*die Sitte*), and law (*das Recht*).[32] Art, history, and these social forms presuppose the emergence in culture of science from the pretheoretical forms of myth, religion, and language. Art draws upon the symbols of myth and religion and appears in culture as a counterpart to science. History needs the power of art to re-create the sense of the past, but it depends on science to establish the validity of its data. In similar fashion, the social forms are essentially cognitive, although, like science, they presuppose the worlds of myth and language for an account of their origins.

All these forms depend on symbols, and the formations of experience they produce differ from one another within the structure of culture as a whole. Cassirer has found in the symbol, as the key to all human knowledge, the phenomenological presence of Kant's schema. In his doctrine of the schema Kant reaches only abstractly, through his transcendental analysis, the principle of a concrete bond of intuition and concept. Cassirer finds this present in the phenomenon of the symbol as the "observable" medium of all thought and culture.

In the logic of Cassirer's system, *Substance and Function* is the first volume of his conception of the philosophy of symbolic forms because in it Cassirer presents the symbolic form of science and theoretical knowledge. As mentioned above, volume 1 in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is *Language* (1923), volume 2 *Mythical Thought* (1925), and volume 3 is titled *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (1929). In this third volume Cassirer presents three functions of consciousness, which recapitulate, in reverse order of their publication, the three fundamental forms of the earlier works.

The expressive function (*die Ausdrucksfunktion*) of consciousness corresponds to myth. The representational function (*die*

32. *PSF*, 2: xv.

Darstellungsfunktion) of consciousness corresponds to language as the basis for the formation of the empirical world of common-sense class concepts. The significative function (*die reine Bedeutungsfunktion*) corresponds to science and theoretical thought, which brings up to date Cassirer's account of science in *Substance and Function.* The third volume presents the philosophy of symbolic forms as a phenomenological system.

At one point in this volume, Cassirer gives a demonstration of the fact that the perceptually given object for consciousness is never purely given. Its nature is formed by the power of the symbol. Cassirer asks the reader to consider a *Linienzug* or graph-like line drawing. He says that we may apprehend this line as a purely expressive object, as we grasp the tension in its shape, feel its motion, and so forth. Then we may shift perspective and apprehend it as having theoretical significance, as a mathematical object, a geometric figure showing certain proportions and relations.

We may pass on to seeing it as a mythical-magical form, in which it is a sign dividing a sacred from a profane sphere. We may apprehend it again as an aesthetic ornament, giving attention only to its artistic potentialities, a consideration of its visual qualities for their own sake.[33] This phenomenological experiment reaffirms Cassirer's original conception of the symbol as simultaneously *geistig* and *sinnlich,* and his later principle of symbolic pregnance. It also demonstrates what he states in *The Myth of the State* (1946), that "it is a common characteristic of all symbolic forms that they are applicable to any object whatsoever."[34]

Only the philosopher is in a position to see that all symbolic forms are variations of one another and that the truth of the nature of the object of knowledge is dependent on a coordina-

33. *PSF,* 3: 200–201.

34. *The Myth of the State,* 34.

tion of each with the others, so that they coalesce into a whole. This is Cassirer's version of Hegel's principle, "The true is the whole" (*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*). In order for Cassirer to arrive at the conception of symbolic forms as a totality, he adds this speculative principle of Hegel to his transcendental analysis of the various areas of culture. His primary difficulty with the Hegelian standpoint is its propensity to resolve all other forms into that of logic. Cassirer regards Hegel as engaging in this type of reduction in the system of categories in his *Science of Logic.*

Cassirer's attachment to Hegel is based on his interest in *The Phenomenology of Spirit.* In the preface to *The Phenomenology of Knowledge,* the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* Cassirer says that he is using the term "phenomenology" in Hegel's sense, not in the modern (Husserlian) sense.[35] In the preface to the second volume, on myth, he says, like Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* that he wishes to offer the individual a ladder by which to ascend from the most rudimentary to higher forms of consciousness. He says Hegel begins at the level of the things of the empirical world. He wishes to take the ladder one step lower, and to begin with myth.[36]

In these prefaces and in other places, such as the first sentence of his draft for the introduction to *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms,* where he says: "We start with the concept of the whole: the whole is the true (Hegel)," Cassirer casts his project in its broadest outlines in Hegelian terms.[37] He conceives all the symbolic forms as standing in dialectical relation to one another and as developing always through dialectical oppositions, beginning in myth.

Cassirer's dialectical oppositions remain free-floating. He is

35. *PSF,* 3: xiv.
36. *PSF,* 2: xiv; see also *PSF,* 3: xv.
37. *PSF,* 4: 193.

unwilling to order the symbolic forms into a metaphysical logic of categories. Cassirer's method of philosophizing is that of "systematic review" (*systematischer Rückblick*) or "systematic overview" (*systematischer Überblick*), in which, given the principle that the true is the whole, taken from Hegel, and the principle of the transcendental, taken from Kant, he can enter into any particular content of culture. Taking the symbol as the medium of this particular, he can begin to give a systematic account of the meaning of the particular, which includes its relation to the totality of symbolic forms.

Cassirer's dialectic is a functional dialectic. All contents of consciousness are products of the symbol. They fall within the various symbolic forms that characterize human culture. The symbolic forms exist in opposition to one another. Human culture is the totality of these oppositions. The task of philosophy in relation to culture is to elucidate these oppositions, showing in its account of them both the divisions within and the overall harmony of human culture.

Each symbolic form develops according to a dialectic of its own mode of symbolism from its beginnings in myth. Each symbolic form, like human culture as a whole, originates in forms of mythic expression. Cassirer gives an extended example of this sense of dialectical development of phases within a symbolic form at the end of the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* where he outlines the dialectical stages through which myth passes to become religion. In the first volume he gives an account of the phases of the development of language. Within culture the internal dialectical development of any symbolic form involves its confrontation with the presence of other symbolic forms. These two senses of dialectical opposition—that among symbolic forms and that among the phases of the internal development of each—are interlocked.

Although Cassirer subscribes to Hegel's principle of whole-

ness, he does not adhere to the traditional sense of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*—that there is a progressive synthesis in which the forms of consciousness cancel and transcend one another as they merge into the whole. Cassirer claims that there are often sharp contrasts and oppositions within culture that do not clearly resolve themselves into a higher synthesis, even though culture itself is a whole. Hegel's dialectic is a dialectic of the Absolute. Hegel's aim is to produce a total account that comprehends all moments of experience in a progression. The Absolute is the standpoint of the whole that emerges when this progression is articulated. It is a single story, determinate in all its parts.

Cassirer's dialectic does not proceed from the Hegelian perspective of the Absolute. Cassirer's dialectical account of culture begins in medias res and is committed to the aim of "systematic review." Cassirer understands the symbol as internally dialectical, comprising at once a particular content and a universal meaning, like Hegel's *Begriff* ("concrete universal"). Cassirer can begin with any particular content of culture and articulate its dialectical relationships with other symbolic forms in a discussion that expands in various directions. In principle, from this functional perspective the account can be taken as far as the whole. But the account does not attempt to achieve comprehension of a total progression of forms in order to illuminate the oppositions in question. Oppositions are explained in terms of themselves, not through their relation to the Absolute.

Cassirer wrote the first part of his *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* (1927) at the time he was writing the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.* He sees spirit (*Geist*) and life (*Leben*) as dialectically related, such that these principles of reality are in dynamic tension with each other: life continually transforming itself into spirit and spirit constantly renewing itself in the immediacy of life. The relationship of spirit and life parallels that of the functional bond that is inherent in the sym-

bol—the universal meanings achieved by spirit are attained by its mediations of life. Life is the immediate particularity that spirit requires. From the nature of the symbolic form itself Cassirer generates a metaphysics of the reality that underlies the human.

In a fragment written between 1921 and 1927 that has come to light with Cassirer's manuscripts on *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* and is discussed by Bayer in the commentary that follows, Cassirer unequivocally states that philosophy is not in itself a symbolic form. This does not mean that philosophical thought dispenses with symbols, for it uses them, especially in language. Philosophical thought does not have symbolic form of its own, separate from other symbolic forms. Philosophy is thought that can grasp the symbolic forms as a totality, while, in Hegel's terms, showing each to have its own determinate identity and "inner form." Cassirer says: "It is characteristic of philosophical knowledge as the 'self-knowledge of reason' that it does not create a principally new symbol form, it does not found in this sense a new creative modality—but it grasps the entire modalities as that which they are: as characteristic symbolic forms." Thus, Cassirer says, "philosophy is both criticism [Kant] and the fulfillment [Hegel] of the symbolic forms."[38]

The Phenomenology of the Philosophic Spirit

In the preface to *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), Cassirer says that this work, together with *The Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (1927), and *The Platonic Renaissance in England* (1927),[39] constitute a "phenomenology of the

38. *PSF,* 4: 226. See also Chap. 2 in this book.

39. *The Platonic Renaissance in England,* trans. James P. Pettegrove (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1953).

philosophic spirit" (*Phänomenologie des philosophischen Geistes*), playing on the title of the work of Hegel to which he is most attracted.[40] The fragment mentioned earlier, part of Cassirer's metaphysical writings, is the only place in his corpus where Cassirer truly makes clear that philosophy is not a symbolic form. Even if philosophy is not a separate symbolic form having independent access to the object, Cassirer still has the problem of saying what philosophy is. Philosophy is certainly a part of spirit. How are we to understand philosophy as such a phenomenon?

In his trilogy on the philosophic spirit, Cassirer looks at modern philosophy historically, as it develops itself from the Renaissance forward as a self-conscious activity, independent of its ties with religion and theology in the medieval world. Cassirer regards the origins of philosophical idealism as lying with the Greeks, specifically with Plato's conception of the idea as form. He regards self-knowledge as the true aim of philosophical reasoning, which he considers as having originated with the Greeks, specifically with Socrates. These classical origins needed to be rediscovered in the Renaissance in order for philosophy to be reborn as a self-confident, self-conscious enterprise. Cassirer attempts historically to trace this philosophic spirit as it develops from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.

He begins with Nicholas of Cusa, as he did in the first volume of *The Problem of Knowledge* in 1906, but now his question is not the development of the critical problem of knowledge; it is to understand philosophy as a development of spirit. This approach to the same general development of modern philosophy, presented in Kantian terms in the early volumes of *The Problem of Knowledge,* here assumes a distinctly Hegelian tenor. Here the problem is what philosophy itself is, as a part of culture. Cassirer in this trilogy regards the Platonic renaissance in En-

40. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment,* vi.

gland as created in the thought of the Cambridge Platonists—Shaftesbury and others—as a missing link in the revival of classical humanism. Typical of humanist philosophy generally, none of the thinkers in this phenomenology of the philosophic spirit are system-builders in the traditional sense. They force us to understand each of them as particular thinkers who are part of the universal spirit of their age.

In approaching the thinker in relation to the age, Cassirer is employing the logic of culture-concepts (*die Kulturbegriffe*) that he explains in his later work *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* (1942).[41] With nature-concepts (*die Naturbegriffe*), as opposed to culture-concepts, a specific principle can be employed to determine their object. If we wish to determine whether a specific metal is gold we can do so unambiguously, for, as Cassirer says, "gold" *means only* what possesses a certain specific weight, a specific electrical conductivity, a specific coefficient of expansion, and so on, and has a specific place on a table of metals. But Cassirer says that when we turn to form- and style-concepts in the humanities or cultural sciences (*die Kulturwissenschaften*), we lose this power of specific determination.

In the cultural sciences the particular can be coordinated with the universal, but the particular cannot be subordinated to the universal in the way it can be in the natural sciences. Cassirer says that when we characterize Leonardo da Vinci and Aretino, Ficino and Machiavelli, Michelangelo and Cesare Borgia as "men of the Renaissance" we can coordinate their particular properties only by means of the universal; we cannot assign to each a specific determinate meaning. We cannot subsume their individual oppositions under some common principle, but the concept does allow us to grasp an ideal connection among them

41. *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies,* trans. S. G. Lofts (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

such that each of these figures can be seen as contributing to the spirit (*Geist*) of the Renaissance. Cassirer employs such culture-concepts in his treatment of the Enlightenment, in which the philosophers he discusses are, each in his own way, coordinated with the spirit of the age.

This holistic approach in which philosophy, understood in cultural, not simply logical, terms, is also found in Cassirer's later studies of individual philosophers, such as *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (1932), *Descartes: Doctrine, Personality, and Influence* (1939), and his posthumous *Rousseau, Kant, and Goethe* (1945).[42] Here, his approach, different from that of the early volumes of *The Problem of Knowledge,* is to come to grips with the philosopher in light of the interrelationships of his life, work, and times. Philosophy thus understands itself to be part of the human spirit. There is a culture of philosophy that exists within and is made possible by the wider processes of human culture.

This is not to reduce philosophy to its history. In *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer is firm on the point that philosophy is above all else the pursuit of truth. The pursuit of truth, he says, is what distinguishes the philosopher from the sophist.[43] Philosophies once brought alive by the palingenesis of the history of philosophy must be critically considered in terms of their truth. Cassirer strongly engages in this critical process in his attack on the copy theory of knowledge in volume 1 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* in his evaluation of types of philosophies of life and philosophies of spirit in *The Metaphysics of Symbolic*

42. *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* trans. Peter Gay (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); *Descartes: Lehre-Persönlichkeit-Wirkung* (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1939); *Rousseau, Kant, and Goethe,* trans. James Gutmann, Paul Oscar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1945).

43. *PSF,* 4: 187.

Forms, and in his attack in *The Myth of the State* on Heidegger's and Spengler's lack of a conception of freedom.

Philosophy, for Cassirer, is more than the history of philosophy, and philosophy is also more than an adjunct to science. Unlike the positivists, Cassirer regards philosophy as more than a clarification of the logic of the sciences. For Cassirer, philosophy is one of the *Kulturwissenschaften;* like them, philosophy employs culture-concepts to understand its own spirit, to understand itself as part of culture, and to understand culture itself. Cassirer does not explicitly state a theory of concept formation for philosophical reasoning, but philosophic concepts would seem to be arrived at through a transformation of culture-concepts in which particulars are illuminated but not formally determined by thought.

The aim of philosophy is not to attach itself to a specific symbolic form but to understand human culture and the nature of the human as such. The philosopher must coordinate all the symbolic forms under the universal of the human being. What guides philosophical reasoning in this process is a sense of organic form, a sense of the whole as something ordered within itself. Cassirer's source for this is Hegel, to an extent, and Vico, whom Cassirer held throughout his career to be the founder of the philosophy of the *Geistes-* or *Kulturwissenschaften*.[44]

But more than these, Cassirer's inspiration is Goethe. Cassirer's various writings on Goethe occupy a place in the field of Goethe scholarship in their own right. They run from "Goethe's Pandora" (1918), early in his career, through his *Goethe and the Historical World* (1932) to its very end, with an essay on "Thomas

44. Cassirer makes this claim from his earliest work, *Leibniz' System* (1902), to his last works. The references to Vico throughout Cassirer's writings are traced out in my "Vico's Influence on Cassirer," *New Vico Studies* 3 (1985): 105–11.

Manns Goethebild" (1945).[45] Goethe's lively sense of nature and poetic form was for Cassirer an embodiment of the aesthetic and organic natural forms with which Kant struggled in the third *Critique.*

It is to Goethe that Cassirer turns for the basic formulations of his conception of the three basis phenomena in *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms,* and it is Goethe whom Cassirer quotes to Heidegger at Davos in answering questions about the nature of human freedom. It is Goethe who allows Cassirer to stand between the poles of Kant and Hegel, between the restrictions of critical philosophy and the excesses he perceives in speculative logic. For Cassirer, Goethe is not only a source of the conception of organic form; he is also the poet of the humane spirit, reminding us of what culture is and can be.

The Philosophy of Human Culture

If Goethe was Cassirer's ideal of the humane spirit of the cultural thinker, Albert Schweitzer was Cassirer's example of the spirit of the ethical thinker—of the true *Ethiker.* In his inaugural lecture, at the assumption of his professorship at the University of Göteborg in Sweden in 1935, Cassirer's topic was "The Concept of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem."[46] Cassirer put this in ethical terms. He began by quoting Goethe's view of the two types of philosophy represented by Plato and Aristotle—that Plato relates himself to the world as a blessed spirit that

45. "Goethes Pandora," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 13 (1918): 113–34; *Goethe und die geschichtliche Welt: Drei Aufsätze* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1932); "Thomas Manns Goethebild: Eine Studie über Lotte in Weimar," *Germanic Review* 20 (1945): 166–94.

46. "The Concept of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 49–63.

penetrates it to its depths but is here to stay only for a while. Plato seeks heaven like an obelisk, like a pointed flame, whereas Aristotle is the master builder who piles up materials from all sides, pyramid fashion, and ascends to the top. Goethe says it is as though these two figures divide humanity between them, and their two properties are not easily reconcilable.

From there, Cassirer moves to Kant's distinctions between two kinds of philosophy—one is the Scholastic conception of philosophy and the other is the conception of philosophy as related to the world. Cassirer holds himself responsible along with others for having pursued the former to the detriment of the latter. Cassirer is speaking as an exile in the midst of the destruction of the ideals of Western culture at the hands of the Nazis.

Cassirer quotes Schweitzer, saying that philosophy as such is not responsible for the disintegration and crumbling of "our spiritual and ethical ideals of culture." But, as Schweitzer explains, "Philosophy is to be blamed for our world in that it did not admit the fact." Every effort should have been made, led by philosophy, to direct our attention to the disintegration of culture. "But in the hour of peril," Schweitzer says, "the watchman slept, who should have kept watch over us. So it happened that we did not struggle for our culture." Cassirer says, "I believe that all of us who have worked in the area of theoretical philosophy in the last decades deserve in a certain sense this reproach of Schweitzer; I do not exclude myself and I do not absolve myself."[47]

As World War II took shape, Cassirer began to bring out the normative dimension of his philosophy of symbolic forms. But his earlier analyzing of culture had never been wholly without normative direction. His response to the conditions of World

47. Ibid., 60.

War I was *Freedom and Form* (1916), which from one point of view appears to be a work on aesthetics, but as the thrust of the subtitle, "Studies of German Cultural History [*Geistesgeschichte*]," indicates, he intended it to serve as a reminder of the connection between freedom and culture.[48] This is the same theme Cassirer attempts to emphasize in his confrontation with Heidegger a decade after the war at their meeting at Davos—that culture is the work of human freedom.

In their confrontation at Davos, Heidegger stated that for him, freedom or "liberation" is "to become free for the finitude of existence and to enter into the *Geworfenheit* (being thrown into existence)." And he goes on to say, "I believe what I call *Dasein* (existence) is not translatable into Cassirer's vocabulary."[49] As Heidegger puts it, freedom cannot be a project of *Geist* in Cassirer's sense. In explaining his position, Cassirer quoted from Goethe, arguing that freedom is an ideal for human beings and can be understood as the purpose of all the finite configurations of culture that, when traversed, point us toward the infinite. For Heidegger, freedom requires a "breakthrough," an *Einbruch,* which is not necessary to the nature of human beings but is wholly contingent (*zufällig*).

Cassirer was convinced that Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* offered no ethics. He also was convinced that the emotivist ethics deriving from modern positivism was unacceptable. In Sweden he wrote a critical work on the views of an exponent of this position, Axel Hägerström (1939).[50] To reduce ethical judg-

48. *Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1916).

49. *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 40.

50. *Axel Hägerström: Eine Studie zur schwedischen Philosophie der Gegenwart,* Göteborgs Högskolas Arsskrift, vol. 45 (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1939).

ments to subjective states of approbation or disapprobation is to ignore the sense in which values are objectively present in culture and the sense in which ethical ideals exert a real force in human affairs.

When Cassirer arrived in the United States in 1941, friends and colleagues began to press him to translate *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* into English so that his philosophy of culture would be available to an American audience. They also expressed the wish that he would apply his philosophy to an understanding of politics and the events of the twentieth century. These urgings led him to write two books: *An Essay on Man* (1944) and *The Myth of the State* (1946), which was left in manuscript at his death. Cassirer decided not to put the three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* into English but instead to summarize, recast, and update his views in a new form. He now presented his conception of symbolic forms not as an expansion and revision of the critical problem of knowledge but as a philosophical anthropology, using Pope's title *An Essay on Man* with the subtitle, "An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture."

A normative tension runs through his essay on man. Culture is presented as an activity of self-knowledge, the result of the ability to connect reason and imagination with human freedom. Human beings are to be understood through an examination of the whole cycle of human cultural activity, rather than through a reduction of their being to any one form of activity. Cassirer says there is a "crisis in man's knowledge of himself," in that human nature is so fragmented that human beings cannot confront the human as a whole in the mirror of culture. Instead we find human beings reduced to one aspect of the human, to Nietzsche's will to power, to Freud's sexual instinct, to Marx's economic instinct. Theologians, scientists, politicians, sociologists, biologists, psychologists, ethnologists—all approach the

problem from their own viewpoint. We have no common context from which to understand human nature.

Cassirer transforms the Aristotelian definition of man as *animal rationale* into man as *animal symbolicum*.[51] The symbol not only provides the universal medium of human knowledge; it provides the moral medium for human nature understood as the system of cultural activity in which man can act. Cassirer now connects his conception of the philosophic spirit with the classical project of self-knowledge. Cassirer opens *An Essay on Man* with the sentence: "That self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry appears to be generally acknowledged."[52]

Cassirer employs the biological theories of Jakob von Uexküll to explain the human organism that underlies culture. Uexküll claims that each organism is a functional circle in which there are two poles—a reactor system and an effector system. Each organism is surrounded by its own environment, its own *Umwelt.* Thus the world of the sea urchin is full of "sea urchin things" and the world of the fly is full of "fly things." In the human organism, Cassirer says, there is a third and mediating factor—a symbol system such that the world of the human is always full of "symbolic things."

The power of the symbol to transform itself into systems of symbols whose meanings self-consciously reside in other symbols involves human freedom to create ideals. The ideal frees human beings from the immediacy of their existence and allows life to take on moral direction. The duty of philosophy is to present the harmony of all the symbolic forms of culture, to counter the tendency within any symbolic form to dominate the others. This is a moral ideal for philosophy, not simply a task of dialectical logic. Cassirer's emphasis on this need for harmony

51. *Essay on Man,* 26.
52. Ibid., 1.

in *An Essay on Man* is a version of Schweitzer's metaphor of philosophy as the watchman.

In this same period Cassirer wrote "Albert Schweitzer as Critic of Nineteenth-Century Ethics," which appeared posthumously in 1946.[53] Schweitzer remained Cassirer's inspiration as an ethicist of culture. In this essay, Cassirer uses Schweitzer's views to oppose the Hegelian view that philosophy is its "time apprehended in thoughts," that philosophy has only a passive role in culture. Cassirer thus opposes the view that philosophy "always comes too late" to events.

In concluding this essay, Cassirer says that philosophy "only comes too late when it begins to forget its principal duty, when it yields to the pressure of external forces instead of using its own powers and confiding in these powers." Schweitzer stands for the "courage of truth" as well as the "enjoyment of knowledge." The ideals of harmony and self-knowledge that are crucial to the "courage of truth" can be held up by philosophy against the disintegration of culture. "But to this end," Cassirer says, "philosophy must first reconstruct and regenerate itself. It must recognize its fundamental duties before it can regain its place in modern cultural life."[54]

Until the appearance of *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms,* the discussion of the human organism in *An Essay on Man* was all that was known of Cassirer's grounding of his conception of culture in a doctrine of the human. The second part of *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms,* as mentioned, is the essay "Basis Phenomena," which he wrote about 1940, in Sweden. In it Cassirer speaks of Uexküll's biology of the organism but does not

53. "Albert Schweitzer as Critic of Nineteenth-Century Ethics," in *The Albert Schweitzer Jubilee Book,* ed. A. A. Roback (Cambridge, Mass.: Sci-Art Publishers, 1946), 241–57.

54. Ibid., 256–57.

carry his discussion as far as his definition of man as *animal symbolicum*.

The three basis phenomena of the I, action, and the work (*das Ich-Phänomen, das Wirkens-Phänomen, das Werk-Phänomen*), as explained in Bayer's commentary, are absolutes of the human world for Cassirer. Cassirer says we either accept these phenomena or we do not; we "cannot give any further 'explanation' and cannot want to."[55] The basis phenomena appear to be analogous or at least partially analogous to his later formulation of Uexküll's biology: the reactor system to the I, action to the effector system, and, most clearly, the symbolic system to the phenomenon of the work. The work (*das Werk*) is not labor or toil but work in the sense of a cultural product, the result of artistic, ethical, scientific, or other such activity.

Cassirer ends his phenomenological presentation of his metaphysics with the connection of the work to culture and culture to the Socratic project of self-knowledge. As Bayer brings out in her commentary, this is one of Cassirer's strongest statements of the Socratic standpoint of his philosophy. Cassirer says: "This call now means: know your *work* and know 'yourself' *in* your work; know what you do, so you can do what you know. . . . The discovery of this imperative of the work—its autochthonic and autonomous sense, its 'binding character'—that is Socrates' real deed."[56] Cassirer sees the I and the action (as driven by the will) as merging in the work, and the phenomenon of work as culminating in the self as it makes a knowledge of itself. He regards Socrates as the image of philosophy in which the theoretical and the moral are not separable. Socrates at one moment appears to be the pure thinker and at another is the presence of the moral spirit.

55. *PSF,* 4: 142.

56. *PSF,* 4: 186. See the discussion of Socrates in Chap. 4 of this book.

The Myth of the State remains the final moment of Cassirer's philosophy, and, like *An Essay on Man,* it is both a theoretical and a moral work. Unlike any other major contemporary philosopher, Cassirer was able to grasp the nature of the Nazis' use of myth to create a politics of the modern state, because he had at his disposal a complete analysis of myth as the original symbolic form of human culture. This theory of myth, developed as a response to problems in the theory of knowledge, has now become the key for the philosophical understanding of the role of myth in twentieth-century politics. Cassirer saw that the problem of modern politics was not the Nazi state itself. The larger problem is the connection of the form of mythical thought with the techniques of modern politics that has taken place in the twentieth-century state.

The techniques of mass communication that would today be called the media are the basis of modern political power, and that power is not the vehicle for a rational understanding of issues, ideas, and facts. Through such techniques the modern politician uses the thought form of the myth to influence the emotions and feelings of the masses, which respond above all to the power of the image. Cassirer says: "We no longer observe the flight of birds nor do we inspect the entrails of slain animals. . . . But if our methods have changed the thing itself has by no means vanished. Our modern politicians know very well that great masses are much more easily moved by the force of imagination than by sheer physical force." The politician, Cassirer says, becomes a sort of public fortune-teller. Thus, "the most improbable or even impossible promises are made; the millennium is predicted over and over again."[57]

In regard to Nazism as a particular phenomenon of the twentieth century, Cassirer was able by means of this theory of myth

57. *The Myth of the State,* 289.

to explain the reasons for the attack on the Jews. In an article for *Contemporary Jewish Record* (1944), Cassirer says that "in order to understand the campaign against Judaism launched by the leaders of the New Germany it is not enough to consider the reasons usually given." Cassirer asks why Hitler, in his last address, marking the eleventh anniversary of his regime, abandons the theme of the conquest of the world by the German race; he is obsessed with only one thing—the threat posed by the Jews. When no Jew could breathe in Germany, what worries Hitler "is not the future destiny of Germany, but the 'triumph' of the Jews."[58]

Cassirer's explanation for why the Jews became the particular scapegoat of Nazi Germany is one that could not even have been envisaged in the absence of his philosophy of culture. In the development of Western culture it is the Jews that first confront the system of totem and taboo within mythical life. In *An Essay on Man* Cassirer describes how the Hebrew prophets are the bringers of the new sense of ethical life, of individual responsibility, and of self-conscious ethical ideals that break the circle of primitive society based on totem and taboo. The Jews remain the bearers of the ethical spirit that threatens the mythical reliance on the power of the image to hold consciousness in the immediacy of the world and to inhibit the power of thought. Nazism became a reenactment of the original ancient struggle between the mythical and the ethical-religious consciousness at the beginning of culture.

In a lecture given at Princeton University in 1945, Cassirer asked: "What can *philosophy* do in this struggle against the political myths?" He said: "Myth cannot be overcome by logical and rational arguments." Cassirer says that if philosophy cannot reform the political myth directly, it "can make us under-

58. *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 239–41.

stand the adversary"—understand the strength of the myth. "To all of us it has become clear that we have greatly underrated the strength of the political myths. We should not repeat this error."[59]

For Cassirer, philosophy has the ultimate duty as the watchman called for by Schweitzer. In Cassirer's view, this duty is not one that philosophy can choose either to assume or not to assume. It is a duty that is required of philosophy by human culture, by that which originally makes philosophy itself possible. This duty cannot be accomplished simply as an act of good will; it requires a full philosophy of culture, a theoretical knowledge of the nature of the human, and a comprehension of the metaphysics upon which the human world rests.

59. "The Technique of Our Modern Political Myths," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 266.

1

The Early Texts

Life and Spirit

1

Life and Spirit

All soul has charge of all that is inanimate, and traverses the whole universe, though in ever-changing forms.
—Plato, *Phaedrus*

The central distinction of Cassirer's metaphysics is between life (*Leben*) and spirit (*Geist*). Cassirer understands all metaphysical systems of the twentieth century as tending in one or the other of these two directions. A full understanding of what life and spirit mean for Cassirer requires not only the definition of the two concepts but also an understanding of their connections with the key ideas of his philosophy of culture, especially his conceptions of dialectic and symbolic form. Cassirer intends his metaphysics of symbolic forms to pass between the horns of the dilemma of life and spirit. To accomplish this, he wishes to show that each of these attains its reality through the transformation of the other.

Definition of Life

Life is a principle of unity that is organic, natural, dialectical, subjective, vital, biological, and functional. It possesses features that sharply distinguish it from the principle of spirit. Life is an undivided, unified view of the world experienced by organisms in nature. These organisms see the world as a whole at each moment. Cassirer calls life "an undifferentiated unity, the unity of the 'natural world-picture' " (5; 5).[1] The forms of culture are dif-

1. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic*

ferentiated, but the features of life are not. Life is a principle of union: "Taken in itself it is a whole and closed" (6; 6); it is the "final point of identity" (225; 264) beyond which we cannot go.

The unity of life makes life the most fundamental of principles. As a unity, life is more fundamental than its productions. Cassirer says that life "presents itself to us, so to speak, as a uniform and simple beam of light, which has not yet been refracted and dispersed by different mediums of meaning" (5; 6). To define itself, spirit requires various forms of meaning; this multiplicity stands in contrast to the sense of unity that typifies life.

Life is not a simple unity, because its unity draws together the diversity present in spirit. These differences are preserved in its unity. Life is "the primordial fact," whose "dispersion in a multitude of different directions is quite essential—and that precisely is the 'primary phenomenon' of Life itself, that it asserts its deep unshakable unity in this divergency" (225; 263). Life, as a principle of unity, must unify.

Life is characterized by movement and change. Life is inherently dialectical. Cultural forms of spirit also spring dialectically from life and resolve themselves back into life. That the differences between cultural forms of spirit are resolved in life's unity does not stop the dialectic; instead, "it pushes it back further into the concept of life itself" (8; 7). Life is dependent on its dialectical movement, its "creation of ever new forms," and its "destruction" of them (226; 264). Life itself is the unity of these movements.

Forms, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen,* ed. John Michael Krois, vol. 1 of Ernst Cassirer, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte,* ed. John Michael Krois and Oswald Schwemmer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995). Page numbers in the American edition are given first, followed by those in the German edition.

Life is also described by Cassirer as subjectivity, and the unity of life is called "the focal point of subjectivity" (8; 7). Subjectivity is experience composed of nonenduring qualities, instead of " 'things' with enduring 'characteristics' " (65; 63). Without an empirical sense of objects, the self, and others, only fleeting experience can occur. Animals make distinctions, but they cannot add to or change the dimensions of a situation. Their "subjectivity" does not have the ability to move between possible interpretations of experience, and it lacks the power to approach the experience of nature in lawlike fashion. An animal does not organize its world by making shared, nontemporal interpretations of it. Subjectivity is the wholly individual, closed experience of the world. Life is subjective experience that both opposes and grounds the divergent, objective formations of spirit.

This subjective experience of life is the experience of fate. No alternate explanation of events is available for the creature that cannot move between interpretations, between possibilities for given, stable occurrences. Cassirer says, "Life as such is self-imprisoned," not free.[2] Life moves according to fate. Life is movement without conscious choice; choice requires the consciousness of spirit. In the realm of nature, instinct does not provide organisms, whether as individuals or as a species, with true options for action. The outcome of natural events is fated or determined by instinct, not by choice (111; 109).

Cassirer rejects Georg Simmel's spatialized, abstract, and absolute conception of life. Life for Simmel is "some absolute beyond all mediation" (14; 13). If life were an absolute in Simmel's sense, its dialectical movements, which Cassirer claims

2. " 'Spirit' and 'Life' in Contemporary Philosophy," trans. Robert Walter Bretall and Paul Arthur Schilpp, in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer,* ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Evanston, Ill.: Library of Living Philosophers, 1949), 876. Hereinafter cited as "S & L."

must occur, could not occur. Life is not a rigid pole of being in a spatial reality. For Cassirer, life is functional; life "ever *exists* only insofar as it continually *recreates* itself."[3]

Cassirer also rejects the "organological" view of life, as developed by the Romantics, and the philosophy of history of Oswald Spengler. According to the organological view, the temporal and fleeting features of life pervade not only nature but culture. In this view, cultural forms are essentially an aspect of life. Spengler regards culture as having no independent stability outside its temporal process; the "wilting and decay" of cultural structures is a result of culture's existence as a feature of life (105; 102–3). For Cassirer, life and spirit are different in kind, yet they stand in a necessary relation to each other. The features of life, such as immediacy, subjectivity, fate, and pure becoming, are not the features of spirit. Life is "the circle of merely *organic* creativity."[4] The experience of life is the experience of organisms in nature; nature and culture are not identical processes.

Definition of Spirit

Spirit is the specifically human principle that grounds Cassirer's philosophy of culture.[5] Spirit is also a principle of unity, but one that is cultural, intellectual, dialectical, objective, and functional. Spirit cannot be defined in and of itself; it can be defined

3. "S & L," 870.

4. "S & L," 875.

5. In the American edition of *PSF,* 4, *Geist* is most often rendered as "geist" used as an English word (see *PSF,* 4: x, n. 6), but in some instances it is translated as "intelligence," "mind," "intellect," or "culture." Throughout this commentary, "spirit" is used as the English equivalent for *Geist.* All quotations from the translation of *PSF,* 4, in which *Geist* appears in the original, are amended to read "spirit" (adj. *geistig,* "spiritual").

only in relation and contrast to life. The definition of spirit also requires that it be understood in terms of the symbolic forms that make up its internal structure. As a principle of unity, spirit is not mainly theoretical or mainly practical; it is the unifying principle of all spiritual formations. Cassirer says that spirit is "the central point of unity for all varieties and directions of the [spiritual] giving of form" (60; 58) and that it is "the true unity" of symbolic formation (225; 263).

Plurality and difference between forms is preserved by spirit; no leveling or blending of these differences occurs. Spirit would have nothing to unify if there were no varieties of activity: "The unity of spirit is to be found only in the plurality of symbolic forms" (225; 263). Spirit has the tendency at once to unify and to diversify. Cassirer says that " 'spirit' " is the "transpersonal 'sphere of meaning' " (218; 237). Both spirit and life are described as circular functions. Life is a "circle of action," as described by the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, in which biological organisms act and react in their environments; spirit is a "circle of vision," in which spiritual beings recognize difference, interpret situations, and give meaning to events (76; 74).

Spirit is culture. Cassirer says "all 'culture,' the entire development of 'spirit,' leads away in fact from mere 'life' " (230; 268). The primary activity of spirit is a movement away from life; the first activity of culture is to fix sensation within the flux of life and from this to begin to form a world of objects. Spirit is specifically human. It is connected with " 'consciousness' " in the human being and develops through the activity of symbolic formation (55; 53).

This consciousness arises when the human being is not merely a part of the world but also begins to express and represent the world. Expression and representation depend on symbolic formation and cultural configurations: "Through them [the symbolic forms], along with the objective configurations of culture,

that characteristic mode of conscious awareness is achieved that is found in mankind" (61; 60). Culture is the human world achieved by spirit through conscious activity. Consciousness and culture are parallel developments within spirit (231; 269).

Another way of describing spirit is as intellect (*Intellekt*). Spirit contains all intellectual possibilities, it is the source for all intellectual acts. The quest of the intellect for certainty can be conducted only within spirit. Cassirer says that the " 'Archimedean point' of certitude that we are seeking can never be given to us from the outside of it"; the source of ideas lies inside the intellect (50; 47). The intellect and all its ideas, so to speak, lie within spirit.

The intellectual or spiritual world goes beyond the world of space and time, the boundaries for the life of the human being. The human being escapes the limits of perception and action through spirit, and "so man comes to share in a new heaven and earth, in an 'intelligible cosmos' " (111; 109). This "intelligible cosmos" is possible through the power of the symbol present in spirit. Cassirer says, "The world of spirit is no more 'immanent' within the world of 'life' than it is 'transcendent' of it; it remains as little caught up 'in' it as it raises itself 'above' it. This twofold nature of 'inside' and 'outside' or of 'above' and 'below' is itself not something that is already there and given. It is one of many spiritual aspects; it is only there as the 'viewpoint' of the spirit" (61; 59).

Spirit as intellect is specifically human, different from both animal life and the divine. Human beings are able, through the functioning of spirit, to interpret the world through the concept of 'thing.' The particularly human intellect thinks in terms of the thing, and this manner of thinking separates human beings from both animal life and the divine. Cassirer says, "To be precise: the 'thing' is the specifically *human* category. It does not apply either in the perceptual world of animals or for an *intellec-*

tus archetypus. Animal consciousness stands *beneath* the category of the thing, the divine stands above it" (212; 230).

Cassirer distinguishes human from animal mentality using the biology of Uexküll, but it is unclear in general what Cassirer means by the divine. In all other discussions of the divine, Cassirer considers it in terms of the symbolic form of religion and limits its concept to the religious phase of thought (91; 89). In the passage just quoted, the divine is a principle of intellectual perfection.

Another distinguishing feature of spirit is the ability to make value judgments. All values originate, develop, change, and are preserved in spirit. Both negative and positive judgments affirm spirit, because judging is itself an act, an actual directedness of mind: "Even if the entire sphere of the spirit were conceived as something negative, even if all its activities were denied and rejected, the mere assigning of this negative meaning is itself a new act that holds us firmly in the sphere of spirit that we had hoped to flee" (32–33; 31).

This ability to judge is one of the most significant aspects of spirit. Spirit is able to judge itself because it is able to look at itself; life cannot look at itself. In spirit, "and herein lies perhaps its true depth and its final mystery," all evaluation of action occurs (33; 32). If life and spirit are to be judged, only spirit can judge: spirit is "always both assailant and defendant, plaintiff and judge in one."[6] Spirit is the only process able to judge itself.

Spirit's capacity to judge depends on its own internal dialectical movement. To judge and choose, spirit must be able to reflect, to turn against itself and see its various possibilities. Cassirer says, "This turnabout, this 'reflection,' entails no break within spirit itself; rather, it is the form in which it proves itself and reconfirms itself, something that is characteristic of and

6. "S & L," 876.

typical of it alone" (33; 32). This "being two-in-one" is the dialectic of spirit (33; 32). Life, in contrast, cannot reflect or choose, because it does not have this kind of dialectical ability, the ability to recapitulate itself in new ways.

The dialectical process of spirit is apparent in the mediacy of the symbolic forms. The forms are mediated by spirit, and "only by virtue of this mediacy, in the creation and destruction of these forms (dialectical process . . .), can spirit come to possess and know itself" (228; 267). Each symbolic form is a mediator of spirit and life, whereas all symbolic forms are mediated through spirit's dialectical activity. In this activity, spirit comes to know all its forms and all its possibilities; it comes to know itself.

This dialectical movement of spirit is a process of doubling up. Cassirer says: "It is through this twofold movement [*Doppelrichtung*], from the inside out and back again, through this ebb and flow of the spirit, that inner and outer reality take form and definition."[7] The activity of giving form to experience that is distinctive to spirit exists only in relation to this twofold movement. Cassirer says: "It is always a double movement [*doppelte Bewegung*] that works itself out here: a continuous alternation of the forces of attraction and repulsion. . . . This double determination [*Doppelbestimmung*] applies to every kind of creative activity [*Art der Gestaltung*] and of 'symbolic formation'."[8] The activity of doubling up is at the basis of Cassirer's metaphysics. Without the ability of spirit to double itself it would remain a substantial, static principle that could not take on a life of its own once it has freed itself from the immediacy of the flux of life.

7. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* 3 vols., trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953–57), 1: 288–89. Hereinafter cited as *PSF.*

8. "S & L," 870.

Objectivity is a further essential aspect of spirit. Objectivity occurs through the ability of spirit to achieve meaning in experience, to elicit nontemporal, enduring features in experience. Spirit is capable of making various interpretations of the same event over time, and those interpretations can be shared in culture. Through its objective activity, spirit provides the sense of self. Objectivity allows the sense of self to develop, because the self as present in the body requires that the body be seen as an enduring object, not merely experienced as a temporal sensation. The necessity of objectivity for the human being is shown in the mutual dependence of object and self: spiritual consciousness "is a consciousness of objects insofar as it is self-consciousness—and it is self-consciousness only in and by virtue of the fact that it is a consciousness of objects" (66; 64). Essential to the human being is this sense of self, of the I, as distinct from the object.

Cassirer refers to spirit as subjectivity; this should not be confused with what he calls the subjectivity of life. In a discussion of the unity of spirit, Cassirer says, "Here a turn must occur: 'subjective, instead of objective,' " which is a turn toward the "spiritual energy as such," not toward an "absolute object" (224; 262). Spirit in this sense can be set off against object in the sense of a substantial being or thing. Neither life nor spirit are substances, but the conception of substance is one of the conceptions spirit can have of the object, as opposed to its activity as subject.

Life is preserved in spirit through spirit's constant interaction with life; spirit gives constant meaning to life; thus, "the substance of life has become a subject" (220; 238). The subject is the sphere of meaning, opposed to the sphere of the thing, the particular, and the temporal flux of nature. In spirit, substance and nature are both understood and overcome. Neither life nor spirit is a substance in Cassirer's metaphysics, but, in one of its stances of opposition to life, spirit can apprehend life as object in substantive terms.

In a discussion of Wilhelm von Humboldt's observations of language, Cassirer says that the "whole spiritual attitude" is the "orientation of man's subjective view of objects."[9] The subjective here is the way human beings produce signs or assign meanings to objects. The subject in this sense is the maker of meaning, and in different cultures different subjects arrive at different meanings for the same object. In particular contexts, spirit is considered as subjective, but in Cassirer's metaphysics as a whole, spirit is objective, in the sense of a shared world of objects and interpretations.

The further property of spirit is that it, like life, is functional. Activity, process, and function define spirit. Cassirer says that spirit is "the eternally productive act" (31; 30). As the unity of form, spirit is not itself a substance or thing. It is also not a unity of substances or things, because the forms that spirit unifies are activities, not materials. Spirit is a principle of unified energy, "not the 'unity' of the thing" but rather the spiritual energy in the activity of formation (224; 262). Both spirit and life are functional, "two accents that we fix in the process of becoming" (15; 15).

Cassirer rejects Simmel's sense of spirit as he rejects his notion of life, discussed earlier. Cassirer claims that Simmel's notion of spirit, "this abstraction, this region of the self-significant and the absolute, the high-handed idea," creates an unbridgeable gap between life and spirit that cannot exist, given their actual interactions (14; 14).

Cassirer claims that the conceptions of spirit advanced by Ludwig Klages and his predecessors Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are also flawed. They all regard spirit as a domination of life. For Klages, life's potentiality is smothered by spirit. Cassirer says that in Klages's view of spirit, "the origin of all judging con-

9. *PSF*, 1: 284.

sciousness and all goal-seeking willing, the creator of 'culture,' is transformed in this creativity into a curse on mankind" (24; 23). Klages desires a return to life; he has a "Romantic yearning after the paradise of life" because he believes that the spiritual is a "tearing apart and alienation from life" (219; 237–38). For these philosophers of life, spirit is a slave to the drive to dominate. Cassirer claims that spirit is a principle, not of the domination of life but of the continual transformation of life into culture.

Dialectic of Life and Spirit

As suggested earlier, for Cassirer, the structure of reality is dialectical and metaphysics requires a dialectical form of thinking. The symbolic forms as presented in the first three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* are internally dialectical and stand in dialectical relations to one another.[10] Life and spirit are also dialectical, both in their separate features and in their relation to each other. Their dualistic interconnection is necessary for human experience.

Life and spirit are individually dialectical. Life is dialectical because it is both momentary and immediate, yet this momentariness is taken up constantly in the unity of its flux. Spirit is dialectical because it continually generates and diminishes its forms. Both life and spirit are typified by movement. They are both "pure activity [*reine Tätigkeit*]."[11]

The dialectical movement between the two principles is the movement inherent in human nature. The existence of human beings, beings that are both spiritual and biological, depends on the continual interaction of spirit and life. The mythic feature of human nature exemplifies this interdependence: for myth to

10. See, *PSF,* 1: 74, 2: 25, 3: 40.
11. "S & L," 869.

be sustained requires a constant tension between temporal experience or life and nontemporal constructions or spirit. Time in mythic experience is a single layer of becoming; yet some mythic figures are unchanging: "Myth pushes the contents perceived in it off into an indefinite temporal distance, but this distance has not yet, so to speak, achieved any temporal depth" (91; 88).

The experience of the duality of life and spirit requires language (216; 235). Language reveals the dependence of human beings on the interactions of life and spirit. For human beings to use language requires that words be spoken in time; words cannot be spoken simultaneously in a sentence. Language also requires that words retain a shared meaning; meaningful discourse is impossible without stable definitions. Language is "an unfolding as well as a limitation" and would stagnate were there no changes in the definitions and no organization of events, were there no dialectic between life and spirit (79; 77). Such a stagnation, ending language as we know it, would eliminate one of the primary characteristics of human beings.

Individual experience affects culture as culture affects individual experience. Human beings interpret and act upon the natural world in cultural forms, and events in the natural world affect these forms of cultural experience. Cassirer's examination of myth in his philosophy of symbolic forms shows this connection. Mana-taboo, or the sacred and profane, in mythic thought is an example of the interchange between nature and culture; mana has its place "in a sphere where there can be no question of a highly developed concept of the soul or the personality, or at least where there is no clear dividing line between physical and psychic, spiritual-personal and impersonal reality [*Sein*]."[12] The connection between nature and cultural form is so immediate in mythic thought that the two worlds are barely separable, yet it is

12. *PSF*, 2: 76–77.

in myth that the separation between nature and culture is born from the dialectic of life and spirit that is present in the world.

Even when spirit has reached its furthest point from life through the highest development of language, it is still tied to life. Cassirer says, "Even the freest, truly autonomous acts of spirit still possess here, amid the high-handedness that they assert among themselves, a natural bond and ties" (7; 7). All cultural forms originate in the primary principle of life and are always connected to life, not simply as their origin but as a force that exists within them and which they continually confront.

The human being existing in time and space grasps the nontemporal and nonspatial forms of spirit. Temporality is one feature of life that remains in spiritual activities. All reaching toward nontemporal forms is an act taking place in time, although the forms themselves, in some sense, are not in time. "It is only the series of experiences itself, not what is grasped and experienced in it, that remains bound to the form of time; only the acts of intending and opining, but not the facts they refer to, belong to it" (99; 96). This bond between spirit and life is inescapable for the human being.

The dialectical relationship between life and spirit cannot properly be understood as hostile. Life must allow spirit to develop. First, life needs spirit in order to accomplish its own activity. Without spirit, life is acting against nothing, and there is nothing to ensure its continuation. Life's continual activity of becoming is its existence; but without spirit as its complementary force, it would pass into mere becoming.

Second, spirit needs life. Cassirer says, "If this law [spirit's law of meaning] were completely antagonistic to life, it would at the same time have to destroy its own essence, for it exists and has application only insofar as it is active, and it cannot become active in any way except by entering and by constantly resubmerging itself into the living world. Always changing, but ever

itself, near and far and far and near, spirit in all of its productivity always stands opposed to life without ever turning against it" (31; 30). If spirit were to try to destroy life, it would thereby destroy itself, because spirit needs life as the active principle of its existence. The interdependence of spirit and life ensures that both life and spirit continue.

The dialectic between life and spirit does not result in a synthesis, a fusion of the two processes. The two processes preserve their characteristics throughout their interaction. Cassirer's philosophy "recognizes the specific difference between the world of 'spirit' and the world of 'life,'" and "sharply it emphasizes it" (49; 47). The duality of these processes does not become an identity of process. Culture would cease without this dual movement. The dialectic does not overcome the difference in kind represented by these two principles.

Cassirer continues to emphasize the point that life and spirit are different kinds of activities rather than different degrees of the same kind of activity. He says that "by no mere *quantitative* increase, enhancement or intensification of Life can we ever attain the realm of the Spirit, but that in order to gain entrance into this sphere a turnabout and return, a change of 'mind' and of direction are necessary."[13] Life and spirit differ in their directions, aims, and purposes. In their dialectical relationship, these differences are preserved, not synthesized.

In one instance, however, Cassirer does use the term "synthesis" to describe the relationship between the two. In the appendix to the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* spirit is described as a "synthesis of life and form." Cassirer says, "This unity (synthesis) [*Synthese*] of life and form is the true concept of spirit, its 'essence'" (228; 267). This passage concerns mediation (*Mittelbarkeit*) as an activity of spirit, such that

13. "S & L," 869, emphasis mine.

the terms "mediation" and "synthesis" are used interchangeably. This statement is not in fundamental disagreement with the main text, in which Cassirer is careful to avoid the term "synthesis." He recognizes its incompatibility with his notion of dialectic.

Dialectic is balance. If one element were to be more actual than the other, there could be no reciprocal movement; the balance would be upset, ending the movement between the two elements. The two must be in harmony for the movement to continue. But this movement is not a simple oscillation between two poles. The movement is toward spirit as the stronger, but once spirit has asserted itself, life exerts its force, with which spirit must again contend in its focus on the ideal of harmony. Human nature is determined by the dialectic between life and spirit. The unity of the human being depends on the balance and harmony between the two principles.

Cassirer's use of the term "concrete" is connected with his conception of the dialectic between spirit and life. The notion of concreteness is used to describe both spirit and life in the following passages: "The actual 'concrete' reality of spirit [*die 'konkrete' Wirklichkeit des Geistes*] consists rather in the fact that all its different basic aspects mesh with one another" (7; 6); "The concept of 'concrete spirit' [*des 'konkreten Geistes'*] therefore experiences its realization only in these symbolic forms—the dialectic is balanced out, but continues then naturally within each of the particular symbolic forms" (228; 266). Some thinkers are correct to " 'posit' fully developed concrete life—to arrive at being for itself, and so to have 'Subject' come from mere Substance" (228; 267).

These statements regarding the concreteness of life and spirit can seem peculiar given Cassirer's notion of process and activity. They are part of his concept of dialectic: concrete spirit is life and concrete life is spirit. As life and spirit interact, each uni-

fies the other's activity, and that unification yields the symbolic forms of culture. The dialectic is not a movement between abstractions but a movement between actualized processes.

Fundamentally, Cassirer's notion of dialectic is a preservation of difference. Life and spirit cannot be complete opposites, because the opposite of both is death: the antithesis of life is the death of biological experience, and the antithesis of spirit is the death of cultural experience. Life and spirit together oppose death. The impetus of each is not to produce the death of the other but to act together with the other to oppose death through their interaction. This interaction is necessary for the human being to be what it is, and the human being attempts to preserve the harmony of this interaction despite its individual mortality.

Relation to Symbolic Forms

One of the central issues in Cassirer's work is the relation between life, spirit, and the symbolic forms. Spirit and life must be metaphysically connected as first principles to the symbolic forms—for example, to myth and religion, language, art, history, and science. The connection between these three kinds of activities is complex. Life and spirit are both necessary for the emergence of the symbolic forms, and these depend for their continued activity on both principles. Cassirer discusses symbolic forms from various perspectives. The symbolic forms are 1) structures centered in life, 2) life's attainment of spirit, 3) structures centered in spirit, 4) lawgivers of life, 5) spirit's attainment of life, 6) the interaction between life and spirit, and 7) the development from life to spirit.

In a primary sense, the symbolic forms are centered in life, making them forms of life. The form of myth is "an original 'form of life' " (19; 19). Both life and myth have subjective ele-

ments; life is completely subjective, and myth is attached to this subjectivity at its origin. Myth does not hold life at a distance; instead, it is intertwined with it. All symbolic forms possess the subjective element of life to some degree, and all arise from myth.

The symbolic forms vary in their proximity to life, or what Cassirer calls their "'closeness to life'" (20; 19). Distance depends on the features of life as these occur within the symbolic forms. The most primordial mythic level is the closest to life, whereas religion, as a development from myth, is further removed from life. In religion the divine is beyond nature or life. Yet in the highest religious act, of passing beyond conceptions of nature in order to know the divine, new conceptions of nature are made. Religious thought does not escape the temporality of life.

Language also does not escape life, but it is further removed from the immediacy of life because of its activity of objectification. Language stabilizes experience by giving names to what is experienced; these names can be shared, recalled, and appealed to in the future. Nevertheless, "the living process of speech" shares with life the feature of becoming: "The individual speech act does not hereby take place when the speaker merely reaches into a world of completely finished forms from which a selection has to be made but which otherwise must be treated as given, like a minted coin" (16; 15). Language moves away from the immediacy of life in order to achieve objectivity, but it remains tied to life, as do all human activities.

In a sense, theoretical thought, although it is fully formed only after language, is nearer to life than is language. Life and the symbolic form of pure theory share an emphasis on change and becoming. Pure theory sees space as an order of events rather than as an object. In language, space is an object, whereas in pure theory, "with this dispersal of the rigid spatial schematism, this

elevation of space to a purely conceptual level, to a symbol of order, reality seems to have regained some of the flexibility and fluidity that it possessed in its earlier phases when it was 'closer to life' " (96; 94).

The notion of thing, typical of language, meant to stabilize perceptions and fix experience, is replaced in theoretical thought by the notion of law, meant to recognize the fleeting characteristics of nature. Such lawgiving is a kind of stabilization and objectification but is unlike the objectification by language—thinking in terms of things or objects. As theoretical thought searches to understand the world, different scientific orders emerge, moving away from and then back to the experience of life.

The symbolic forms are forms of life also because life has a drive to produce them. It is an essential feature of life that the forms "originally lie enclosed within it" and that it " 'comes to itself' in the medium of the symbolic forms" (19; 18). Life's turn toward form is not a move toward something distant and separate from itself. It is rather a return to itself, an actualization of its essence.

Both symbolic forms and life function dialectically; the dialectical movements within each form are affected by the original and ongoing movements of life, their producer. Cassirer says that life's motion "consists in the creation of ever new forms—*Gestalts*—and in their destruction" and that each form's function "embraces this process within its own characteristic motion, within its own characteristic shaping and changing of shapes" (226; 264). Life's process of change is passed on to the symbolic forms in their production.

In the process of symbolic formation, life attains spirit. The symbolic forms are not merely effects of life. Life itself has no spiritual activity, yet, in symbolic formation, life acquires spiritual activity: "In life alone we do not have such spirit, such 'being

for itself.' We find this only in the form that life gives to itself . . . in the creation of symbolic forms (language, myth, art . . .). Hence it is in these that 'life' first attains to 'form' (to *eidos*)—in which it reconciles itself with 'form' " (228; 266). Life gives form to itself, thereby attaining spiritual activity.

This spiritual change that life undergoes as it acquires symbolic form takes place in the human being, and the result of this spiritual change is culture. Culture is the distinctive feature of human life. Culture is the movement away from mere life, into form, or the movement toward " 'living' forms" (230; 268). Life becomes spirit through the development of culture. Cassirer says, "All culture takes place in and proves itself in the creative process, in the activity of the symbolic forms, and through these forms life awakens to self-conscious life, and becomes spirit" (231; 269). Without the human being life would not be transformed into spirit, and in this process the human being itself is formed.

The symbolic forms are basic spiritual capacities that transform the experiences of organic life as it becomes part of the human sphere. Life gathers itself up and projects itself into spirit through the forms. For the animal world, the unity of life is constant, but, Cassirer says, "the world of the Spirit, on the contrary, does not come into existence until the stream of Life no longer merely flows freely, but is held back at certain points—until Life, instead of unceasingly giving birth to new Life and consuming itself in these very births, gathers itself together into enduring forms and projects these forms out of and in front of itself."[14] Again, it is life that produces the symbolic forms and culture.

Although the symbolic forms are forms of life, from another perspective they are forms of spirit. In some passages Cassirer

14. Ibid.

describes the tie between the symbolic forms and spirit as excluding life. This tie exists in light of the structure of the forms and their objectivity. The structure of the forms depends on spirit. Spirit is the organizing principle of the symbolic forms, the "spiritual potencies" (67; 65). The diverse forms are unified and centered in spirit. This principle of unity is not separate or outside the forms; it is instead "graduated within itself in the different symbolic forms" (67; 65). Spirit is not otherworldly or separable from the forms of human nature and culture.

The human world is centered in spirit because the symbolic forms are centered in spirit. The human world seems disjointed and chaotic, with each symbolic form pursuing its own direction in consciousness; spirit, however, unifies and structures the human world. As "closed fields of energies," the forms remain individual and retain their characteristics but are "nonetheless related to a common center and are united in it" (60; 58). The symbolic forms make the world intelligible: an " 'intelligible cosmos' " can be "conceived only in *symbols,* the symbols of language, art, religion, and theoretical cognition" (111; 109). The forms make the human world intelligible, and spirit, by organizing and structuring their activities in its own drive to unity, makes the symbolic forms intelligible.

The symbolic forms are also centered in spirit through objectification. The objectivity is the result of spiritual activity. Through symbolic forms, the human being makes a world of objects that stand apart from spatial and temporal experience and that can be shared in culture. These objects constitute the nonliving, spiritual world. Spirit is the source of objectivity and the awareness that "man has built an 'opposing-world,' which now is added to the surrounding world of immediate existence" and that "he is not only a part of the world, but has gone on to represent and depict this world" (61–62; 60). Spirit makes this opposing world through symbolic forms.

In the rise of language, "order according to means and ends gives way to an order according to objective characteristics and objective contexts" (76; 74). Names objectify and stabilize experience and thought; that is, " 'object' and 'name' belong together, not in the sense that the name in any way 'imitates' or reproduces the object as some previously given nature of the thing, but in the sense that by virtue of it, by virtue of the general function of naming, is consciousness able to raise itself to the sphere of objective thinking at all" (74; 72). Language, through its objective activity, gains a spiritual view of the world, a "spiritual horizon" (76; 74).

The formation of images in the symbolic form of art is "the second, highly productive root of every type of objective view," and "the same process of objectification, of 'making present' that we met with before in language, is found in a kind of new dimension in the different fine arts" (78; 75–76). Whereas language objectifies through naming, art objectifies though embodying and shaping. Different in kind, both art and language represent and discover the world; neither merely reproduces an already given world. In these two forms, objectification is the stabilizing, defining, individuating, and humanizing of reality.

The relations among life, spirit, and symbolic form are visible through the concept of law. Life follows the law of becoming, and symbolic forms discover or make this law. This lawgiving activity by the forms stems from the activity of spirit. Lawgiving, or limitation, is a property of spirit, similar to but not the same as spirit's power of objectification. Giving law to life is a recognition by spirit of life's processes, not a stabilization or objectification of them. Within each of the symbolic forms, the processes of change and time are structured. A law of change does not itself change, because laws are ideas of permanence formed through symbolic consciousness.

Mythic consciousness is the first to sense a tension between

the unchanging force governing the world (spirit) and the temporal events occurring in the world (life). Cassirer says, "Even here, where we are still moving in a basic sphere of mythic thought and awareness, consciousness has an early inkling that the law of coming to be and passing away to which all life is subject can no longer be conceived to belong completely to the circle of life and particular things" (100; 98). In myth, lawgiving is the primary way of responding to the flux of nature and of thus limiting the temporality of life.

Theoretical thought or scientific thought consciously recognizes that it makes laws in order to understand change in nature. Theoretical thought attempts to understand space as a lawful process of change. This level of theory does not conquer becoming "by means of the concept of the thing; rather it does so by the concept of law" (96; 94). The symbolic form of theoretical thought or science discovers and produces laws that the processes of life follow. Its source is spirit, with its drive toward limitation.

Symbolic forms are the medium that allows spirit to attain to life. As life attains to spirit, so "spirit attains to the form of life by breaking away from its mere immediacy—this is most obvious in the 'symbolic forms,' in language, art, knowing" (228; 267). Through its production of the symbolic forms, spirit moves away from its immediate opposition to life into mediacy. In this process, spirit becomes vital. Through this activity of mediation, spirit draws life together with form to make the human world. The symbolic forms are mediators of human experience; they "are themselves of course something 'mediated' [*ein 'Mittelbares'*], not the so-called 'in itself' of things" (228; 267). Spirit mediates the forms once they are produced. The unity of life and form is the essence of spirit and the essence of human consciousness and culture. Culture is made in this mediation of life and spirit.

Life and spirit interact in the symbolic forms. They are where the dialectic of spirit and life occurs. The activity of symbolic formation "is in its essence neither mere life nor mere form; rather, it is the becoming of form," or the becoming of "spiritual energies" (15; 15). The symbolic forms depend on the motion of life and spirit for their own continuing movement. All symbolic forms "exist only by virtue of being activated and by giving shape to themselves in this activation" (15; 15). This continued shaping of themselves through the interaction with life and spirit means that the two principles are interconnected; they do not constitute an "external dualism" (16; 15).

Life and spirit are not outer and inner worlds, finished points, that the symbolic forms bridge. Symbolic formation is instead the harmony between these two dynamic principles. The forms are the "means for the *creation* of these polar opposites," or "the mediums in which and only by virtue of which the 'separation and sorting out of the I and the world' takes place" (60; 59). Through the activity of the symbolic forms, life and spirit become harmonized processes.

Spiritual and vital contents are interwoven in the symbolic forms, but these never merge with one another; spirit and life retain their characteristics in the forms. Cassirer says, "A world shaped by myth could not be grasped if we conceive it exclusively as a form of thought or if we take it purely as a form of life; only the interconnection of both these determinations can provide its true constituent principle" (41; 39). This dialectical movement in the forms means that both living subjectivity and spiritual objectivity are manifested in each form.

The symbolic forms of language and art can actualize objectification that is a property of spirit; they fix objects in experience. Both forms, however, also have subjective features. Language occurs in living time and arises from human action. Art is a balance between the objective and the subjective. No pure objec-

tivity is attainable: "The attainment of complete and pure objectivity can hence come only at the price of an asceticism that must be imposed by the artistic creator as well as the beholder of art upon their own selves and their emotional stirrings" (84–85; 82). Such imposition is at odds with human nature, which depends on a dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity formed through the symbol.

The interaction of life, spirit, and the symbolic forms rests on the sense in which these three kinds of activity require one another. Life requires spirit because no shared or fixed experience is possible in it; all is becoming. Spirit requires life because it structures and preserves the differences it forms from life. Symbolic forms themselves require one another, for the meaning of any one depends upon its differences from the others. Each symbol is "limited and conditioned by every other symbol" (227; 265). No absolute point of all these interactions is reached in which their standpoint relative to one another is resolved.

The actualization of symbolic form is a development from life into spirit. Life is the primordial principle of all nature, whereas spirit is the primordial principle of specifically human thought. The transformation of life into human experience begins with the form of myth. But in the symbolic form of history this transformation is the most visible. Regarding history, Cassirer says that "the circle of specifically human existence closes here. The new dimension into which we enter when we move from the different forms of organic life into the human world is perhaps most obviously different at this point" (85–86; 83). History cannot be viewed as an experience bound to the present, to the temporality of life. The nontemporality of spirit, this "change in outlook, this grasping in the present without really 'remaining' in it in the true sense, without being bound to the here and now," is the defining characteristic of history (86; 84). History requires

that an experience first be had in time, in life, and then it is recalled as past, in spirit.

Reality

Reality (*Wirklichkeit, Realität*) for Cassirer is human reality, the interaction of life, spirit, and symbolic form.[15] As interaction, reality is an active, functional, productive, and formative notion. This reality, based on life, spirit, and form, exists only for the human being. Natural organisms do not experience this interaction, because they have only living experience; human beings have the ability, through the functioning of spirit, to distinguish between possible realities and between appearance and reality. A discernible, fully determinate reality exists only for the human being.

Life and spirit are the principles of reality, of what is. The human being is both natural and spiritual; reality is formed through both principles. Symbolic forms are the cultural orderings of reality. Human reality is produced by these three. Life is the first principle of all organisms in nature. As a part of nature, the human being shares this principle with all other organisms. Life as the primary source of reality is not overcome by culture; instead, life is the unity presupposed by culture: life is "the actual 'concrete' reality of spirit" (7; 6). The spiritual activities of judgment, differentiation, and limitation are unified in life. Spirit is realized in life through its production of symbolic form.

Spirit is the first principle of what is specifically human and it is of particular concern to Cassirer. Spirit mediates between

15. In the early texts Cassirer passes back and forth between the terms *Wirklichkeit* (reality, actuality) and *Realität*. I have followed Krois's translation in rendering them both as "reality."

life and form; that is, spirit structures form as it springs from life. In this mediacy, spirit becomes aware of possibility, of both unity and diversity, and "only by virtue of this mediacy . . . can spirit come to possess and know itself—and there is no other, 'higher' form of reality than this self-knowledge of spirit" (228; 267). The reality of spirit is the mediation of life and form.

Cultural views of reality are produced through symbolic forms. Each form builds a view of reality that is shared in culture. Reality is made of sacred and profane forces in the symbolic form of myth, of objects in the symbolic forms of language and art, of laws in the symbolic form of theoretical thought, and of recollections in the symbolic form of history. The subjective element of life and the objective element of spirit are active in each of these forms; these two principles of reality continue to ground the activity of the symbolic forms.

Reality from the standpoint of the symbolic form of myth is composed of forces acting in the world. These forces can appear at any time or place: "The 'same' thing can, in fact must, manifest itself at different places in space and time—and must appear in completely different shapes, without ever ceasing to be the same" (216; 235). Rituals are performed as a means of summoning the sacred forces and appeasing the demonic forces. Through the activity of expression (*Ausdruck*), which has its primal form in mimetic gesturing, myth reveals its immediate *feeling* of reality.

In language, the real is composed of objects; reality is formed in the act of naming. Cassirer says that " 'objectified' reality is bound to language," which "draws forth the core of the thing, the substance of the thing" (213; 232). As a symbolic form, language is not merely a method of thinking; it is thinking itself. The division of the world into parts is not merely linguistic: "This distribution of accents and the partitioning off of a 'fore-

ground' and a 'background' provide the intellectual articulation of the world as we represent it, and of which the spoken articulation is only an outer expression" (72–73; 71). Representation (*Darstellung*) is the means by which language achieves its distinctive version of reality.

The symbolic form of art also produces reality through representation; representation here occurs in images. The images of art are not replicas of a given world of things; art "cannot simply sketch the image of reality after some copy that it has at hand, according to a given 'model'; rather, it must produce it itself" (78; 76). The form of art is an entire way of thinking. Art is "more than *merely* 'aesthetic'," inasmuch as art "contains a representation of the world which is also a true world-discovery" (79; 76). Art produces and thereby discovers reality.

In the symbolic form of theoretical or scientific thought, reality is what is lawful and is produced through signification. Signification (*reine Bedeutung*) means thinking in "schemata and models," as the world of objects is gradually left behind (97; 95). The achievement of pure theory is difficult for consciousness because the category of the "thing" has a strong hold on it: "With all its organs grasping it, thought adheres to this basic category of the thing. Even when it no longer appears to the world of perception—from the standpoint of content—to be the final, 'true' reality, where thought grasps the necessity of going on to another reality, it does not dispense with the form in which it grasps them" (97; 94). When pure theory is achieved, laws, not things, constitute reality.

The symbolic form of historical consciousness determines reality through recollection. History is recollection (*Erinnerung*) in the present of events known as past; "as far as the reality of history is concerned, it is impossible to take it as some rigid thing-like object" (85; 83). Historical reality is always based in a

historical consciousness, a continual turning inward toward the past. Historical reality is not an absolute object but a recollection pertaining to the perspective of a particular historical consciousness.

Life and spirit are the principles of all action in the symbolic forms. Each symbolic form embodies its own view of reality; we can, however, also conceive of reality as the totality of these formations. Such an approach is still grounded in life and spirit, as the first principles of all human activity, but it recognizes each form of reality as a part of cultural reality. Cassirer says, "For us true reality is the subject which is capable of all these 'views'" (212; 230). A cross-cultural and cross-temporal view of reality is produced by the variety of symbolic formations.

From this perspective, reality is not confined to the outlook of a single symbolic form. Klages's view that myth is the sole, "true and original" reality, Cassirer claims, must be rejected (24–25; 24). Instead, reality depends on the various activities of the human being, or on spirit's employing all of its possibilities in experimentation or play. Cassirer says, "Man must retreat into the world of 'unreality,' into the world of appearance and play, in order thereby to conquer the world of reality."[16]

In sum, cultural reality is the set of possibilities that the human being can make. These possibilities depend on spirit's power of objectivity, on spirit's ability to stabilize objects or events and form various meanings of them. The formation of these possibilities also depends on subjectivity; life's temporality causes the human being to form culture as a development in time. The real is ultimately the totality of symbolic forms as produced through the dialectic of spirit and life.

16. "S & L," 870–71.

Origins and Ends of Life and Spirit

The dialectic between life and spirit is what shapes the human condition, experience, and culture. These principles, as nonsubstantive functions, have their sources and goals not in substance but in activity. Humanity is activity.

The notion of origins is essential to Cassirer. One of the most original elements of his philosophy is his study of myth in the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.* Life and spirit are the origins of myth and all other symbolic forms; the two principles yield the symbolic forms and come to terms with each other in this process of formation. Spirit grows out of life, and in this sense the origin of spirit is life; as spirit develops, life remains its opposite. As first principles, spirit and life can have no further explanation. As kinds of activity, however, they spring from human activity.

The ends or purposes of life and spirit are clearly delineated by Cassirer. These ends are the aims of the human being, and they ground all human activity. The achievement of life is the formation of symbols. This formation is life's "final fulfillment," in which it "possesses and grasps itself in the imprint of form as the infinite possibility of formation, as the will to form and power to form" (19; 18). Through this activity or fulfillment of its function, life returns to itself.

In another sense, the aim of life is to preserve itself by a process of self-movement. This "self-preservation" is achieved through its continued activity of making and sustaining the dialectical activity of the symbolic forms (19; 18). Life's retention of its own characteristics ensures that it can never be reduced to form and is always overflowing form. Self-preservation is the goal of life.

The ends of spirit are reflection, the development of culture, and freedom. The reflective ability of spirit arises in its turn to

itself so it can judge itself, becoming conscious of its duality. Through both negative and positive judgments, spirit achieves something positive: the confirmation of its duality and distinctive ability. Cassirer says that "this turnabout, this 'reflection,' entails no break within spirit itself" but instead reconfirms spirit and "represents its actual achievement" (33; 32). Life is not able to turn toward itself and reflect on its activity.

Culture is the development and fulfillment of spirit. Out of the spiritual activity of symbolic formation arises culture, and the totality of the symbolic forms is human culture as such. Spirit structures cultural form; culture is the reference point for "the dynamic structure of the spiritual world" (60; 58). Spirit achieves its being as culture through the symbolic forms. The goal of spirit is freedom. This freedom is obtained through spirit's activities of reflection and culture. In them spirit frees itself from life. Ideas are not bound to biological existence; they are formed through reflection and culture. Ideas reach beyond the temporality of life, beyond both organic compulsion and organic death.

The compulsions of nature, such as the reaction to stimuli in the environment, are overcome by spirit. The human being "ceases simply to live in its environment and begins to build up this environment itself" as it "brings forth this environment from its own spiritual activity" (45; 43). Interest in meaning and objectivity replaces interest in actions and reactions. The human being is still a part of nature but "his 'noticing' becomes detached from dependence on his actions and sufferings" (45; 44). Ideas stand apart from biological existence; they are objective, shareable, and cultural. Ideas are liberation from the compulsions of life.

Not only the compulsions of life or nature but also the mortality of nature is overcome by spiritual freedom. Organic life is fated to die, whereas spiritual forms are free from any organic

death. In myth, spiritual forms expressed as images gain a kind of immortality: "The organic phenomenon of death, of having to die, is now met and overcome by a spiritual phenomenon, by an act of freedom. In the immortality which it lends to its mythic hero, mankind has attained for itself, for its own species, an ideal immortality" (88; 85). This immortality is a spiritual preservation of forms that constitutes its freedom, the freedom of the ideal.

The actualization of the ends of life and spirit depends on symbolic forms, which encompass both functions. The aims of the symbolic forms are composed of the aims of both life and spirit—preservation and freedom. For life and spirit to fulfill their functions, symbolic forms must arise and develop in relation to one another. By recognizing the dialectic, tension, or harmony between nature and culture, the forms preserve the difference between life and spirit. In the making of the forms, "the actual ideal achievement that was to be accomplished here proved in each case always to be not merely the elimination of opposites but their tension" (60–61; 59). The symbolic forms maintain the dialectic between two distinguishable functions. Symbolic forms must preserve life in particular, as a means of achieving their other aim—to be free of life.

The symbolic forms free spirit in another way. Freedom from organic necessity is the spiritual goal of the forms. Cassirer says, "Here we attain the realm of freedom. The true and highest achievement of every 'symbolic form' consists in its contribution toward this goal" (111; 109). Each form works toward the goal differently. Freedom depends upon shared ideas through time and is the highest goal of culture, yet nature is not thereby dispensed with. Both life and spirit remain essential for the human being.

Cassirer rejects the views of Klages, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche regarding the goals of spirit and life. Klages says that

spirit is created by life to be life's tool, something technical, but spirit then aims at domination of life. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche believe that the aim of life is to enslave spirit and that the aim of spirit is to nullify life; Nietzsche, moreover, thinks spirit can never escape life. According to these philosophers of life, the desire of both life and spirit is the desire for power.

In contrast, Cassirer says, "the philosophy of symbolic forms finds that it meets with spirit everywhere as not the 'Will to Power,' but as the 'Will to Formation' " (28; 27). Life does not create in spirit a tool for its own activity; spirit is more than a tool, more than merely foresight. Cassirer does not claim that life and spirit have personified desires and wills, but they have an aim. Their aim is to produce symbolic forms and, once those are produced, to effect change in them. Origins and ends are connected in a circular manner. Life as biological origin and spirit as ideal end are continually brought together in the human being. There is continual return to beginnings, in the circular process of culture.

Living and Spiritual Beings

The principle specific to human beings is spirit; hence, human beings are spiritual beings. Life is the sole principle of animals; the animal is what it means to be a living being as such. Human beings possess features of animal life, yet spirit and life remain distinct; "the difference between them still remains, in principle, irrevocable" (46; 45). The contrast between the two activities, spirit and life, reveals what is unique about the human world.

Objectivity is the feature of spirit that fundamentally defines the human being. Objectivity, in its broadest sense, structures such human activities as demonization, opposition, flexibility, time, recollection, and knowledge. Each of these activities de-

pends on the division and separation that objectivity provides and each is actualized by the different symbolic forms.

The making of the demonic in the symbolic form of myth is the primary act that separates human beings from animals. Human experience and animal experience share some characteristics, yet the human experience of demonization makes it distinct. What the two share is the inconstancy of space and time, continual change, and activity. In space and time both humans and animals experience continual alteration or "a continual going-over-into-another, a complete melting together of individual places as well as of moments" (68; 66).

In mythic thought a concentration of experience occurs that does not occur in the animal world. This concentration, "a gathering together of particular 'points of judgment,' " makes the demonic world: "The demon may be conceived as ever so vague and fleeting, but it always has some kind of personal 'character' by means of which it can be distinguished and recognized" (70; 68). Enduring properties are attributed to demons and thereby the individualization of reality begins. Such concentration, entification, and individualization belong to spiritual activity, "an independent, spiritual action which, as such, lies far beyond the limits of animal 'consciousness' " (69; 67).

The human being experiences opposition through the spiritual activity of objectivity. In language the human being encounters a world of complexly related objects standing in opposition to the self. Cassirer says, "Its beginnings lie in the animal realm, but the step that [is] taken here, the step to 'representation,' attains a basis and stability only when it is able to bring forth the organ of language" (213; 232). Opposition, grounded in spiritual objectivity, is made by the human being through language: "Only as a speaking creature does man have a world opposite him" (214; 232).

Spiritual objectivity allows the human being flexibility in interpretation, whereas the subjectivity that is characteristic of life gives the animal only rigidity. Animals respond to situations in actions, but they respond to them by repeating the same actions over and over, so their actions "as a whole reveal a thoroughly rigid structure" (76; 74). The animal acts, but not objectively; it does not distance itself from its actions. The animal lives in the immediate.

As language develops, flexibility arises for the human being. Using language, the human being is able to formulate different responses to events and ideas through an objective view of reality. This view provided by language allows the human being flexibility; it "marks one of the most characteristic differences between the human world of consciousness and the animal's world of experience" (76; 74). Spirit produces this objectivity through language.

The human experience of time, as seen in the symbolic form of history, also arises from spiritual objectivity and is unlike animal experience. An animal experiences situations in mere sequence and presence: "Its ability to 'notice' is essentially limited to the moment of its influence" (63; 61). Without objective time, recollection and history do not arise. Recollection requires an opposition to time in the sense that it is an interpretation made of time. Cassirer says, "We only remember what we, in a way, have brought forth from ourselves, a view that we have conceived to be about something independent and objective" (77; 75). Animals can have a history but cannot form history.

Higher animals do experience a kind of memory, but it is not the kind of memory achieved in spirit. Memory is not recollection, because recollection is not the simple appearance of the past in the present. Recollection requires both that the past be known as the past and that it exhibit a comprehensible order, that the past appear as more than just a content remembered.

Whereas "higher animals" are "open to influence and reorientation through earlier experience," this is not the openness of spirit, because "this type of animal 'learning' does not involve that specific form of 'turning inward' that we designate by the name of 'recollection'" (86; 83–84). Cassirer does not mention which animals are considered the higher; he simply upholds the sharp distinction between animal and human.

The experience of time as obtained through spiritual objectivity is not found even in higher animals. The distinctly human experience of time is historical. The symbolic form of history is grounded in objectivity, here manifested as temporal distance. History is human, that is, "specifically human" (85; 83). A sense of time, of past, present, and future, needs the objectifying power of spirit. This turn toward objects of its own making, toward itself, is the activity of spirit, of humanity: "The turn toward the 'objectivity of things' is the true line of demarcation between the human world and that of all other organic creatures" (62; 60).

Another difference between spiritual beings and merely living beings is knowledge. The spiritual being, with its ability both to see itself as an object and to turn away from itself, is able to have knowledge or understanding of another object. Knowledge is specific to the human being: "Only with mankind does this life complex become a knowledge complex; instead of the circles of life just *standing* in one another, now there is knowledge of one another among the circles of life" (213; 231). Human beings know that they are composed of both living and spiritual functions, whereas animals have no such knowledge.

Spirit is a human function; higher animals are closer to spirit than are lower animals. All animals experience circles of life, of action, but higher animals also exhibit mediated behavior, the use of tools. Cassirer says, "With that the 'preliminary' level of the concept of the thing [is] achieved. We will have to attribute

some kind of 'object-related' view to the higher animals. An 'opposing world,' an 'objective' reality, as the 'objectified' starts to appear" (213; 231). Again, Cassirer does not specify which particular animals are the higher, but he does uphold the distinction between all animals and human beings by maintaining that in higher animals the objective, or spiritual, begins to appear only on a preliminary level. Spirit is exclusively human.

For each of these spiritual characteristics to be actualized, symbolic formation is necessary. Spiritual beings are symbolic beings. All symbolic forms belong to the human world: "The 'human world' is constituted by the whole of these ways of giving form, not by some particular one of them" (60; 58). The development and continuation of culture requires that all symbolic forms be active. Human beings make their cultural world through symbols, formed by the interaction of life and spirit. The harmony or tension between life and spirit is the characteristic dialectical movement of the human being. This dialectical movement, "the decisive feature which serves to define not so much the content of specifically human existence as its general dynamic character," provides the basis for all human activity (61; 59).

Image of Life and Spirit

Reality and its principles are like water. Movement, becoming, life, spirit, and the symbolic forms are fluid and flowing. Water is Cassirer's metaphor for these activities. Reality is a "river of becoming [*Fluss des Werdens*]" (96; 94); its principles, developments and formations work within this river. Life and spirit are aspects of the process of becoming, or "two accents that we fix in the river of becoming [*Fluss des Werdens*]" (15; 15). It is becoming itself—the process of the whole—that is fluid; the accents thus established by the human being in this whole must also be fluid.

Spirit and life are like water: their dialectical activity is their fluidity. Spirit continues to dive into life, "constantly resubmerging itself into the living world," while life continues its transformation into spirit (31; 30). Circularity is also fluid. Life, as the circle of action, and spirit, as the circle of vision, are experiences of the world. As a living or a spiritual being experiences its world, the horizons of this world encompass or encircle it. The circle of its limits is like the container whose shape is assumed by the water it contains.

Symbolic forms, as formations of life and spirit, also have the characteristic of flow and movement. The forms do not follow a predetermined path for their development; instead, the path itself is becoming. Cassirer says, "Thought does not flow here in a finished riverbed which has been made for it; rather, it must find its own way—it must first dig its own bed for itself" (4; 5). The riverbed of the forms is made by the forms through their continual movement.

Language depends on fluidity. If language is not used, it ceases. But usage changes meanings of words; the stability of meaning that words must have does not remain constant. Words are fluid: "The formative power of language is not to be compared to the current of a river [*einem Strome*], which crashes against and breaks on the presently given linguistic forms as against a wall; rather, it floods these forms themselves and keeps them internally mobile" (18; 17). The fixity and fluidity of language are dialectical. The great poets' use of language influences it more than that of others; the entire direction of language is affected when its meanings are reformed by a great poet.

The image of water here is "nonspatial," "nonmaterial," like the activities of life, spirit, and form. Cassirer says, "That great process of separation through which the world of spirit actually first comes about, cannot be clarified by means of any spatial comparisons" (61; 59). The fluidity of water is a root meta-

phor for reality: "It is only by such dynamic comparisons, not in static images, that it is possible to describe form as form-that-is-becoming" (18; 17–18). Water is a metaphor and dynamic image that illuminates the notions of life and spirit. Thales of Miletus found water to be the substance of reality;[17] Cassirer found it to be the functional image of reality.

Criticism of Heidegger's Notions of Life and Spirit

Cassirer's criticisms of Heidegger's views of life and spirit summarize Cassirer's most salient and strongly felt views regarding life and spirit. His criticism of Heidegger shows how our understanding of the two principles affects our view of the human condition. Cassirer says that Heidegger's notion of life is actually a focus on death: "Heidegger's whole discussion [is] centered on the problem of death" (205; 222). Existence means being thrown into the world (*das Geworfensein*), hence thrown into death, owing to the "*essential nature* of human being" (205; 223). Death makes ideas mortal, unable to transcend the organic nature of the human being.

In Cassirer's conception of life, ideas do not suffer an organic death. The lives of individual human beings end in death, yet the ideas of human beings in culture continue in "eternal endurance" (207; 224). By grasping the necessity of organic death, furthermore, the human being objectifies and distances himself from death, or "interprets his own annihilation and thereby annuls it," and in so doing in a sense achieves freedom from death (208; 224). In this view, the element of death in life does not mean the defeat of all aspects of the human being.

Spirit for Heidegger, Cassirer claims, is the general, the in-

17. Aristotle *Met.* 983b20.

authentic, and the merely social. The inauthentic is rejected: "Everything 'general,' all giving in to the general is for Heidegger a 'fall'—a disregarding of 'authentic' *Dasein*—a giving in to the inauthenticity of the 'they' " (201; 220). Likewise, the form of language is corrupted by the general and "hardens into mere 'talk about,' into superficial 'idle talk' " (202; 220). Spirit is a fall from individuality, from individual *Dasein*, into the collective and ordinary.

In Cassirer's view culture is spirit's highest possible attainment. Spirit structures the activity of sharing ideas through culture; through "transpersonal meaning" ideas achieve freedom (202; 220). History is not the repetition of personal destiny but the recollection of culture. The objectivity of spirit allows the human being to make and interpret the world, not in solitude but in culture. The human being is a unique interaction of life and spirit—a cultural animal.

2

The Object of Philosophy

Human truth is what man puts together and makes in the act of knowing it.
—Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*

For Cassirer, the object of philosophy in one sense is the dialectic of life and spirit, discussed in Chapter One. The object of philosophy in another sense is itself. Philosophy asks itself what it is, does, and hopes to achieve. A remarkable portion of the early texts of the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is concerned with what philosophy is and how it functions. Understanding what philosophy is, for Cassirer, is an essential part of the activity of philosophy. The activity of philosophy can be understood through its various components: its presuppositions, starting point, method, goal, and impulse. These components are integrally related; strict divisions between them are artificial.

Philosophy Is Not a Symbolic Form

The most revealing and new claim Cassirer makes about philosophy in these early texts is that philosophy is not a symbolic form. In the earliest text, which is the appendix to the fourth volume, Cassirer says what he nowhere else says so explicitly: "It is characteristic of philosophical knowledge as the 'self-knowledge of reason' that it does not create a principally new symbol form, it does not found in this sense a new creative modality—but it grasps the earlier modalities as that which they are: as characteristic symbolic forms" (226; 264). In the same

passage, Cassirer says, "Philosophy does not want to replace the older forms with another, higher form. It does not want to replace one symbol with another" (226; 265). All ways of thinking are symbolic forms, except philosophy.

Philosophy does not replace the symbolic forms with its own activity. Its goal is to comprehend them. Philosophical thought arises after symbolic thought itself has developed. Cassirer says that philosophy grounds all the earlier spiritual formations, "all the previous levels of symbolism" (231; 269), and that it is "the fulfillment of the symbolic forms" (226; 265). Such a comprehension or "systematic overview" (227; 265) is possible not only because philosophy is different in kind from the symbolic forms but because philosophy arises after the forms.

Cassirer says that philosophical thought attempts to understand how each form structures reality; philosophy is "criticism" of the symbolic forms (226; 265). Though philosophical criticism does not rid thought of symbolic ways of thinking and experiencing, philosophy is a type of freedom from the process of formation of experience that occurs within particular symbolic forms. Cassirer says that philosophical activity "is the only possible ideal liberation from the compulsion of symbolism" (227; 265); the particular freedom of philosophy is a demonstration of its critical ability.

Although nowhere else is it so distinctly stated as in the appendix to the fourth volume, the view that philosophy is not a symbolic form finds support in other passages in the early texts. Most closely related is Cassirer's statement that philosophy is not limited to thinking from within one symbolic form; rather it is an attempt to understand the entirety of the forms. Cassirer says philosophy cannot "remain fixed in the confines of any particular form" but must move in the "totality of possible ways of giving form or meaning" (49; 47). Philosophy is not a symbolic form because it, unlike the forms, can comprehend the totality of

human thought. Philosophy is not another particular formation of knowledge and reality alongside other symbolic forms.

In the second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* Cassirer indicates that philosophy is a final and different kind of thinking because it can gain an overview of the symbolic forms. Cassirer states, "Although myth, language, and art interpenetrate one another in their concrete historical manifestations, the relation between them reveals a definite systematic gradation, an ideal progression toward a point where the spirit not only is and lives in its own creations, its self-created symbols, but also knows them for what they are." He concludes, "Or, as Hegel set out to show in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes:* the aim of spiritual development is that cultural reality be apprehended and expressed not merely as substance but 'equally as subject.' "[1] The point at which the symbolic forms are known for what they are marks the advent of philosophy. Despite such statements in the other volumes, the most explicit descriptions of the nature of philosophy as different from the particular symbolic forms are found in the fourth volume.

In some passages of the fourth volume the descriptions of symbolic forms seem similar to the descriptions of philosophy. Such passages seem to call into question the distinction between philosophy and symbolic form. The symbolic form of language, for instance, provides an understanding of the human world; it "gains a clear overview of the whole of reality" (76; 74). The symbolic form of art can create fundamental distinctions in the world. Cassirer says, "Aesthetic composition creates a clear and distinct outline of the world of objects" (78; 76). That such an outline of the world is achieved through symbolic activity seems to suggest that philosophy as the search for knowledge of reality is no different from these forms.

1. *PSF,* 2: 26. See also "S & L," 875.

Language and art, however, are concerned with delineating the objects of the world; philosophy is concerned with the interaction of the subjective and the objective features of reality and their first principles. Philosophy does not aim at a partial view of spiritual reality. Philosophy is unlike a particular symbolic form because "its task consists in comprehending the basic symbolic character of knowledge itself" (226; 265).

If philosophy is not a symbolic form, what is it? The early texts of the fourth volume suggest that philosophy is in some sense the knowledge of spirit (*Geist*) itself. The symbolic forms, as functional manifestations of spirit, all belong to the activity of spirit. Spirit is specifically human experience. The divisions of spirit are symbolic forms; the whole of spirit is culture; and the overview of spirit in its own activity is philosophy.

Cassirer says, "Spirit cannot peel off, like snakeskins, the forms in which it lives and exists. . . . Yet as little as spirit can ever in reality alienate itself from its basic form, so neither is it on the other hand ever completely bound to this basic form; it is not confined to this as by prison walls. This is the spirit's peculiar nature and its privilege; it not only 'exists' in particular forms, it at the same time knows about this, its determination" (50; 47–48). Spirit is composed of the symbolic forms, but it also has the ability to know that it is so composed. As Cassirer describes it, this knowing is the same as the activity of philosophy. Spirit is not only an active principle of thought; it also has reflective ability.

Further evidence for the equivalence of philosophy and spirit's activity of self-awareness comes from another property of spirit. The perspective of spirit produces a totalizing vision of reality that encompasses the individual visions of reality of the symbolic forms. Cassirer states, "A pure view of reality, as it is achieved in every one of the individual symbolic forms, as well as in their totality, can never be regarded as coercion directed against this

reality" (28; 28). Spirit itself commands a view of the totality or whole of reality; thus, spirit has a way of knowing that is broader and different in kind than symbolic knowing.

The activity of spirit is, in addition, described by Cassirer as an activity of thought beyond symbolic formation. As spirit moves away from life through the development of symbolic forms, it turns to an awareness of its own activity; that is, "spirit no longer lives off the marrow of the object, but rather from its own substance; it becomes 'thinking of thinking' " (29; 28). As the first principle of thought, spirit is the source, possibility, and movement of philosophy.

Awareness of its symbolic formations gives spirit knowledge of itself. The " 'self-knowledge' " of philosophy (226; 264) is like the "self-knowledge" of spirit (228; 267). Philosophy has "truly grasped itself" when it comprehends the characteristics and relation of the symbolic forms (226; 264). Spirit's knowledge of itself also comes from its understanding of the symbolic forms. Cassirer says, "There is no other, 'higher' form of reality than this self-knowledge of spirit. Here it knows itself as One and Many, as immediate and mediated, as unity, as a synthesis of life and form" (228; 267). Here the powers of philosophy and spirit are alike.

The suggestion that philosophy and the essence of spirit are the same does not mean that philosophy has no connection with or interest in life (*Leben*). Philosophy, like all human activity, requires both principles of human experience; it grows out of and requires both spirit and life. Philosophy is an activity of human beings; it depends on vitality and nature as well as on mind and culture. Its purpose is to understand all these aspects of the human world. Knowing the ground of spirit is knowing life. Philosophy is a spiritual activity because it is a specifically human activity. Philosophy, whether or not it is the self-

awareness of spirit, is not a symbolic form. It questions itself and the whole of reality. It questions its goals, presuppositions, methods, and desires.

Goal of Philosophy

The philosophical goal of self-knowledge is achieved in the process of accomplishing a number of central goals concerning life, spirit, and symbolic form. These goals are to find the unity and the origin of the symbolic forms and to define the human being and culture. Achieving these goals of self-knowledge results in human freedom. Cassirer states this goal in the first lines of the fourth volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* "to compare and unify the many aspects of all we have seen at different stages" (3; 3).

In the first three volumes Cassirer investigates the symbolic forms of language, myth, and theoretical thought, and in the fourth volume he aims at an overall comparison and unification of the symbolic forms. A search for the connection between the forms results in Cassirer's articulation of the first principles of life and spirit. Cassirer says the goal of the first volume, *Language,* is to "survey" the symbolic forms and thereby "possess a kind of grammar of the symbolic function as such, which would encompass and generally help to define its special terms and idioms as we encounter them in language and art, in myth and religion."[2]

Concerning the "general task" of the second volume, *Mythical Thought,* Cassirer says, "We can know myth in its own realm, can know its essence and what it can accomplish spiritually. We can truly overcome it only by recognizing it for what it is: only by

2. *PSF,* 1: 86.

an analysis of its spiritual structure can its proper meaning and limits be determined."[3] If myth can be understood according to its essence, meaning, and limits, it can be distinguished from other symbolic forms. The symbolic forms are to be grasped according to their individual essences, meanings, and limits.

Cassirer states in the third volume, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge,* that "the philosophy of symbolic forms aspires to know the special nature of the various refracting media, to understand each one according to its nature and the laws of its structure."[4] Again, descriptions and comparisons of the individual symbolic forms are Cassirer's focus. The goal of comparison and unification of the symbolic forms stated in the first lines of the fourth volume are unique to it, even though throughout the first three volumes Cassirer comments on the conception of symbolic forms and various connections between them.

An understanding of what connects and unifies the symbolic forms as dialectical activities requires an understanding of how dialectical movement works. Cassirer says this philosophy "seeks to understand and illuminate the riddle of the becoming of form as such—not so much as a finished determination but rather with determination as a process" (4; 4). Philosophy attempts to piece together the puzzle of the dynamics of form. Cassirer describes his philosophical goal as the discovery of origins. The unity of the symbolic forms is in life and spirit, the two principles of humanity. Life, of which spirit is a transformation, is the primordial principle of unity. Hence philosophy seeks to understand life. The goal is to reach the origin. Cassirer says that life is "the primary phenomenon" and that "the highest that we can conceive of is life" (225; 264).

Origin and goal are linked in another sense. Our origin is life

3. *PSF,* 2: xvii.

4. *PSF,* 3: 1.

and our goal of symbolic form is logic, but not, Cassirer claims, logic in the Hegelian sense of transposing all forms of experience into a progression of categories. Philosophy must grasp both of these senses of finality: "In the final, highest insight we must naturally rise to the concept of validity [*Geltung*], but we cannot for this reason do without the concept of life! On the contrary, it is final—a life itself in which we 'participate' in changing symbols!" (234; 271). The aim is to grasp all the symbolic forms, including logic as the highest or last activity of the form of theoretical thought, and to grasp their root in life.

This knowledge of finality does not mean that philosophy can claim to predict the future. Cassirer is critical of those who believe that, through knowledge of life alone, "true philosophy is again supposed to become prophecy" (32; 31). Life has no articulation of values, yet prophecy depends on the articulation of values. Any stand that philosophy takes concerning the movements of culture requires more than knowledge of the origin. Complete knowledge of the origin would include knowledge of spirit's interaction with life. Philosophy should not attempt to isolate the origin; instead, it should attempt to understand the origin as an indispensable aspect of the human world. Prophesying based on life alone is a mistaken goal for philosophy.

Another way to state the goal of philosophy, for Cassirer, is to say that it studies the human being. Philosophy aims to define the human being: "The basic problem of 'philosophical anthropology'" is discovering that "the concept of mankind is defined" by human "achievements" (43; 41). Human beings are symbolic. Cassirer says, "The simplest and most pregnant definition that a philosophically oriented 'anthropology' is capable of giving for mankind would therefore perhaps be that mankind is 'capable of form'" (46; 44).

This study of the human being yields the recognition of the essential nature of human being. Philosophy is the attempt by

consciousness to see more than the individual symbolic forms and to see the link between them. To this end, Cassirer says that consciousness "turns against itself, yet with the intention not of negating its own essential nature, but of recognizing it" (54; 52). This recognition of its own, human nature is the goal of philosophical thought.

Understanding the human being means understanding the entire human world. Philosophy cannot effect self-knowledge by "taking the beginning or the end of the human universe, but not this universe as a whole, as our main focus" (60; 58); rather, understanding all human formation, meaning, and value is the aim of philosophy. Cassirer's philosophy of life and spirit aims at knowing the totality of the human world.

The goal of understanding the whole of human reality is not to be mistaken for the goal of creating a system. Cassirer says, "This direction of our 'glance' at the whole (of phenomena, at the primary phenomena) defines a specific way of regarding things which must be strictly distinguished from having a view of the 'system' ('signification,' Newton)" (200; 207). A system in this sense is the product of the symbolic form of theoretical thought and is necessarily a partial view of reality. Systems are based on theories, such as theories in mathematics or physics, and are composed of the laws of their domains. Philosophy, in contrast, attempts to grasp all ways in which human beings experience the world—the expressive, the representational, and the theoretical.

Cassirer's goal is a systematic philosophy, but this is not to be confused with the theoretical goal of system-building. Cassirer describes the aim of philosophy as "systematic review" (*systematischer Rückblick*) or "systematic 'reconstruction' " (*systematische 'Rekonstruktion'*) (56; 54); such systematic thought refers to the articulation of the particular forms within the totality of

the human world. Theoretical systems lead to irrevocable oppositions or antinomies because they are partial. Philosophy's goal is to grasp the entirety of life and spirit. Its goal is to acquire a systematic way of thinking, a holistic viewpoint, but not to create a fixed "system."

The overarching aim of philosophy is human freedom. Cassirer's chief problem with Heidegger is that Heidegger rejects human freedom by employing a notion of fate. For Cassirer, human beings can overcome the fact of death by knowing and accepting it, thereby distancing themselves from it. This distance is a kind of freedom. Cassirer states, "This might be a very ancient way of thinking, this might be found by some to be very heathen, but it is the truly philosophical solution, which takes death itself up among the realm of necessity, and through this thought of necessity, through *amor fati,* it is able to liberate us from anxiety about death" (208; 224). Philosophy provides an ideal of freedom in the face of necessity.

Philosophical Presuppositions

Knowledge of the whole human world requires awareness of the presuppositions which are a part of that knowledge and a part of the whole human world. The presuppositions of philosophical thought also affect the results of that thought. Cassirer criticizes various philosophical positions with regard to their presuppositions, but he affirms that some presuppositions are required for any philosophical knowledge.

Cassirer says, "In the end one can 'develop' out of elements nothing other than what had been already implicitly attributed to them, no matter how concealed this tacit assumption has been" (38; 37). One finds in any position what is already there in its origins. The task of philosophy is not to give up on knowledge

but to uncover and express the presuppositions involved in any conception of knowledge. In a criticism of Paul Natorp's view of human sensation, Cassirer states, "That various theoretical presuppositions enter into this 'datum' itself, which a truly thorough reconstruction would have to show and make clear, is here neither recognized nor acknowledged" (58; 56). The possibility of knowledge cannot be abandoned; instead it requires the recognition and acknowledgment of the presuppositions involved.

Cassirer criticizes philosophies of life, skeptical philosophy, and philosophies grounded in a naturalistic view of the world. The philosophy of life presupposes the values it rejects. It values life and rejects spirit, but Cassirer points out that all values arise only in spirit. Cassirer says, "The metaphysics of life must make use of the spirit's administration of judgments, which it rejects, and in doing so it indirectly accepts the use of judgment" (31; 30); that is, it "implicitly presupposes" its values (32; 31). By praising life and denying the necessity of spirit in the human world, the metaphysics of life (for example, in Bergson, Heidegger) is internally contradictory. The contradiction arises through a disregard by such philosophy of its own presuppositions.

Skepticism is flawed in a similar way. Spengler's skeptical approach to history claims that expression is the only form in which cultural history exists. Cassirer claims that Spengler's attempt at a " 'morphology' of world history," based on "merely physiognomic expression," presupposes a logic outside of expression: "The unique power and independence of the 'logos' are once again presupposed and recognized in the basic topic of a morpho-*logy*" (108; 105). Spengler does not see that his philosophy of history presupposes a standard of reason in history. Skepticism in general is flawed in this sense; simply stated, "Skepticism seeks to expose the nullity of knowledge and language—but what it ultimately demonstrates is rather the nullity

of the *standard* by which it measures them."[5] Skepticism of all forms presupposes reason as a standard, in the reasoned claim that knowledge is unattainable.

A final instance of philosophies that go wrong owing to their presuppositions is found in those philosophies based on the natural world view, or a naive realism. In the natural worldview the human and physical universes are essentially alike. Philosophies based on this view attempt to study humanity as science studies nature, to study the temporal development of form out of matter. Cassirer says, "A strictly naturalistic anthropology must undertake this attempt again and again, for its 'possibility' depends upon the success of this attempt. But this attempt always turns out in the end to be circular" (38; 37). By presupposing that human beings and nature develop in the same way, naturalistic philosophies find only what they expect to find.

The natural world picture as a type of human experience is accounted for in the philosophy of symbolic forms, which "cannot simply accept the natural world view but must inquire into the conditions of its possibility."[6] To view the world with the naive realism of the natural world picture is to see it as a world of things or physical objects. In the scientific study of nature this is an accepted and legitimate view, but when it becomes a presupposition in the philosophical study of the human world, it falsifies what is to be understood. Cassirer says that in the study of nature, " 'naive realism' appears to have its proper place; reality as it is found in the forms of experience, in the forms of space and time, of substantiality and causality, are regarded as 'absolute' reality" (85; 83). Presupposing that the formative, functional, human world is reducible to an order of thinglike substances is a philosophical mistake.

5. *PSF,* 1: 188.
6. *PSF,* 3: 28.

Philosophy, however, cannot do without some kinds of presuppositions. Philosophy attempts to articulate reality; thus language must be presupposed for philosophical activity. The symbolic form of language enables the formulation of philosophical distinctions: "As long as the function of language has not yet completely developed or achieved its full strength, there are as yet no really sharp distinctions of such areas of 'importance,'" and "the difference between the 'essential' and the 'unessential' does not precede the development of language" (73; 71). Philosophy requires the sensibilities present in myth and the expressive function (*Ausdrucksfunktion*) of consciousness, but the specific activity of philosophical articulation depends on language. Language is the medium of philosophy, but in fact philosophical thought presupposes all the symbolic forms, in various ways.

The philosophical activity of finding analogies rests on a presupposition as well. To use analogy as a method of philosophy requires a previous grasp of essences. Cassirer uses analogy in his own texts; he considers whether "an analogous 'change in meaning'" can be found for the experiences of space and of time (98; 95). The capacity for analogy necessitates a previous grasp of essence; comparing two aspects of something requires having a grasp of what each aspect is. Cassirer says, "For in the end knowledge by analogy also presupposes insight into specific, objective facts, and without them it would have no footing and no definiteness" (109; 107).

In sum, philosophy cannot rid itself of presuppositions of knowledge; therefore it must consciously clarify its presuppositions. Such a clarification can reveal whether particular presuppositions are interfering with or even falsifying its results. Some presuppositions mislead; others are necessary for thought because "there is no seeing that is merely receptivity" (30; 29).

Methodological Starting Point

Cassirer describes the methodological starting point of philosophy in several ways; all are related to the notion of immanence. The starting points for philosophy lie in the unity of spirit, in critique, and in the process of formation. Starting from a dogmatic, rigid, or narrow position results in a mistaken view of the human world.

Thought is immanent in the human world; philosophy will not discover what it means to be human by attempting to think outside life, spirit, and symbolic form. The philosophy of symbolic forms does not begin from an external position of thought: "All this is denied it by the methodological rule to which it ascribed from the beginning. This method restricts it to the limits of immanence" (49; 47). Philosophical understanding can be gained only by traversing the totality of spirit from the inside. As mentioned earlier, Cassirer says that the " 'Archimedean point' of certitude that we are seeking can never be given to us from outside of it, but must always be sought within it" (50; 47). The starting point for philosophy is to be sought within culture. Answers to questions about self-knowledge are already present in culture.

The unity of spirit is immanent in culture. Spirit does not exist as an external reality and then reproduce itself as culture; instead, the distinction between inner and outer and all other such distinctions exist within the unity of spirit. Philosophy must begin with the unity of spirit as the formulator of reality. Cassirer says, "The fundamental starting point of our way of looking at things is that no separation can be made between some positively given being and the spiritual functions, which are presumed to apply subsequently to this material" (223; 261). Reality is not given or absolute, because there is nothing determinate outside spirit.

The starting point for philosophy is the notion that all knowledge exists within the unity of spirit.

Critique is the beginning of philosophical method. If reality is constituted through spirit, then examining how spirit functions in relation to itself is a fundamental philosophical task. Cassirer says that Konrad Fiedler, "the modern aesthetician whose starting point and philosophical method are closest to our own," began with the critique of knowledge; Fiedler "saw the necessity of constructing aesthetics on a basis secured by the criticism of knowledge" (81; 79). Having the correct starting point, however, does not ensure correct results. Despite Fiedler's application of the method of critique, his findings are flawed: "The 'objectivistic' founding of aesthetics finally undergoes a methodological overstatement and exaggeration insofar as it tends to push aside completely the subjective factors in aesthetic experience" (84; 81). Critique must address itself to all the conditions of knowledge, taking both life's subjectivity and spirit's objectivity into account.

Cassirer says, "The problem of a 'philosophical anthropology' does not stand outside the purview of critical philosophy"; the starting point for Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms is critical (34; 32). Philosophical anthropology studies what is peculiarly human by comparing the conditions of human experience with the conditions of animal experience. The symbolic forms are what first differentiate the human from the animal world; the activity of philosophy occurs later.

In critique, the formation of symbols is taken to be a distinctively human process. The symbolic forms enable the human being both to hold the world at a distance and to approach it; they make the human being unique. Cassirer says, "If we are to identify this process of delimitation, to draw a line of demarcation between mankind and the totality of the world of living

things, this can occur only by taking the concept and structure of this configuration as a starting point" (38; 36). Philosophical critique shows how those immanent formations make human experience possible. They provide philosophy with its starting point.

Cassirer finds fault with the designation of other starting points for philosophy. What he calls the philosophy of being has a false start in its dogmatic view that reality is substantive. Cassirer says, "Realistic metaphysics agrees with empiricist Positivism in that they both think in terms of substance: they begin with the unitary 'simplicity' of the thing, of the existing 'world' as present at hand" (224–25; 263). Reality is multifunctional; therefore, a beginning in unitary simplicity leads to contradictions and antinomies of thought, and "these contradictions cannot be resolved as long as one clings to the notion of Being as a univocal, certain starting point" (224; 262).

Philosophy should rightly begin with the notion of functions and formations, not beings; the interaction of the processes of spirit and life cannot be understood simply through the notion of being. Cassirer says, "What seems to be a real opposition when seen from the standpoint of Being becomes merged; it becomes a correlation and cooperation, when regarded from the standpoint of activity" (17; 16). Cassirer's philosophy *"begins not with the simple unity of the thing (substance), but with the unity of function"* (225; 263). Again, the philosophical starting point affects the philosophical results.

Cassirer does not, however, completely reject the notion of being. Thinking in terms of being is a stage of thought, to be understood as occurring within the process of symbolic formation. Being has no independent reality: "There is no 'being' of any kind except by virtue of some particular energy ('nature,' for example, only by virtue of artistic, religious, or scientific energy)

and without our taking this relation into account, the concept of 'being' would be completely empty for us" (224; 262). Being is a result of symbolic formation and cannot be an external basis for the forms.

Cassirer rejects the view that philosophy can start from a fixed theoretical position. In the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer says, "Philosophical inquiry into artistic as well as mythical and linguistic expression is in danger of missing its mark if, instead of immersing itself freely in the particular forms and laws of expression, it starts from dogmatic assumptions regarding the relation between 'archetype' [*Urbild*] and 'reproduction,' [*Abbild*] 'reality' [*Wirklichkeit*] and 'appearance,' [*Schein*] 'inner' and 'outer' world."[7] The fourth volume shows how these particular forms are further grounded in the starting points of spirit and life.

Philosophy should not begin with the view that the inner and outer worlds are static or finished things. The dialectical movement of the symbolic media produce such distinctions. Cassirer's philosophy begins with such movement: "We began with the view that the meaning and value of the individual symbolic forms could never be completely obtained if we were to see in each of them only a bridge between a *finished* 'inner world' and a *finished* 'outer world,' between an 'I' and a 'non-I' as given and fixed starting points" (60; 59). The symbolic forms create such oppositions; the particular way in which each form achieves these oppositions gives each form its particular characteristics.

In the essay " 'Spirit' and 'Life' in Contemporary Philosophy," Cassirer also states that philosophy must attempt to understand reality as process. Not in the fixed of space but in the dynamic terminology of movement, rhythm, and current does philosophy begin to describe reality. Cassirer says, "To be sure, it is

7. *PSF,* 1: 178.

evident that all these turns of expression can be nothing other and nothing more than metaphors; but, if at all, it is only in dynamic metaphors like these, and not in any figures whatsoever borrowed from the static world, the world of things and thing-relationships, that the connection between the 'particular' and the 'general' in language, the relation between 'Life' and 'Spirit' therein, can properly be described."[8]

A narrow beginning point for philosophical thought is a hindrance to the achievement of its goals. In systematically reconstructing how life and spirit must interact to produce the human world, the philosopher must adopt the broadest view possible. If philosophical thought is to discover the ground of all of reality, it is necessary to obtain the most open starting point. Cassirer says, "The danger of taking too narrow an approach arises in two different ways: by limiting the starting point of our questions either in an intellectualistic or in a pragmatic sense" (56–57; 54–55). Cassirer here refers specifically to Paul Natorp's intellectual concept and Bergson's pragmatic concept of spirit. He contrasts these ideas with his own more comprehensive view of spirit. A one-dimensional starting point cannot lead to an understanding of the multidimensional human universe.

Philosophy does not properly begin by imposing a view about reality onto its subject for study; it instead begins with an active openness toward its own thought and its own immanence within the process of culture. The philosophy of symbolic forms "does not begin with a prejudice about the character of their reality, but seeks to understand *every view* according to its own norms" (211; 229); and in doing so, philosophy grasps the entirety of the symbolic world. Philosophy also should not begin with a prejudice concerning the first principles of life and spirit. The starting point for philosophy is in the notion of immanence, not the

8. "S & L," 879–80.

notion of being. With such a starting point philosophy can produce an account of the totality of human experience rather than create antinomies of thought.

Methodological Turn

In Cassirer's consideration of the presuppositions, starting point, and method of philosophical thought, method is described as a "turn" (*Wendung*). To grasp the totality of human experience, a methodological turn is required. Philosophy turns to the world of symbolic forms in order to see the activities of spirit and life within them. This turn is possible because of the inherent connection between all thought and its ground.

Cassirer invariably turns to discussions of the individual symbolic forms to illustrate features of life and spirit. The symbolic form of language exhibits the interconnection between the living, creative process in the use of language and the spiritual, structuring activity involved in the preservation of language. Language shows the becoming of form; Cassirer says that it should be conceived of "not merely as something that has become what it is, but which is continuously shaping itself" (16; 15).

Examining symbolic forms is the only way to turn to life and make life visible; it is "the method by means of which we are able to expose the unique character of 'subjectivity' " (53; 51). The immediacy of life can be understood only through the mediacy of symbolic forms, which incorporate the features of life. The understanding of life requires discursive knowing rather than immediate vision.

The dialectic between mediacy and immediacy becomes evident in the philosophical turn. The mind cannot rid itself of its immersion in symbolic media, yet it can step back from them to look for their first principles: "In the midst of the application of

these categories, it can turn back to their 'origin,' it can ask about their ground and significance. This question is the beginning of a new attitude" (54; 51). The posing of philosophical questions both interrupts thought and raises thought to new awareness; it embraces the dialectic between the immediate and mediate activities in spirit.

The methodological turn is a turn not to unitary being but to the totality of thought. The unity of spirit is life, as that from which symbolic forms arise. The turn to the unity of the symbolic forms is therefore the attempt to reach life. Cassirer says, "Here a turn must occur: 'subjective, instead of objective.' What we need is not the 'unity' of the thing, the absolute object, but the unity of spirit, of the spiritual energy as such in all the various 'symbolic forms.' That is what the philosophy of symbolic forms has tried to give and provide (whereby of course we may not confine ourselves to the energy of 'knowledge' [*Erkenntnis*] as Kant did)" (224; 262–63). A focus on only one symbolic form—theoretical knowledge (*Erkenntnis*)—no matter what its importance, cannot provide a view of the totality and unity of spirit. Through the unity of the symbolic forms, the bringing together of myth, language, and scientific knowledge, and these together with other forms, the features of life and spirit can be discerned.

Metaphysics, the turn to and study of spirit and life, requires a phenomenology of spirit in the sense of establishing the path spirit takes from its most primary to its most self-consciously cognitive forms. Cassirer says, "The philosophy of symbolic forms has sought from the beginning to establish the path that leads through the concrete productions of spirit. By taking this path, the philosophy of symbolic forms finds that it meets with spirit everywhere as . . . the 'Will to Formation' " (28; 27). Through comprehension of the total course of the productions or phenomena of spirit, the nature of symbolic formation can be discovered.

The philosophical turn must be achieved through a comprehension of all the forms of human experience. Cassirer criticizes other positions for trying to bypass comprehension of the totality of the phenomena of spirit or symbolic forms in their attempt to reach and differentiate life and spirit. Cassirer says that philosophy "cannot simply give itself over to irrationalism; it cannot attempt to drive the intellect beyond itself by means of a decree of the will; it cannot exchange the mediacy of analysis for the immediacy of intuition" (49; 47). Irrationalism takes the wrong turn because, by definition, the goal of an articulated knowledge of human reality can in no way be obtained through the irrational.

It is a mistake to hold that a leap of will can provide knowledge of life and spirit. In such a view, the intellect is merely a part of the mind and cannot answer the question of its cause: "This is the essential, truly critical question for Bergson's methodology. He is himself clearly conscious of the fact that a rational answer to this question is not possible within his system" (49; 47). If the intellect is considered narrow and partial, then it cannot see the totality of symbolic thought, and it cannot gain access to the unity of spirit and life.

Cassirer rejects intuition as the starting point for thought because it represents an attempt to grasp the immediate without the mediation of the symbolic forms. Cassirer says, "The turn toward intuition stands in opposition to the symbolic direction of thought, and it seeks to gain predominance by an *Aufhebung* of the contents of the symbolic forms" (230; 268). For Cassirer, philosophy must think through the contents of the symbolic forms, not merely preserve them. Each of these methods attempts to avoid a full account of the phenomena of symbolic formation and does not arrive at a knowledge of life and spirit.

What makes the philosophical turn possible is the dialectical movement of reality that is already displayed by life, spirit,

and the symbolic forms. The transformation of life into spirit is a turn to form. Cassirer says, "The 'turn to the idea' requires in every case this turn to 'symbolic form' as its precondition and necessary access" (14; 13). The process of mediation between life and spirit is exhibited by the originating and continuing movement of the symbolic forms. Philosophy systematically reconstructs the necessary turn of life to form as a result of itself thinking through this turn.

Philosophy is able to uncover the basic activities of the human being because, in much the same way as life and spirit, it turns to what it already comprises. The potential for life's turn to form is an original aspect of life, and its inherent goal. Cassirer asks, "How could life 'turn to' this objective content if the relationship and tension, the 'intention,' toward it did not already originally lie enclosed within it, indeed if this very intention were not an aspect of it, its being, and its final fulfillment?" (19; 18). Analogously, human beings could not turn, in philosophy, to life and spirit were life and spirit not originally aspects of the human being. As formation is the fulfillment of life, philosophy is the fulfillment of the symbolic forms. The methodological turn of philosophy is possible because as a spiritual activity it moves dialectically and is originally connected to spirit's origin in life.

In particular, memory makes the philosophical turn possible. As mentioned before, animals differ from human beings is in their capacities of recollection. Cassirer says, "The lack of memory, of 'retaining inside,' according to all that can be inferred otherwise about animal 'mental life,' is an original lack of any turn inward. Genuine 'memory' is correlative with what opposes it; it is connected with its seeming opposite" (77; 74–75); and human memory is called " 'recollection' " or " 'knowledge-memory' " (86; 84). If life and the unity of spirit lie originally enclosed in the human being, then the philosophical turn is a kind of recollection. In philosophy the human being retrieves the

totality of self, and through philosophy, the self achieves self-knowledge.

From whatever direction we approach Cassirer's philosophical turn, the method of his philosophy remains a turn to life and spirit through the individual symbolic forms. Philosophy is bound to human thought; it "remains strictly within the world of thought and utilizes only its own, immanent means" (55; 53). The systematic overview of the symbolic forms, which is the purpose of philosophy, rests on this methodological turn to spirit and life as their ground.

Accessibility of Origins and Developments

Cassirer has a complex view of how and what philosophy can know about cultural origins and the developments from them. On the one hand, access to knowledge of the origins and development of culture is possible and even central to Cassirer's philosophy; on the other hand, full access to such knowledge is denied by it.

Philosophy depends on its ability to understand how culture originated and progressed. Cassirer calls life the "common origin" of the various human symbolic activities and worlds (225; 263). Life is furthermore described as coming before spirit: "In life alone we do not have such spirit, such 'being for itself.' . . . It is in these [the symbolic forms] that 'life' first attains to 'form' " (228; 266). Philosophy, in this respect, has access to the origin of all human culture. Philosophy is able to discover which symbolic form originally springs out of life. Myth is the most primordial of all symbolic forms. Cassirer says, "The further back we go, the more we seem to approach the truly primordial level of myth, the more clearly this 'closeness to life' becomes" (20; 19). Philosophy must think its way back through myth to reach a knowledge of life.

This access to mythic thought is crucial to understanding the other symbolic forms as well, such as the symbolic form of history. Cassirer says, "Myth, insofar as it is seen and understood in a truly comprehensive manner, provides the magic key that unlocks the world of history" (88; 86). Myth provides the richest insights into the human past. Myth, as the symbolic form closest to life, provides a standard by which to measure the other symbolic forms. Cassirer's philosophy demonstrates the accessibility of this primordial symbolic form.

Cassirer's philosophy also makes accessible a knowledge of the development of the symbolic forms as they differentiate themselves from myth. In the philosophy of symbolic forms, Cassirer adopts Hegel's project in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* of showing the developmental stages of spirit or consciousness. These stages progress, in Cassirer's terms, to theoretical knowledge, not to the Absolute. Using Hegel's image of the ladder, Cassirer says that philosophy should " 'provide us with the ladder' to consciousness that will then lead consciousness to this standpoint of theoretical knowledge" (87; 84). For Cassirer, the ladder must begin with the first form of thinking, the symbolic form of myth.

Cassirer's description of the movement of the symbolic forms reveals his general concern with developmental forms of thinking. In describing the development from animal experience to human experience, he says, "We will have to attribute some kind of 'object-related' view to the higher animals. An 'opposing world,' an 'objective' reality, as the 'objectified' starts to appear" (213; 231). Here, Cassirer appears to say that a kind of spiritual development from animals to human beings occurs.

The symbolic forms are compared by describing the development of one symbolic form out of another. The movement from myth to language and the differences between language, art, and theoretical thought are described in developmental terms. Re-

garding the movement from myth to language, Cassirer says, "In these first, primitive structures of myth the decisive step has already been made. The chaos of affects has begun to clear, and the particular configurations emerge from it that acquire an enduring nature" (70; 68); and "this itself again provides a definite stage" (74; 72).

A developmental understanding is also shown in Cassirer's descriptions of the changes internal to the symbolic form of language. The concept of object or thing, "the pure thing-schema," develops or "first comes about" through the steps that language takes in its advancement (214; 232). At its most primitive, language acts in the sphere of emotion, means, and ends, whereas at its most advanced, language acts in the sphere of vision, objects, and contexts. Cassirer says, "In its highest logical achievements language moves far beyond this circle. It makes the transition from the sphere of emotion to the 'theoretical' sphere" (76; 74). The characteristics of language are clarified through study of the phenomenological evolution of language.

Art also is known through its development. At its origin, art is connected to myth; picture magic is central to the mythic relationship to nature. In its development as a symbolic form, art is also closely tied to myth; both forms make an image of the world. Cassirer says, "In its earliest beginnings it [art] appears to belong completely to the mythic sphere," and "Emancipation from this circle takes place only gradually and step by step" (80; 78).

The symbolic form of theoretical thought is the final stage of symbolism in Cassirer's general phenomenology of knowledge. Like all the symbolic forms, science or theoretical thought evolves; it is "a slow, continuous development" (217; 236). The evolution of science occurs in opposition to the more primary forms of thought. Cassirer says, "The last stage, the stage of theoretical knowledge, creates a new form of objectification. It

is in a certain sense directed as much against language as it is directed against myth. It advances beyond language's category of the thing" (217; 235). The steps by which science makes concepts, models, and laws reveal the inner form of the theoretical worldview.

All symbolic formation participates in the development of human freedom. Through the activity of symbolic formation the human being becomes conscious and finally self-conscious. Through the act of becoming conscious, the human being begins to acquire freedom. Cassirer says, "By means of its resources and its own unique way, every symbolic form works toward the transition from the realm of 'nature' to that of 'freedom' " (111; 109).

Despite such descriptions of origin, primordial form, development, evolution, and change, Cassirer denies that philosophy has access to certain types of knowledge. Philosophy has no access to the genesis or cause of symbolic formation itself. Philosophy can study the contents of the forms but the findings of these studies involve necessary limits on knowledge. Cassirer rejects the possibility of genetic or causal knowledge of the human world. Philosophy has no access to a "genetic-historical" analysis of the human world (41; 39). Cassirer criticizes Kant for his genetic view: "[There are] defects in the definition of the correlative relationship between matter and form in Kant. They stem from the fact that a question concerning matters of meaning has again been reinterpreted in an unacceptable way as a genetic question about origins" (194; 200). Cassirer states that his own view, "the purely analytic point of view," is not genetic, nor can it "be confused with questions of genesis" (66; 65).

Symbolic form, spirit, and life *as such* cannot be known in evolutionary terms. Cassirer says it is not the case that "the world of the spirit can be 'derived' from nature in the sense of an evolutionistic metaphysics" (47; 45). He rejects the positivis-

tic view that culture and nature are intelligible according to scientifically formulated evolutionary or genetic principles. Cassirer says, "The methodology of anthropology as it has been shaped under the influence of the idea of evolution and the great evolutionary systems, particularly Herbert Spencer's, no longer stands unquestioned and unshaken" (37; 35). Philosophical anthropology is research into essence and meaning, not merely into empirical data. A scientific view of an evolution of symbolic forms is not possible for two reasons: symbolic forms are not only natural but also spiritual, and science is only a partial view of reality.

Life can be claimed in phenomenological terms as the originary principle of the human being, but thought has no access to the temporal origin of the human being. At what point in time spirit arose from life is unknowable. Cassirer says, "No metaphysics and no empirical fact will ever be in a position to illuminate the 'origin' of this configuration in the sense that it puts us back at the temporal starting point, that it permits us immediately to eavesdrop on its beginning. We can never penetrate back to the point at which the first ray of spiritual consciousness broke out of the world of life; we cannot put our finger on the place at which language or myth, art or knowledge 'arose' " (38; 36). The forms already exist in the human world; thought has no way to gain access to the temporal start of symbolic formation.

We can have knowledge of the particular contents of the symbolic forms. Each form is a whole of meaning; its contents are not separable into discrete parts. The contents of the symbolic forms can be compared according to their simplicity or complexity of configuration. Cassirer says, "We can only oppose *totalities* of meaning to one another, in order to become aware of the specific spiritual norm that governs them, but we cannot trace the formative principle under which they stand to some-

thing itself not yet formed, so as to let it 'develop' out of some as yet unformed 'matter'" (38; 37). In this sense, knowledge of the development of symbolic forms out of life is inaccessible to philosophy. They simply begin as transformations of life.

Philosophical knowledge of the origins of culture, that is, of life and spirit, thus has limits. Life can be articulated and its activity described, but the reason for its existence, its cause, cannot be understood: "Here we stand indeed before a primary phenomenon, which can be given only verbal expression but not given any further 'explanation'" (226; 264). The activities of life, including its transformation into spirit, can be articulated by philosophy. Cassirer states, "The philosophy of symbolic forms seeks to represent the nature and full development of this primary phenomenon, but it naturally cannot go back to its 'Why,' and it does not raise this question, but recognizes here the necessary and inescapable 'limit of conceptualization'" (225; 263). The developmental knowledge Cassirer speaks of here concerns the nontemporal development of life. The genetic or evolutionary development of life into form remains unknowable.

Similarly, spirit cannot be understood in these terms, although differences between the senses of objectivity and reality in each of the symbolic forms can be articulated. Whether the symbolic forms actually produce spiritual objectification is unresolvable; Cassirer says, "This question is basically as pointless as it is unanswerable" (66; 64). Philosophy must recognize its limitations and accept that its understanding of the origins of life and spirit is limited.

Where the limitations of thought are not understood, philosophy goes astray. Bergson's philosophy is an attempt to overstep the limits of intelligence through an act of the will and thereby touch the immediacy of life. Such an attempt yields false results. Cassirer says, "It hereby becomes more and more tangled

in its own nets—it attains to ever more complicated constructions, but it never achieves anything that is superior or even different from it" (49; 47).

In sum, philosophy can know itself and the bases of culture because it has access to certain kinds of knowledge concerning the origins, developments, and contents of the human world. Not all issues of origin and development are resolvable, however, because access to the cause of knowledge itself, to spirit as such, is not possible. Cassirer is willing to accept spirit and life and the act of symbolic formation as primordial, as *archai*. The recognition of this metaphysical limitation of knowledge is a guide to genuine understanding and a liberation of philosophy from the error of acting as though it can provide what in principle it cannot.

Holistic Knowledge

Philosophy, according to Cassirer, seeks an understanding of the whole human universe, that is, holistic knowledge. Such knowledge involves an account of how this is obtained and how it compares to other ways of thinking. In Cassirer's view, the general is studied through the particular; the preference for a particular way of thinking yields a narrow, nonholistic account of reality. In this process philosophical relativism is rejected and antinomies of thought are overcome.

Cassirer says, following Hegel, "The whole is the true" (193; 199). Philosophy aims at understanding the whole of culture, the "human universe" or "this universe as a whole" (60; 58). Philosophical anthropology depends on study of the symbolic forms because they are specifically human: "The analysis of the particular symbolic forms can help us in the attempt to create a philosophical anthropology. In fact, there is no other means by which to distinguish the specifically human world from the

world of natural forms or to uncover what it is" (42; 40). Cassirer's philosophical anthropology, the study of the whole human universe, necessarily includes the metaphysical investigation of spirit and life as the first principles of culture.

Philosophy attempts to grasp the general. While spirit is engaged in symbolic activity, it can also attain the level of philosophical thought and reflectively examine its activity. This examination ignores the singular to attend to the general. Cassirer says, "This dismantling can of course never be understood in an ontological sense, but only in a purely methodological one. It does not involve getting rid of objective, spiritual creations, but only ignoring them in a specific, limited sense," and "it expands its own horizon through this review" (54; 52). Knowing the individual symbolic phases and reviewing the links between them allows thought to grasp the horizon of symbolic formation.

This kind of review is a characteristic project of the first three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.* It is not specific languages but the universal features of language that are of interest. Cassirer says, "Although philosophical analysis can never claim to grasp completely the special subjectivity that expresses itself in the different languages, still the universal subjectivity of language remains within the scope of its problems."[9] The characteristic features of each of the symbolic forms are taken up in a systematic review.

With such a review, general knowledge of the human world becomes possible. The fourth volume seeks to go beyond the findings of the previous volumes, which reviewed only the individual symbolic forms. As mentioned earlier, Cassirer says he is "trying to summarize in a systematic review what we found there and to generalize from this summary" (56; 54). Generalizing from the findings of the previous texts of the philosophy of

9. *PSF,* 1: 285.

symbolic forms shows what the " 'philosophy of symbolic forms' can provide to the foundation of a philosophical anthropology" (55; 53). This anthropology includes the grounding of human experience in the principles of life and spirit.

Cassirer also discusses how the general is grasped by philosophy. Thought develops by attending to the particular, and it sees the whole of culture through the media of particular symbolic forms. The broadest knowledge is obtained by thinking through all aspects of the whole. Cassirer says, "We start with the concept of the whole: the whole is the true (Hegel). But the truth of the whole can always only be grasped in a particular 'aspect.' This is 'knowledge' in the *broadest* sense—'seeing' the whole 'in' an aspect, through the medium of this aspect" (193; 199).

The notion that the whole is visible through the parts is not new to the fourth volume. In the first volume, for instance, Cassirer says that "every notion of a part already encompasses the notion of the whole, not as to content, but as to general structure and form."[10] In the fourth volume he attempts to comprehend the metaphysical ground of the whole. Cassirer says, "Knowledge is 'organic' insofar as every part is conditioned by the whole and can be made 'understandable' only by reference to the whole. It cannot be composed of pieces, of elements, except to the extent that each part already carries in itself the 'form' of the whole" (193; 199). The way to grasp spirit and life is through the symbolic forms, because each form manifests the features of spirit and life.

The essence of the general is expressed in each aspect of reality. It is not necessary, or even possible, to study all historical manifestations of symbolic forms; studying a single case can reveal the essential features of spirit and life. Cassirer states, "The heaping up of all these manifestations does not help us to find

10. *PSF*, 1: 102.

and grasp this essence itself if we were not already able to experience it paradigmatically in a single case of its realization" (110; 107). Cassirer advocates the importance of a "single example" in this form (42; 40). A previous grasp of essence, inherent in thought, allows the general to appear to thought through the particular.

This examination of the particular does not mean that philosophy favors one aspect over others. Holistic knowledge is not achieved by privileging one aspect and neglecting another: "We will never arrive at a description and an understanding of this world if we extract only a portion of it, if we try to read off its total meaning from a single, privileged part of it" (60; 58). Klages and Heidegger, for example, make the mistake of privileging one aspect over others. They lack a view of the whole.

As mentioned above, Klages favors myth in his description of the human world. This attention to myth provides insights into myth but not into the whole of reality. Cassirer says, "It does not seek to 'think' the nature of myth from outside, but to enter into its characteristic and specific way of seeing things. By virtue of this viewpoint, however, it is forced from the outset to remain within the sphere of mythical vision" (25; 24). The result of Klages's view is the indictment of spirit and the approval of life; this imbalance is destructive of a philosophical anthropology that attempts to do justice to the whole of human experience.

Heidegger's thought has a similar problem. It remains in the religious sphere and cannot grasp the whole of human and cultural activity. Cassirer says, "Heidegger moves through the sphere of life to that of personal existence, which he utilizes unremittingly for a religious purpose, but on the other hand he is also confined by this sphere" (203; 221). Within his religious outlook, the whole of life and spirit cannot be perceived: "From the philosophy of religion, the problem of 'life' and 'spirit' also

poses itself differently" (200; 219). Noteworthy is Cassirer's distinction between Heidegger's notion of religion and his own, a "broader, more universal, *idealistic* meaning of religion" in which "we behold liberation and deliverance" from finitude (203; 221). Within a confined notion of religion, as within any particular symbolic view, holisic knowledge cannot be achieved.

Cassirer's list of types of metaphysics illustrates his view that philosophy should not favor, reduce to, or emphasize one part of experience. Cassirer holds that there are three types of metaphysics—one based on the phenomenon of expression (*das Ausdrucksphänomen*) or myth, another on representation or language, and another on signification or science. He regards the romanticism of Klages as representative of the first, the vitalism of Bergson as representative of the second, and the positivism of Moritz Schlick as representative of the third (219; 237–38). Each of the three philosophers focuses on only one attitude and the result is a distorted understanding of life and spirit. In contrast, what Cassirer calls "*our* metaphysics" is the holistic knowledge of life, spirit, and all their formations (219; 238). A full understanding of the interaction of life and spirit requires an understanding of each formation of that interaction. Through a knowledge of each part, knowledge of the whole is obtained.

Cassirer's interest in the broadest, most comprehensive view of reality is grounded in his analysis of spirit. Spirit is not merely the intellect or the categories of science. Cassirer says, "It is most important that we reinstate 'intelligence' [*'Intelligenz'*] in its full concept, before we compare it with other powers of being and measure it by reference to them" (60; 58). To compare life and spirit properly, a complete view of spirit is needed. Human beings are not only theoretical but also mythic and artistic, and holistic knowledge depends on this full notion of spirit. A narrow interpretation of spirit is a narrow interpretation of the human world.

The forms of knowledge present in the symbolic forms are relative to one another; each produces its own view of reality, appears sequentially as the predominant way of thinking, and has equal importance as an element of culture. The notion of thing is relative to the symbolic form of language, which construes the world in terms of things. Cassirer says, "The *category* of the thing exemplifies a particular *phase* in the view of things, and is an outgrowth of what came before. The thing is not the final condition of all knowledge; rather, the thing itself is conditioned: it holds only relatively for a particular point of view. It is a *mode* of having or understanding a world, not the presupposition or *foundation* of our understanding a world" (212; 230). Knowledge of the presuppositions or foundations of culture is philosophical knowledge and is not relative in the sense that the type of knowledge present in a given symbolic form is relative.

Philosophical knowledge is not relative, because philosophy is not a symbolic form. Philosophy grasps, comprehends, compares, and finds the grounds of the symbolic forms; these activities preclude its relativization. Life and spirit, as first principles of human reality, do not change or shift their fundamental identities, and the true grasp of these principles does not change, either. The aspects or forms of the whole may change, but the principles upon which the activity of the whole depends do not change. Philosophy cannot be modified by competing activities; it is the only activity of its kind.

That holistic knowledge is not relative does not mean that it is absolute. Absolute knowledge as a point at which every aspect of reality is grasped, Cassirer claims, requires that reality be fixed and unchanging. Reality, however, is continually and dialectically in motion; the essence of human reality is that human beings never become finished static beings. The principles of life and spirit are unchanging, but their symbolic achievements change and develop; holistic knowledge accepts the changing

nature of reality, and its account is modified in accordance with such changes.

Cassirer says we cannot "behold the 'Absolute' face to face. Instead, we must strive to comprehend every symbol in its place and recognize how it is limited and conditioned by every other symbol." In Cassirer's redefinition of it: "The 'Absolute' is always simply the completely relative, which has been carried through to the end in a systematic overview, and the absoluteness of spirit in particular can be nothing else and cannot try to be" (227; 265). The absolute understood as an object of thought is equivalent to being; the absolute understood as the whole is a functional concept. Systematic overview by philosophy encompasses all the relative forms of knowing but does not thereby reach being as an object that transcends them.

Holistic knowledge both grounds the symbolic forms in life and spirit and knows the forms as relative to one another. Cassirer says, "This metaphysics—to our understanding—simultaneously comprehends and gives a foundation to all the previous levels of symbolism (language, myth, art, science) and, on the other hand, also relativizes them" (231; 269). Philosophy arises after symbolic formation, locates the individual forms, and comprehends the totality of symbolic formation and its foundations.

Cassirer's philosophical method leads to holistic knowledge of the changing human world. Instead of antinomies, the result of partial or narrow thought, philosophy grasps both the unity and the plurality of spirit through its own principle of action. Cassirer says, "This unity of *action* and the plurality of possible symbolic viewpoints are not opposed to one another as hostile opposites, but stand in a necessary correlation. . . . Spirit becomes one through its conscious awareness of its identity (as action in general) in the plurality of various activities" (225; 263). Understanding of the correlation and dialectic of spiritual activity is holistic understanding; focusing on only one aspect of spiritual

activity is always distortion. Conscious awareness of the self-identity of spirit is attained through philosophy.

From a narrow view of life, there appears to be an irreconcilable opposition between life and spirit as two conflicting elements of reality. Holistic philosophy instead offers the understanding that spirit is a transformation of life, and that life cannot be known without spirit. The "antitheses of life" are overcome through the view that life develops into spirit through symbolic form, that is, "through the new idealistic concept of spirit, which negates mere 'life' (as dasein), in order then to 'posit' fully developed concrete life" (228; 266–67). The view that there exist in the human world pure life and pure spirit leads to antinomies of thought.

Philosophy also overcomes any apparent contradictions between symbolic forms. Most philosophers tend to favor either myth or logic in their explanations of reality. Myth or logic alone cannot give a full account of reality because each is a viewpoint, not a view of the whole. Cassirer says, "These two standpoints are not absolute; neither of them gives us 'the' essence per se; rather, they give us a specific viewpoint, under which we observe it. This is the solution to the antinomy" (233; 270). The solution to this antimony lies in the process of systematic review that achieves the viewpoint of the whole.

Use of Other Fields of Knowledge

Cassirer's metaphysics stems from his analyses of the symbolic forms and these analyses use the findings from the natural and human sciences and other philosophies. Cassirer makes use of biology, animal psychology, and work in specific fields of philosophy. These confirm Cassirer's view that symbolic form is distinctively human. He says, "The results of a critically oriented and critically founded philosophy of nature connect up immedi-

ately with the results of the philosophy of symbolic forms and can provide an indirect confirmation of its basic thesis. This is what the philosophy of nature teaches us: that the turn toward the 'objectivity of things' is the true line of demarcation between the human world and that of all other organic creatures" (62; 60). The animal research in the biology of Uexküll helps Cassirer differentiate human thought from animal thought as well as determine what features of thought humans and animals share.

One way to reveal life and spirit is to contrast the general experiences of the animal world with those of the human world. Cassirer says, "It is possible and justifiable methodologically to attempt to grasp the general structural principle under which other worlds of experience stand and to contrast this principle with the principles that determine our sensory-spiritual world. This contrast and opposition then become a new means for distinguishing and critically setting the limits between 'nature' and 'spirit,' between 'life' and 'consciousness' " (55; 53). Such a comparison requires an understanding of animal experience and depends on research into animal life, but the philosophical view of animal experience is not the same as a scientific understanding. The grounding principles of animal life are a philosophical, not a scientific problem.

Cassirer makes use of Jean Henri Fabre's experimentation on instinct as a clue to understanding the difference between biological and human memory. Memory requires the objectification of the past and an awareness of the difference between the past and the present. Cassirer says that memory's "precondition is 'representation,' and this is itself closely connected with the representational function of language. When the latter is not yet sufficiently developed, consciousness consists in the simple present of its contents, but it is lacking the most important means for their objectivization, their 'presentation' and representation" (77; 75). Human beings, unlike animals, recognize

temporal opposition through the power of human memory to represent the past in the present.

Despite the usefulness of natural science, its structural method should not be adopted by a philosophy of culture. Human biological structure does not provide the explanation for culture. The science of natural evolution relies on the study of nature's physical structure, yet studying the physical structure of the human being will not provide an understanding of culture. Culture is defined instead by its achievements. Cassirer says, "The totality of these achievements can in no way simply be read off from mankind's 'organization,' such as from the organization of the brain and the nervous system" (43; 41). A map of the human brain provides information about its structure but not about its first principles, purposes, and achievements. The human being and the human world of meaning cannot be known through its physical structure.

The use of natural sciences for understanding life, spirit, and symbolic form requires that the philosopher of culture distinguish between reliable and unreliable science. Not all kinds of scientific research should be utilized. Cassirer rejects methodologies based on empathy and behaviorism because neither results in an accurate portrait of the animal world. Cassirer says we should not "give ourselves over to an aesthetic form of 'empathy' " (52; 49) and that the "radical claim of 'behaviorism,' according to which all animal existence is confined to what is accessible to us in external behavior, also cannot do justice to the problem that confronts us here" (52; 50).

Animal research should instead be based on empirical study of behavior and structure and then should reconstruct what constitutes animal experience. Cassirer states, "Uexküll has presented the program for this; beginning with animal behavior, he reconstructs the animal's surrounding world and inner world" (213; 231). The problem with empathy as a legitimate scientific

method is that animal feelings cannot be proved or denied. Animals are given to us as animated bodies, not merely as moving things. Cassirer thus rejects radical behaviorism, which denies the existence of animal consciousness.

The scientific study of the disorders of language are crucial to Cassirer's definition of the general function of language. Investigation into speech pathologies such as agnosia and aphasia provides clues for an understanding of symbolic form. The essential connection between the acquisition of language and the perceptual stability of objects is confirmed by research into speech pathology. Cassirer says, "How much this process of 'consolidation' owes to language and how much it remains bound to it can best be confirmed by the pathological *disorders* of language" (74; 72).

The difference between animal action and human thought is made visible through such research as well. Cassirer says, "It is again the pathological disturbances of language that, in an advanced stage of human language, can make the differences between both spheres evident to us" (77–78; 75). The scientific study of language is a component of the philosophical study of the symbolic form of language. Language cannot be analyzed simply in philosophical terms, apart from empirical understanding of language acquisition and language use.

Cassirer incorporates other philosophical views concerning specific human activities into his own position. This attention to other views is a pivotal aspect of Cassirer's philosophical method. Regarding aesthetics and philosophy of art, for example, Cassirer says, "It is the task of systematic aesthetics to follow out all these particular ways of rendering and to show the characteristic 'principle' that they obey. This task cannot be taken up here; we must be content with showing the general course and direction of such types of configuration in general" (80; 77–78). Cassirer's conception of art as a symbolic form is

not developed a priori by philosophical principles. The "inner form" of the symbolic form of art is built up by Cassirer from those features of aesthetic experience and analysis of works of art available within aesthetics as a particular field of study.

The findings of aestheticians and philosophers of art, like those of theologians and linguists, must be used by a philosophy of culture to gain insight into the whole of human reality. Through the philosophy of culture these specific fields of philosophical study are connected with the general study of the human being. Work in the sciences and special fields of study does not replace philosophical understanding. The philosophy of culture is not simply a report on their findings. Instead, philosophy adds to their findings its grasp of how they fit into the perspective of the whole, and this sense of the whole is what Cassirer wishes to realize in his metaphysics.

Desire for Philosophy

For any human activity, there is an impulse or motivating force. Cassirer says little about the desire to philosophize, but what he does say is relevant to what he thinks philosophical activity is. The desire or urge to understand the world as completely as possible stems both from the individual and from culture, and from the principles of both life and spirit.

Individuals sense a need to think philosophically. The desire to know the grounds and the totality of symbolic formation is the drive behind Cassirer's philosophy. He says, "Now, after these particular directions have been sorted out, after phenomenological analysis has sought to bring out the basic forms of linguistic, mythic, and scientific thought, the need for synthesis seems to exert its demand on us all the more urgently and insistently" (5; 5). An urgent, insistent demand or necessity for metaphysics appears once the parts of the human world have been ana-

lyzed. From particular knowledge of the symbolic forms arises the desire for holistic knowledge, an understanding of how the parts fit together and are grounded. A full understanding of each particular symbolic form cannot be achieved without an understanding of the origins of each form.

Philosophy is also described as an individual's innate urge to overcome symbolic form. Cassirer says, "We cannot cast off these forms, although the urge to do so is innate in us, but we can and must grasp and recognize their relative necessity" (226–27; 265). The human being cannot avoid thinking within symbolic forms; they are imperative for thought. Philosophy, while not a symbolic form, is an additional way of thinking for the human being. On the one hand, the urge to overcome symbolism results in philosophy. On the other hand, the urge to overcome symbolism can result in the overreaching and distorting notion that philosophy can know without mediation. The desire for an overview of reality can have positive or negative effects. If it is to be productive, it must be well directed.

Cassirer regards Simmel as possessing a particularly strong philosophical drive. Simmel belongs to the general movement to transform traditional metaphysical dualisms into life and spirit. Cassirer says, "Of all the thinkers who are part of this movement, perhaps no one has so strongly felt its origin and brought it so clearly to consciousness as Simmel has done. It is typical of Simmel's spiritual character and his aims that he does not rest until he has transformed this felt polarity into a polarity of thought" (8; 8). Just as philosophy uses language and the results of the sciences to articulate and formulate its views, it depends on feeling or the mythic drive within the human being to generate desire and to move toward those views.

The desire to understand the human world is a cultural desire. The positive manifestation of the cultural desire to know the world lies in the development of symbolic forms. Cassirer says,

"Man knows the world and himself only through the image that he makes of both. But it also turns out that he is not able to remain within this sphere of perceptual truth and knowledge, that the striving after knowledge cannot be met or satisfied in this way. The process of cognition dares to leave behind this basis after just barely taking possession of it" (93; 90), and "pure theory must take possession of this new ground step by step" (97; 94). The striving for knowledge is associated with daring or courage. The production of symbolic forms is motivated by the human desire to know the human world.

The cultural desire to know human reality also has a negative manifestation. An aspect of all culture is the desire to return to the immediacy of life, to do without the symbolic forms. The cultural notion of life is characterized by the ideals of living in harmony with nature, returning to the origins, and thereby finding the original, pure purpose of life. If this desire were fulfilled, however, culture or spirit would be annihilated, and its annihilation would in turn annihilate all value and knowledge. Cassirer says, "This tendency to return to the immediacy of life (in opposition to the striving toward symbolic form as the striving toward spirit) is itself of course a ubiquitous phenomenon in all cultural development—comparable to a negative key signature. But if this curtailment of the activity of the symbolic forms were consistently carried through, it would lead to a complete quietism toward culture itself" (231; 269).

For Cassirer, cultural desire is individual desire writ large. Both types of eros have a positive aspect that propels them forward to new ways of understanding, and both have a negative aspect that pulls them backward toward an unattainable and dangerous way of being. The cultural desire for quietism is like the philosophical desire for an exclusively nonsymbolic understanding of life. Cassirer rejects such quietism or "conscious methodological asceticism" (52; 50). From individual and cultural quiet-

ism come uncritical thought and acceptance; Cassirer's later work links the sleeping philosopher with the potential for the rise of totalitarianism.[11] Desire is necessary for human activity; well-aimed desire is necessary for the flourishing of human activity.

Philosophy is ultimately the desire for self-knowledge. This desire is grounded in culture, because philosophy arises only in culture. It is embodiment of culture in thought that provides culture with a view of itself. As a particularly human activity, philosophical desire, like all desire, stems from life and spirit. Cassirer says that life and spirit strive for expression in contemporary metaphysics: "An inner tension and polar opposition in this sense of life and of culture strive for expression in it" (8; 8). All human activity, including desire to know, is grounded in the activities of life and spirit and participates in the final goal of life and spirit—freedom. Life and spirit are the principles that through their realization in culture provide the possibility of philosophical eros.

The Term "Metaphysics"

Cassirer uses the term "metaphysics" in a variety of ways. In some instances the terms "philosophy" and "metaphysics" are used interchangeably. In other instances metaphysics, most notably the metaphysics of life, is criticized. In still other uses the word refers to Cassirer's own study and is embraced by him; in no other writings does Cassirer embrace the term as clearly as he does in the fourth volume.

The interchangeability of philosophy and metaphysics in Cas-

11. "Philosophy and Politics" (1944), in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935–1945,* ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 232.

sirer's usage shows that his concern lies more with the content of the ideas being discussed than with the formal division between philosophy and metaphysics. In these cases, metaphysics is viewed as a philosophical activity, and therefore as philosophy. Cassirer calls the philosophy of life, *Lebensphilosophie,* the contemporary metaphysics.[12] The interchangeability of these terms is seen in statements such as "a metaphysics, a philosophy of life" (48; 46) and, throughout the discussion of Spengler's organology, as, for instance, when he refers interchangeably to the "organological philosophy of history" (105; 102) and the "metaphysics of organology" (105; 103).

Despite such instances of accord with contemporary metaphysics, Cassirer contrasts such metaphysics with his own project of philosophy. Some of his discussions of philosophies of life criticize the traditional metaphysical thinking of those philosophies. Cassirer says, "The modern concept of 'life' must be forced by the course of metaphysical thinking to follow the same path taken by the concept of God in the older metaphysics" (11–12; 11); Cassirer rejects this path, which conveys the finite into realm of the infinite and the irrational.

Cassirer criticizes the philosophy of life for the belief that metaphysical thinking is immediate and passive. According to Cassirer, all thought is activity. If metaphysics is passivity, then it cannot be a human achievement: "True theory does not mean the mere observation of things or simple passive submission to them, but rather a highly active achievement. Yet precisely as an energy, as action, this seeing goes beyond mere 'practice.' For this difference, however, the metaphysics of life has no category" (29; 28). Cassirer rejects the notion of metaphysics as passive receptivity, held by contemporary exponents of the philosophy of life.

12. Krois and Verene, *PSF,* 4:xi.

The term "metaphysics" is also associated with antitheses and irreconcilable opposition. Traditional metaphysics has its basis in the notion of substance and results in the fixed opposition between beings; Cassirer's thought has its basis in the notion of function and results in the free dialectic of activities. The holistic notion of dialectic overcomes and explains antinomies of thought. He says, "The metaphysics of knowledge draws constant sustenance from this antinomy and aporia. . . . In all the dogmatic systems that begin with the concept of being, which proceed from the notion of 'substance,' this aporia makes itself felt again and again" (196; 202). The metaphysics of substance is connected with dogmatism, narrowness, and stagnation.

In his works other than the fourth volume, Cassirer generally adheres to the view that metaphysics is defective. In the fourth volume, however, metaphysics is viewed as a genuine and worthwhile study. The metaphysical aspects of the philosophy of life are central to modern culture; it questions the traditional notions of reality. Cassirer says: "It is a mistake and a misunderstanding of this movement [*Lebensphilosophie*], to make oneself blind to its origin and its true spiritual significance by thinking that it can be dismissed as a mere 'fad.' For no matter how one may judge its final systematic contribution, its motives are unmistakably rooted in a fundamental and basic stratum of our modern sense of life and our specifically modern sense of culture" (8; 8). Cassirer does not think that the metaphysics of life can be dismissed, as in many ways it is a key to modern culture.

The term "metaphysics" is clearly accepted by Cassirer as fundamental to his philosophy. The titles of two of the three texts in the first part of the fourth volume contain the term: "The Concept of the Symbol: Metaphysics of the Symbolic" and "On the Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms." Cassirer considers his philosophy in these texts to be a kind of metaphysics of life, because life is technically the primordial principle, that is, "We begin

not with the primordial fact of so-called Being, but with that of 'Life' " (225; 263). "Life" is for Cassirer the term with which to oppose the metaphysics of being.

Cassirer sometimes directly identifies his philosophy as a metaphysics of life: "*Our* metaphysics: life's becoming truly aware" (219; 238). The activity of comprehending, founding, and relativizing the symbolic forms is labeled "this metaphysics" (231; 269). The human world is the totality of symbolic forms, each producing a different reality; thus philosophies of the human world should not deny any aspects of it their proper place. In Cassirer's view, the gift of myth and logic that is at the basis of culture and philosophy "is only truly grasped by the metaphysics of symbolic thought!" (234; 270).

In sum, the aim of philosophy is to overcome antinomies and allow the human world to be seen in its entirety. It is possible to do this only with an outlook that is impartial, broad-minded, and undivided. The object of philosophical study is not only symbolic forms and their unifying principles but also itself. The most notable idea about philosophy Cassirer presents in the early texts of *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms* is that philosophy is not a symbolic form. In his later writings concerning "basis phenomena," as Chapter Four will show, Cassirer adds to his conception of philosophy the view that philosophy is grounded in the phenomenon of "the work."

2

The Late Text

Basis Phenomena

3

Basis Phenomena

As they had no other name for it, they invented the form, Triad, and whenever they tried to bring us to the knowledge of what is perfect they led us to that by the form of this Triad.
—Porphyry, *The Life of Pythagoras*

An understanding of Cassirer's conception of basis phenomena (*Basisphänomene*) requires not only a description of the three basis phenomena—I, act, and the work—but also an explanation of how these phenomena are connected with Cassirer's metaphysics of life, spirit, and symbolic form. Cassirer does not directly spell out such connections, but it is possible to draw out from the text the issues they involve.

Definition of the First Basis Phenomenon

Cassirer begins his discussion of the basis phenomena with Goethe, who formulated the notion of three primary or original phenomena in three maxims. Goethe's maxim 391 states that this first phenomenon is "the highest gift," "life," "the rotating movement of the monad about itself," and that each individual has "the impulse to nurture this life" (127; 123).[1] In explicating his own view of the first basis phenomenon, Cassirer takes up Goethe's notions of life and movement and expands upon them in his notions of temporality, I, Self, and feeling.

1. Numbering of the maxims refers to Hecker's edition of Goethe's *Maximen und Reflexionen*. See *PSF,* 4, 127, n.1.

In accordance with Goethe's maxim, one name Cassirer uses for the first basis phenomenon is "life," which appears on his list of "three worlds": " 'life' " (*Leben*), " 'psyche' " (*Seele*), and " 'spirit' " (*Geist*) (122; 118). The first world corresponds to the first basis phenomenon. For Cassirer, the notion of life is identical to the notion of monad. Cassirer says, "Life is given to us in the form of 'monadic' being" (128; 123). This concept of being is a functional, not substantial, concept. Monad and life are identified with one another in a subheading of the text, "the 'monad'; the first: life" (156; 153), and in naming this phenomenon the phenomenon "of the *monas,* of 'life' itself" (138; 133).

One principal characteristic of the first basis phenomenon is movement. Living is moving; it is "in transition from one state to another" (140; 135) and "knows no rest nor calm" (156; 153). That human experience stems from process and movement rather than from being and substance is consistent with Cassirer's metaphysics of spirit and life and his concept of function, as found throughout his published writings.

Cassirer says, "Here we find only the one, essential thing (essential for all three forms of description—the biological, the psychological, the transcendental), that it is not being (*ousia* as permanence), but rather a stream and motion [*eine strömende Bewegtheit*], which knows neither rest nor quiet, is bound to no particular 'state,' to nothing stationary, but is something moving" (138–39; 133). In regard to this sense of force and forward movement, Cassirer says that the monadic basis phenomenon resembles Leibniz's notion of the monad: "Life is given to us in the form of 'monadic' being—a 'being that is not to be understood, however, as at rest in itself, but as a process, as movement—the 'stream of consciousness' " (128; 123).

Life's movement is linked directly with its temporality. The experience of time in the first basis phenomenon is not the experience of the mere present, nor is it the experience of simply

enduring. It is instead the totality of movement through time: "This 'monadic' being is therefore not contained in the simple present. In fact, it is not even describable in terms of a present. It is not bound to a particular moment, but rather encompasses the totality of all aspects of life, the present, past, and future" (139; 133–34). In Plato's view, Cassirer says, the monad is becoming or "belongs to the Heraclitean flux of becoming" (188; 192).

The first basis phenomenon, also named "I" or "Self," is akin to the notion of monad and oneness. Life is known as "the I-Phenomenon" (*das Ich-Phänomen*) (142; 137), "the Phenomenon of the 'I' " (138; 133), "the I-Aspect" (*der Ich-Aspekt*) (167; 167), and "the Phenomenon of the Self" (*das Phänomen des Selbst*) (142; 137). This phenomenon is the basis of the experience of self. This is not the experience of self as an enduring or fixed substance, instead it is the experience of self as moving, temporal, "as present, as past and as going-to-be" (139; 134).

The manifestation of the first basis phenomenon is feeling. In the life-world, one's experience of oneself is the feeling of oneself. Cassirer points to the psychology of Theodor Lipps and claims, "*Feeling* could serve as the expression of 'life,' the *monas*" (149; 143), and "feelings constitute the I" (149; 144). The self feels the world of its own life in relation to the processes of change, becoming, and time.

Definition of the Second Basis Phenomenon

In Goethe's maxim 392, the second primary phenomenon is described as "the second benefit," "the living-moving monad's intervention into the surroundings of the outer world," and as "aware of itself as internal lack of limits, and as externally limited" (127; 123). Cassirer expands on this description by defining the second basis phenomenon as action, morality, will, You, and

the Other. In terms of Cassirer's three worlds, the second basis phenomenon is the " 'psyche' " (*Seele*) (122; 118), but he says relatively little about this second world.

The second basis phenomenon is the active intervention of the monad in its environment. The notion of action is a central feature of the second basis phenomenon, "the Phenomenon of Action" (*das Wirkens-Phänomen*) (142; 137). Herein lies our consciousness of action. Cassirer says, "We find 'us' always characterized this way, not just 'living,' that is, in transition from one state to another, but also as acting and reacting, as linked and bound to others through action and reaction" (140; 135). We both affect and are affected by our surroundings and one another.

Human action is inspired by and integral to the will and is thereby tied to morality. The connections between action, will, and morality are apparent in the names Cassirer gives to the second basis phenomenon, such as "the Action and Will-Aspect" (*das Aktions- und Willens-Moment*) (177; 179), "the Primary Phenomenon of the 'Will' " (*das Urphänomen des 'Willens'*) (157; 154), and "the Ethical Primary Phenomenon" (*das Ethisches Urphänomen*) (129; 124). The sense of opposition, the sense that there is a surrounding world of other acting wills, is part of the experience of ethical action.

Of this basis phenomenon Cassirer says, "We do not 'experience' ourselves, but rather we experience something that stands in opposition to us, that is different from us" (139–40; 134), which is "something with a stubbornness of its own and a will of its own, something that limits and disputes the space of our action" (140; 135). The notion of space here is not that of physical or outside space but that of communal and volitional space.

The expression of the second basis phenomenon, adopted from Lipps's psychological distinctions, is willing, that is, "*willing* as the expression of action or influence on others" (149; 143). Willing involves limits, as Goethe's maxim concerning the sec-

ond primary phenomenon states. The willing of the surrounding world limits possible actions, and yet it is the nature of the will to attempt to overstep its own limits. The "will as unlimited by mere 'possibility' but pressing forward toward effectiveness, reality, 'energy'" (177; 179)—is actually limited in the shared space of action, in which the expression of willing confronts and competes with other expressions of willing.

The temporality of the second basis phenomenon is the present. Cassirer identifies action with Aristotle's notion of the practical (*praxis*); the practical attempts to affect the immediate. Cassirer says, "The practical is directed toward an effect in the present, as something momentary, toward an 'influence' on physical nature or on the human will" (183; 187). This kind of presence does not endure. The second basis phenomenon cannot experience itself as enduring or fixed: "So too all productive activity as mere activity also passes away. It is not able to discern itself as something fixed and objective" (188; 192). Action belongs to the experience of the present.

The second basis phenomenon is additionally described as "You" or "Other." Cassirer refers to it as "the Phenomenon of the 'Other' (the so-called problem of 'other minds')" [*das Phänomen des 'Andern' (das sogen[annte] 'Fremdpsychische')*] and "of the You" (*des Du*) (142; 137); that is, "we find it originally as a 'You'" (140; 135). Again, these concepts are connected with ethics, as the morality of action in a community. The willing of morality requires the experience of other wills. Cassirer says, "The ethical primary phenomenon [*ethisches Urphaenomen*]: the 'I' recognizes others 'next' to it, 'outside' itself, not *extra* but rather *praeter nos* and enters into an active relationship toward them" (129; 124). The second basis phenomenon, then, is action, will, You, the Other, and morality or ethics (*die Ethik*); the interrelationships of these form the structure of this basis phenomenon.

Definition of the Third Basis Phenomenon

According to Goethe's maxim 393, a third primary phenomenon is "what we direct toward the outer world as actions and deed, as speech and writing," and "these belong to it more than to us ourselves" (127; 123). Cassirer takes up both these points and develops them through his conceptions of spirit, objectivity, thought, endurance, and history. Of the three basis phenomena, Cassirer writes most about the third.

What Goethe describes as actions, deeds, speech, and writing, Cassirer calls "the work" (*das Werk*).[2] The third basis phenomenon is called "the Phenomenon of the Work" (*das Werk-Phänomen*) (142; 137). A work is a lasting cultural product. Works can be material or immaterial. Cassirer says, "These creations do not need to have a physical 'existence,' as is the case in the 'plastic arts' (the canvas on which the painting appears, the wood or marble of a sculpture). They also can be quite 'immaterial,' as in the case of the law or the state" (159; 155).

Cassirer gives a number of examples of this basis phenomenon. Examples of a work are "a work (*opus*) of art, science, politics, the history of religion, or whatever" (164; 162) and "the 'work' of 'mathematical natural science' " (165; 163). Works become parts of larger systems of works; examples of such a "system of works" are "the works of politics (constitutions, law books), works of art, literature, philosophy, and science" (159; 156). These examples include both material works, such as political texts, and immaterial works, such as the grouping of systems.

Cassirer very clearly distinguishes the third basis phenomenon from the first and second basis phenomena. Though works

2. German makes a distinction between *das Werk* (in the sense of the production of a cultural work) and *die Arbeit* (work in the sense of labor or toil). Throughout this commentary, "work" is used in the sense of *das Werk*.

might seem to be produced by an individual and therefore be monadic occurrences, they are in fact only produced in a society. Cassirer says, "Every work is as such not that of an individual, but proceeds from cooperative, correlative action. It bears witness to 'social' action" (159; 156). A work is a social constituent rather than a truly individual creation.

Works are more likely to be confused with action, the second basis phenomenon, because works appear to be both actuated and willed. The second and third basis phenomena, however, are fundamentally distinct. One reason for their difference is in the conception of actuation and effect. Actions are done solely for their effects whereas works have an inherent meaning as well. Cassirer says, "There are 'works' whose content, whose meaning, whose 'sense' does not consist exclusively in their bringing about a specific 'effect,' their making any physical or psychical changes in things, or their intervening in the physical or psychical causal order. Rather, in addition to the many particular changing effects they have (besides their 'technical' usefulness and their effects on the 'souls' of men), they also possess a particular content of their own" (183; 187). Works may have some immediate effect but they also have a lasting content and significance.

Another reason for the claim that works are not actions lies in the notion of will. Works command a status of their own. They stand outside of the immediate action of the will. Cassirer says, "For all of these particular creations are not what they are because some conscious beings wanted them to be that way, because we deliberately produced them" (159; 156).

The difference between the practical (*praxis*) and the poetic (*poiesis*) further reveals the difference between the second and third basis phenomena. Action is exclusively interested in the practical; the poetic work is not interested in pure practicality. Nondetermination is a defining feature of the work: "The poetic

'arises' and 'endures' outside every 'intention' (as 'aiming at a goal' taken as a specific, momentary, individual action). It is 'without interest.' It dwells within itself and is 'blessed in itself.' This 'absence of interest' makes obvious how it differs from the 'second dimension' " (183; 187). Works are not definable merely by an immediate, deliberate, or intended effect.

In Cassirer's list of three worlds, the work is identified with the world of "spirit" (*Geist*) (122; 118). Cassirer's earlier notion of spirit understands spirit as continually growing out of life. Although spirit is a transformation of life, it is also continually alienating itself from life. In his inquiry into the basis phenomena, Cassirer connects this alienation of spirit to works. Cassirer states, "These works no longer belong to us; they mark the first level of 'alienation' " (130; 125). Works distance both the individual and action: "This involves distancing it from the 'I,' even alienation from it. But one would be mistaken and too quick to read into this expression of 'otherness' only a negative sense, as so often happens (romanticism, mysticism, and so on). It is rather the beginning of a completely new position" (141; 136). Simmel claims the alienation of spirit to be a tragedy and degradation of spirit, but Cassirer argues that alienation has both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspect of such distancing is the emergence of the objectifying power of thought.

Works and objectivity are correlates. Thus the third basis phenomenon is also called "the Phenomenon of the World ('Object,' objective reality) [*das Phänomen der Welt* (*'Gegenstand,' objektive Wirklichkeit*)]" and "of the It [*des Es*]" (142; 137). The objective, as relatively fixed and as contrasted to the constantly moving subjective experience of life, emerges through the phenomenon of the work. The objective also carries with it the sense of necessity or independent force.

Works, objectivity, and necessity are bound together. Cassirer

says, "From the consciousness of works grows the consciousness of things. Here we first experience what the necessity of things means. The 'object' makes its own independent requirements known. It demands and forces us to give it a particular kind of treatment, if it is successfully to become a 'work' " (141; 136). The objective is not construed as a kind of being outside of us; it is instead an aspect of us or "given to us in the medium of the work" (141; 137). Objective ideas or thoughts, as well as subjective sensations or feelings, are not external to the human being. Objectivity is not physical being but spiritual function. As aspects of works, objectivity and necessity are social, shared, and spiritual principles.

Works are formed through thought. Cassirer adopts the connection between works and thought found in Lipps's psychology. In accord with Lipps, Cassirer holds that thinking is the "expression of that objectification or creation of distance that has its visible expression in the 'work' (*Opus operatum*)" (149; 143). The growth of ideas requires that the mind be able to hold ideas in a retrievable and stable fashion. Thought is the dialectic between the flexibility and fixity of spirit.

Thinking as connected to the work is concrete. Thinking, Cassirer says, "should not be understood here merely to mean 'abstract' thought. It is concrete thought, that is, the content of all cognitive acts in general, the content of all that leads to the 'positing' of something objective" (153; 149). Whenever thought relates intentionally to an object, it is concrete thought. Thought and object are correlates: concrete thought builds our world of objects and objects inform our thought.

The enduring nature of the work is a further and crucial feature in the definition of the third basis phenomenon. The temporality of the monad is transience; the temporality of action is presence; and the temporality of a work is endurance. Works, Cassirer says, "possess a particular content of their own, an en-

during 'being.' It is this 'being' that 'outlives' the moment which is not dragged into the turmoil of physical and psychical activity as it changes from moment to moment—this is the basic determining factor in the make-up of a 'work' " (183; 187). Works are "enduring creations" (159; 155).

This sense of endurance is within time, as are all natural human phenomena. A work begun in a past time continues into a future human or cultural time: "This is its eternity which enables it to have continuing effects that the creative individual, the *monas,* could never foresee" (131; 125). Individuals, who necessarily exist in time, cannot foresee the eventual endurance of their creations. Plato's work is an example. Cassirer says, "What Plato's work 'is' does not lie enclosed in Plato's monadic 'consciousness,' because it extends over the centuries. It only becomes clear in the total course of its consequences and interpretations" (131; 125–26). Plato wrote his texts at specific times, and the texts became enduring works. Their "eternity" lies within temporality.

The enduring work's relationship to past and future is also described in *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences.* Cassirer says, "These works of language, poetry, plastic art, and religion, become the 'monuments,' the signs of remembrance and recollection of humanity."[3] Memory is a chief factor in the existence of a work. The endurance of works is not in some sense outside of time but develops and is sustained through time and through cultural memory.

Endurance is integrally connected to objectivity. Objectivity requires permanence; objective ideas are retrievable ideas, able

3. *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies,* trans. S. G. Lofts (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 126. Hereinafter cited as *LCS.* Cassirer's comments on "works" in *LCS* appear systematically connected to the discussion in *PSF,* 4.

to be compared and considered over time. Objectivity arises because works have fixity. In works, "the fleeting, temporary, transitory must somehow be held fast; it must become 'objective spirit' in Hegel's sense. This occurs only when it becomes condensed and expressed in a system of works" (159; 156). Works are held fast through their being structured into systems, and through systems of works they acquire further objectivity.

What Cassirer calls tools share the quality of endurance with works in general, and this endurance discloses objectivity. He states, "The transition to the 'enduring' work (product) and to the tool as something which is 'always to be applied in the same way' is what actually opens up to mankind the 'objective' sphere, the sphere of 'things'" (142; 137). From the stability of works arise things or objects.

Cassirer employs "culture" and "history" as names for the third basis phenomenon. He makes this clear in one of his subtitles: "The Basic Phenomenon of the 'Work'—the Problem of Culture and 'History'" (158; 155). Culture and history are understood through their works. History is the documentation of works, yet works make history possible: "Documentation through the products generated, that is the theme of historical understanding" (164; 162). There is a dialectical relationship between the witnessing of and the generating of works.

Culture and history arise and exist because of works, and works endure in culture and through history. Cassirer says, "The stockpiling of 'works' as a persisting remainder of activity gives rise to that kind of being which we call culture or history" (158; 155). Stockpiles or cultural deposits consist of both great works, such as a piece of classical art, and small works, such as a change in some use of language.

The Logic of the Cultural Sciences makes the point that a great but lost work still inheres in culture. Cassirer states, "If it no longer exists in its particular form, it nevertheless has exerted

its effects, which have intervened in one way or another in the development of culture and have perhaps determined its course decisively at one point or another."[4] Countless little works constitute culture and history as well. We find the same sort of process present in even the narrowest and smallest spheres of culture. In Cassirer's conceptions of history and culture as characteristic of the third basis phenomenon we find his earlier conceptions of spirit, objectivity, thought, and endurance cited as properties of the work.

Reality

Cassirer uses the term "reality" (*Wirklichkeit*) in relation to the three basis phenomena.[5] He frequently places it in quotation marks to distinguish it from other views, in which it denotes substance and being. In Cassirer's view, reality is a functional concept, but this view does not involve a denial of the existence of physical or external things. In a lecture given approximately two years after he wrote the text on basis phenomena, Cassirer says, "All of us, I think, are empirical realists, whatever metaphysical or epistemological theory we may assume."[6] Though generally unstated, this view is implied throughout his published works. Doubting or proving the existence of the external world is not Cassirer's interest; what interests him is how we give meaning to and interpret the world. For Cassirer the real is associated with what can be made meaningful for the human being through the symbolic formation of culture.

The basis phenomena are metaphysical concepts. Cassirer says

4. *LCS*, 127.

5. *Wirklichkeit* is the term Cassirer predominantly uses in his discussion of the basis phenomena (see Chap. 1, n. 15).

6. "Language and Art II," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*, 195.

metaphysics concerns "the question of the functions that disclose and make 'reality' accessible to us at all" (153; 150). The basis phenomena are metaphysical concepts because they are the ultimate terms through which we make reality accessible. They are the sources of our knowledge of reality. The basis phenomena originally inform and provide meaning to the world. He says, "They are for us the actual sources of knowledge of reality. If we conceive these sources as obstructed, then the stream [*der Strom*] of our knowledge of reality will also run dry. The concept 'reality' then attains its meaning only to the extent that it is fed by these sources, is filled concretely by them" (137; 132). Nothing lies beyond to which our understanding and interpretation of the world can refer.

Cassirer adds to his metaphor of the stream or river the metaphor of sight. Drawing on the traditional notion that knowledge of reality is akin to vision, Cassirer says that the basis phenomena are our vision: "They are the eye, so to speak, that we open up. In this first opening of the eye the phenomenon 'reality' discloses itself to us" (138; 132–33). Sight allows the real to be seen as the basis phenomena allow the real to be known.

The first basis phenomenon does not provide any more primary access to reality than do the other basis phenomena. The second basis phenomenon is "a second essential, constitutive aspect in all our 'consciousness of reality' " and there is "no consciousness of reality without this original, nondeducible consciousness of action" (139; 134). Action and the Other, constituents of the second basis phenomenon, are as necessary a root of knowledge of the world as are the first and third basis phenomena.

Although each basis phenomenon is necessary for knowledge of the real, the third basis phenomenon plays a special role. From the third basis phenomenon arise objective, stable ideas that are required for knowledge generally and for knowledge of reality.

Knowledge requires the kind of objectivity that is grounded in the work; the third basis phenomenon "only truly leads to an authentic consciousness of reality" (141; 136).

Cassirer says, "It is the 'spirit' of objectivity which we attain to here and, with it, the final 'advance' toward reality. Only now is the 'window' to reality truly open. A 'glimpse' of reality, of objectivity, is now opened up for us by spreading it out before us in the work" (142; 137). Objectivity is attained through the relatively stable re-cognizable features of experience that produce our grasp of human reality. The third basis phenomenon is unique because it brings forth the objective ideas that a knowledge of reality requires.

The basis phenomena generally open up both positive and negative aspects of reality. This can be seen specifically in relation to the third basis phenomenon as the source of modern technology. The making of technical tools, which are manifestations of the basis phenomenon of the work, has a negative impact on the human world. In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences,* Cassirer says: "The tool, which appeared to provide the fulfillment of human needs, has instead created countless artificial needs. Each perfecting of the technological culture is, and remains, in this respect a truly treacherous gift. Hence, the yearning for primitive, unbroken, immediate existence must repeatedly break forth."[7] The third basis phenomenon, indispensable as a source of knowledge of reality, can manifest itself in the negative aspects of technology.

These three primary phenomena, as the sources of our knowledge of reality, "are not something which is mediated for us; rather, they are the ways, the modes of mediation itself" (137; 132). Our knowledge of reality springs from this tripartite

7. *LCS,* 27.

ground. Each basis phenomenon contributes to our understanding of reality, and each is of equal importance.

Hierarchy of the Basis Phenomena

In some passages of Cassirer's text the basis phenomena are presented as developing through stages and as hierarchically ordered. Cassirer gives the basis phenomena in a numerical order; they are not merely named. In other passages Cassirer asserts the equally primary and original nature of all three basis phenomena. The basis phenomena seem to arise in stages. They can be ordered as beginning, middle, and end. Goethe's first basis phenomenon is called the "highest" (127; 123) and Cassirer calls it "the primary revelation itself" (128; 123). Cassirer names it "The First" (156; 153) and lists it first. Life appears to be the most original phenomenon. It is the beginning.

From action, the second stage, comes the work, the third stage. The second basis phenomenon is inherently an experience of an Other, of opposition. The third basis phenomenon is the emergence of objectivity, and objectivity grows out of opposition. The third stage thus stems from the second. Cassirer says that in the second basis phenomenon, "we experience something that stands in opposition to us, that is different from us, and out of this opposition grows our consciousness of the 'object' " (140; 134). The third basis phenomenon depends on the second, "without which there would be no 'consciousness of objectivity' " (140; 135).

Works are described as the outcome of action. Cassirer says, "The movement of action has come to a halt; it has found expression in a work" (141; 136). Works express action but become something different in kind from action; the work is known by its enduring quality. This implies evolution from one basis phenomenon to another. This evolution is a kind of progress or ad-

vance: the third basis phenomenon is called "the final 'advance' toward reality" (142; 137).

This sense of evolution is present in Cassirer's discussion of animal experience. Animals share in the first two basis phenomena of life and action but not in the third phenomenon of the work. Feeling and willing belong to both animal and human being. Cassirer says, "These [are] even found in the animal world and [form] the foundation and presupposition of social life as we find it there" (152; 148). Action is both animal and human. Cassirer states, "Biologically we can follow this phenomenon into the animal world. It occurs throughout the animal world" (140; 135). Thus, the first and second basis phenomena are found in both animal and human worlds.

The third basis phenomenon is clearly not found in the animal world. In the early texts concerning life and spirit, Cassirer claimed that some of the animals he called higher have the ability to objectify on some level. In the text on basis phenomena, however, he does not discuss animals in this way. The sense of objectivity that inheres in the third basis phenomenon is not found in the animal world. Animals do not produce enduring historical works, do not collect systems of works, and so forth.

In addition to his statements describing the developmental stages of the basis phenomena, Cassirer presents them as equally primordial. The "I" of the first basis phenomenon does not exist without the second basis phenomenon. Cassirer says, "The 'monad' as an isolated individual is an abstraction"; "we are never alone, enclosed within the walls of our intrasubjective 'consciousness' " (139; 134). The awareness and knowledge of the self depends in part on the activity of the other or the social world.

In relation to the second basis phenomenon, Cassirer emphasizes the primordial nature of action. That action is "a second

essential, constitutive aspect" (139; 134) indicates that all three aspects are essential and constitutive. Moreover, he says, "We want to emphasize this one point, that this form of being-with-one-another in the form of having influence-on-one-another is a genuine basis phenomenon; it can be derived from nothing else, but is originally constitutive" (140; 135). Such a claim suggests that these two basis phenomena are to be understood as equally primary.

The third basis phenomenon is also originary and primordial; it is not derivative as such from the other two. A work incorporates its origin into its being. To understand a work is to understand the history of the work. A work is separate from its origin, yet its origin remains part of its existence. Goethe's maxim 393 states that "youthful beginnings" belong to a work (128; 123). Temporal origins inhere in works. A work is not merely an outgrowth of life and action; it has its own primordial principle, which is history.

All three basis phenomena express a dialectic between origin (*arche*) and finality (*telos*). This dialectical relationship lies within each of the three basis phenomena. Cassirer says of the basis phenomena, "They are 'prior' to all thought and inference and are the basis of both" (137; 132). They are prior and original. They also are finalities. Regarding the first two basis phenomena, Cassirer says, "Life and activity (in the sense of *praxis* and *poiesis*) are finalities" (133; 127). Regarding the last two basis phenomena he says, "The work is the aim of 'action'; but in this action it also comes to its end. The expression *telos* encompasses both" (141; 136). Life, action, and the work each entail a relation of origin and end.

It is possible to resolve the apparent conflict between the hierarchical, developmental ordering of the basis phenomena and the primordial, originary nature of the basis phenomena. The developmental hierarchy that Cassirer describes rests on

the order in which each basis phenomenon is experienced by the human being. Children first experience feeling, then learn moral action, and finally enter into an enduring human culture of works. Cassirer is specifically concerned with the human world; hence, what matters is how the basis phenomena figure in it as the ground of its development. Cassirer shows no concern for whether these three phenomena have an independent evolution preceding their presence in the human world.

As the ground of human nature, the basis phenomena exist as equally primordial. Without all three basis phenomena, there would be no human existence. The apparent conflict between the hierarchy and the equality of the basis phenomena is resolved for Cassirer through this distinction between ground and our experience of ground. For the human being to be at all, all three phenomena must be, but for human nature to come into its own, the phenomena must develop in relation to one another.

Relation to Symbolic Forms

Cassirer does not give a direct account of the relation between basis phenomena and symbolic forms. The text on basis phenomena does discuss some specific forms, but there is no explicit discussion of the concept of symbolic forms in relation to the concept of basis phenomena. Cassirer mentions the forms of myth, art, and language, and he appears to suggest that the basis phenomena are the grounds and conditions for the symbolic forms.

All three basis phenomena are already present in myth, the first symbolic form, from which all other symbolic forms develop. Mythic consciousness already has a sense of works. Cassirer says, "Myth traces all these works back to 'gifts from above.' They are all (language, writing, law, the constitution, and so on, but also the various individual tools and knowledge of how to

use them) brought to man through saviors (Prometheus and fire) or implanted in man through divine revelation" (159; 156). Thus the work is present even in the first or original symbolic form.

Mythic consciousness senses works not as objects but as willful creations, stemming from a sense of either the first or the second basis phenomenon. Works are traced to an "'author,'" an individual, or to "specific 'plans,'" the will (159; 156). The mythic view of the work is later transformed into a thoughtful view of the work: "We must move beyond the sphere of mythic affect (mastery by means of wish) to mastery by means of the work" (141; 136). Mythic consciousness has an early and inadequate notion of the work; however, works do exist in the mythic world.

The third basis phenomenon is also present in the symbolic form of art. Art is a kind of work. Cassirer claims that in "the work of art, and generally in the whole area of the 'poetic' in contrast to the merely and exclusively practical" (183; 187), the enduring element of the third basis phenomenon is required. For the symbolic form of art to arise, there must be a sense of object and a sense of the possibility of transforming objects into something else. To interpret a line drawing as artistic requires first the empirical-practical objectivity or fixity of the line drawing, then the transformation of it into the aesthetic sense of objectivity. In the poetic work, what is objective in the sense of the practical is expressed in language and transformed into the objectivity of the aesthetic.

The symbolic form that Cassirer discusses most in his text on basis phenomena is language. Cassirer says that language is immersed in the basis phenomena: "Language is 'saturated' with all three" (153; 149). Cassirer adopts aspects of language as isolated in Karl Bühler's division of language: "It refers to the three classes of basis phenomena that we distinguished before and that, for example, occur in Goethe's outlook" (152; 148).

Bühler's psychological division of language corresponds to Cassirer's three basis phenomena. Cassirer says, "Language is a multidimensional structure containing completely different functions and encompassing them in a unity. It is 'expression' or 'announcement,' 'evocation,' and 'representation' all in one" (151; 147). "Expression" and "announcement" refer to the aspect of feeling of the first basis phenomenon, "evocation" refers to the aspect of action of the second basis phenomenon, and "representation" refers to the aspect of objectification of the third basis phenomenon.

Cassirer's essay, "Naturalistic and Humanistic Philosophies of Culture," offers a way to see the connection between the basis phenomena and the symbolic forms. Cassirer says, "there emerges, as *the fundamental feature of all human existence,* the fact that man is not lost within the welter of his external impressions, that he learns to control this sea [*diese Fülle*] of impressions by giving it *ordered form,* which, as such, stems in the final analysis from himself, from his own thinking, feeling, and willing."[8] Ordered form corresponds to symbolic form, and thinking, feeling, and willing correspond to the three basis phenomena. From this perspective the basis phenomena appear as the contents of the symbolic forms.

The relation between the phenomena and the forms can be understood in light of Cassirer's conception of reality. Reality is the objective meaning assigned to things and ideas in the world, the symbolic forms assign the meaning, and the basis phenomena are the sources for the assignment of meaning. The basis phenomena are the source of our knowledge of meaning, reality, and symbolic form, and our access to that knowledge.

8. "Naturalistic and Humanistic Philosophies of Culture," in *The Logic of the Humanities,* trans. Clarence Smith Howe (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1961), 22.

Relation to Life and Spirit

Cassirer's earlier views concerning life (*Leben*) and spirit (*Geist*) can be compared to his later views concerning basis phenomena. The early texts ground human nature on two principles, whereas the later text grounds human nature on three principles. The notions of life and spirit appear in the text on basis phenomena in several different ways: all basis phenomena are spirit; different basis phenomena are differently related to life and spirit; and all basis phenomena are life.

In one sense, all the basis phenomena are aspects of spirit. Cassirer says that his aim in the text on basis phenomena was to find a way to secure objectivity. Perception cannot secure it, but expression (*Ausdruck*) can. Perception is "the organization of 'external' perception / Physics, etc.—'nature,'" and expression is "the organization of 'inner' experience / the world of the 'spirit'—culture" (115; 113). For the human being, nature is ordered through spirit; studying spirit will secure all objective truths. The basis phenomena are this security, and they are spiritual. The human being is always a spiritual being.

The Logic of the Cultural Sciences defines the distinction between nature and culture in terms that apply here. The main features of culture are the "personal" (*das "persönliche" Erleben*), "participation" (*die Teilhabe*), and "constancy" (*die Konstanz*) of "meanings" or "significations" (*die Bedeutungen*).[9] The basis phenomena are discernible in this description of culture or spirit. The personal is monadic; participation is shared action; and constancy of meaning is enduring system. All three basis phenomena can therefore be called "spiritual."

In another sense, "life" and "spirit" refer to different basis phenomena. Cassirer's three human worlds: life, psyche, and

9. *LCS*, Study 3.

spirit (122; 118), parallel the three basis phenomena. The first basis phenomenon is life. Cassirer's definition of life has undergone a change from the earlier text on life and spirit to the later text on basis phenomena, in which life is tied specifically to the I. But Cassirer does not abandon the term "life." In his 1942 lecture on art, Cassirer says, "The fundamental reality, the *Urphänomen,* in the sense of Goethe, the ultimate phenomenon may, indeed, be designated by the term 'life.' "[10] He praises Goethe's sense of life in his text on basis phenomena as well. Yet the meaning of the term "life" has changed between the earlier and the later texts that identify life with what is monadic and singular.

Cassirer does not fundamentally describe the second basis phenomenon as either life or spirit. It seems, however, to lie closer to life than to spirit. Cassirer says the second basis phenomenon is "a form of 'life together,' of 'living-with-another' (in abstract terms: 'social' life)" (140; 135). The monad is never truly isolated, because it is attached to a society of actions; "we are never alone, enclosed within the walls of our intrasubjective 'consciousness' " (139; 134). In the second basis phenomenon as the source of social life and in the connection between the first and second basis phenomena, the You is more readily definable in terms of life than in terms of spirit.

The third basis phenomenon is fully identified with spirit. The early texts on life and spirit define spirit, in part, as the emergence of objectivity and as culture. The third basis phenomenon is also defined in these same terms. Works are inherently objective or temporally stable; "the 'work' appears, in contrast to the level of 'action' as described in the second phase, as something objective and, to an extent, fixed" (141; 136). Cassirer says, "It is the 'spirit' of objectivity which we attain to here" (142;

10. "Language and Art II," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 193–94.

137) and, "It must become 'objective spirit' in Hegel's sense" (159; 156). Works are furthermore " 'culture' " or "something 'effected' as human handiwork" (158–59; 155).

The sense in which the third basis phenomenon is spiritual is also described in *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences.* Works manifest the spirit of the human being. Cassirer says that works "are 'more lasting than ore' [*das Erz*]; for not only does there remain within them something material, but they are the expression of a spirit that can, if it encounters a similar and receptive subject, be freed from its material covering and awakened to new effectiveness."[11] The emphasis on works instead of the more general principle of spirit in the definition of the human being represents a change from the emphasis in the early texts concerning life and spirit.

One passage in the text on basis phenomena refers to all three basis phenomena as aspects of life. In the initial explanation of the purpose of Goethe's three maxims, Cassirer says, "Here [we have the] attempt to reconstruct life according to the character of its being and the way in which we ourselves and others can come to know it according to the kind of knowledge that we can have of it. Both questions belong together inherently, for human life is conscious of itself. It does not simply exist; rather, it 'knows of itself' and this 'knowing of itself' is constitutive for it" (128; 123). Here, "life" refers to human life in general, which is composed of the three primary phenomena.

In sum, Cassirer's notions of life and spirit, present in the early writings, appear with changed meanings in his later writings. Although new concepts of life and spirit arise in the text on basis phenomena, all these writings have in common the idea that the grounding principles of the human being are functional, active processes. The text on basis phenomena suggests that life,

11. *LCS,* 126–27.

action, and the work must be added to the metaphysical principles of life and spirit if we are to understand the ultimate ground of the human being. Unless these two metaphysical principles are understood through the three basis phenomena, we have not fully comprehended human reality. The interaction of life and spirit and the interaction of the basis phenomena remain as different descriptions of the processes that ground and define the human being, but descriptions that are not ultimately at odds with each other.

4
The Work of Philosophy

Nevertheless this is the situation we're in: if we know ourselves, then we might be able to know how to cultivate ourselves, but if we don't know ourselves, we'll never know how.
—Socrates in *Alcibiades*

Cassirer is concerned not only with what the basis phenomena are but also with what philosophy is as an activity that arises from the basis phenomena. He presents both the history of philosophy and his own philosophy as manifestations of these phenomena. He conceives of different types of philosophy as arising from different basis phenomena. Cassirer claims that other philosophies offer one-sided perspectives on reality, whereas the metaphysics of symbolic forms preserves reality's tripartite basis.

Relative Truth

In the introduction to the text on basis phenomena, Cassirer states that the proper goal of philosophy is to grasp relative truth. The introduction is an account of the attempts in the history of thought to secure truth and objectivity. Cassirer rejects all attempts at securing or grounding truth that absolutize one aspect of human experience. He rejects absolute methods based on logic, physics, immediacy, belief, and skepticism and proposes a critical method to replace them. Cassirer claims, however, that truth itself should not be rejected, because philosophy uncovers how the various forms of experience are true in relation to one another.

The truth value of expression, and by implication, of perception, is not accessible through the methods of logic. The use of logic alone leads to incomplete and even absurd statements concerning reality. Cassirer says, "There can be no formal, syllogistic proof of the 'birthright' (*quid juris*) of the expressive function [*Ausdrucksfunktion*]. Logically, 'Solipsism' is a 'possible' attitude and yet in practice it is nonetheless 'absurd' " (123; 120). Logical methods are insufficient to produce a full understanding of human experience. Logical methods used alone isolate and absolutize one feature of experience and thereby distort truth.

Nor can the physical sciences ground human reality. Cassirer says that, in physics, "we cannot meaningfully inquire into any kind of being except physical being" (123; 119). Physics does not investigate the human meaning of experience. The issue of distinctively human reality lies outside of physics: "We can only conclude that it is not possible to make this meaning visible from the standpoint of physics and through its methods" (122; 118).

Physicalism takes physical being as absolute and uses the physical sciences to study this absolute reality. Such study implies the experiences of both self and others but does not incorporate them into its field of vision; it views them as "physically insignificant (something understood that goes without saying) that can be left aside in all physical statements ('bracketed out')" (126; 122). The problem of grasping all of human truth is not solved through the physical sciences. Cassirer discusses this point in *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences:* "This problem belongs, if we take it in its full generality, to a sphere that cannot itself be grasped and exhausted by science even taken as a whole."[1] The methods of behaviorism are those of physicalism; behaviorism cannot explain the distinctive character of the human experience and its truth.

1. *LCS,* 18.

Cassirer rejects the attempts of metaphysical theories of immediacy to secure truth. The truths of expression and perception cannot be understood through immediate knowledge, because immediate knowledge is isolating and absolutizing. Isolating common sense or intuition as the sole and absolute method of obtaining truth is a mistake. Immediacy, the "leap into the metaphysics of 'immediate knowledge,' either in terms of 'common sense' (cf. Reid) or of metaphysical 'intuitionism,' " is the view that physical things do not belong to human truth, that "the so-called world of things (physics, physicalism) is an illusion of 'science' " (124; 120). Physicalism and immediacy deny each other's position and are opposites; such opposites are merely aspects of the problem and do not overcome it.

Cassirer rejects the possibility of securing truth through belief. Belief takes an absolute stand on the problem of reality; it is one of the " 'absolute' solutions" (120; 117). Cassirer says that " 'belief' in the religious-intuitive sense as the final grounds of *certainty,* something that cannot be attained by any kind of 'knowledge' " (119; 117), denies that other means of knowledge have access to being. Belief alone cannot ground human reality.

A different but similarly absolute view of truth is the skeptical view. Unlike logicism, physicalism, and belief, skepticism maintains that truth cannot be secured. Like the former views, skepticism holds an absolutizing position. Cassirer says: "(No function is to be trusted, if it can fool us even *once.*) Since therefore the 'absolute' *truth* of what is supposedly true ('taken for true' in perception) can never be secured, we are now left with *absolute* illusion" (116–17; 114). Cassirer claims instead that truth in general cannot be absolutely denied, that "we cannot eliminate it or skeptically deny it completely" (123; 120). A claim of absolute skepticism is itself a truth claim.

Cassirer rejects absolute methods for grounding reality in favor of a critical method of relative truth. The claim by skepti-

cism that the expressive function is false and the claim by absolutizing metaphysics that the expressive function is exclusively true are both confuted by critique. Cassirer says, "Our standpoint [is] 'critical': we uphold neither the falsity (skepticism) nor the truth (metaphysics) of the expressive function. Rather, we seek to limit critically and justify critically its achievements in the construction of the 'cultural world' " (124; 121). The expressive function of consciousness produces culture from immediacy, but expression is not absolute; it does not have a meaning in itself apart from the forms of cultural life that arise from it, limit it, and stand in various relations to one another.

The only refutation of the notion of absolute truth is the notion of relative truth. Cassirer says, "We do not need 'absolute' truth; rather, in fact, we need relative truth. We don't need 'being-true' (= a *mirror image* of an absolute true being); we need 'being truer' [*das 'wahrer' sein*], an expression of the *whole* of experience" (117; 114). Cassirer's philosophy is a philosophy of experience, not being. The existence of experience is a single indisputable fact, yet the forms of experience are relative to one another.

The truth of perception is not denied in this critical approach to truth and objectivity: "It does not ask about the 'truth' of perception as a *whole.* It asks about the *place* of each particular perception [*'Wahrnehmung'*] within the whole, in the 'context of experience.' This *context,* the 'system,' does not need to have its truth demonstrated or 'tested'—it is the measure, not what is measured" (120; 117). The whole of experience is the measure of truth. Particular experiences or perceptions are measured against this whole. Cassirer says, "Every *individual* perception must be measured within this whole and tested if it is 'true' or 'false' " (120; 117).

The goal of philosophy is to understand all of experience. Each particular form of experience is relative to others; truth

does exist, however, in human culture understood as a whole. Cassirer is not a relativist who claims that all theories of experience are equally acceptable; he argues instead that the critical view of experience recognizes both the relative and the fundamental characteristics of human reality.

Disputed Access to the Basis Phenomena

Cassirer is concerned with our access to the nature of the basis phenomena, how deeply and fully we can know the basis phenomena themselves. He discusses two conflicting views of our access to them and proposes a resolution. The dispute is between the Goethean and the Cartesian-Kantian views of knowledge and is resolved in part by the Socratic view of philosophy.

Goethe maintains that the nature of the basis phenomena is inaccessible. Goethe's account of the basis phenomena stresses their ultimate mystery and our limited knowledge of their nature. In maxim 391, Goethe says that life (*Leben*), the first basis phenomenon, is a mystery to all human beings, that life's "specific nature remains a mystery to ourselves and to others" (127; 123). Cassirer highlights this feature of life in his interpretation of Goethe's sense of life: "We must take it as a primary phenomenon [*Urphänomen*] without attempting to give an 'explanation' of it. Must I not also simply accept (admit) myself insofar as the *monas* remains unknown, but not a 'mysterium'? It is, rather, unknown and revealed to all, the primary revelation itself" (128; 123). As the primary revelation, in Goethe's view, life is equally unknowable to the self and others.

In maxim 392, Goethe describes activity in the surrounding world, the second basis phenomenon, as similarly mysterious. Goethe says: "Although it requires a predisposition, attention, and luck, we can become clear ourselves about what we experience; but to others it remains a mystery" (127; 123). One's own

activity can be understood by oneself but not by others. Access to the second basis phenomenon is limited to the individual. Cassirer notes this limitation of Goethe's view: "In its regard for others, mankind observes the first clarification about itself" (129; 124). An individual's activity is inaccessible and mysterious to others.

Goethe's notion of the work, the third basis phenomenon, also exhibits a mysterious nature. In this case, the mystery resides in the self and the access belongs to others. Goethe's maxim 393 describes one's work as more understandable to others than to oneself; "the outer world can more readily attain an understanding about it than we ourselves are able to" (127; 123). In regard to this aspect of Goethe's view, Cassirer says, "But here a strange turnabout [takes place]. These works no longer belong to us. . . . The 'I' can no longer really find itself again in it"; and "they are also no longer recognizable in full measure. For the being of the works outlives that of their creator" (130; 125). Through our works, others know us better than we know ourselves. The self's works remain a mystery to it.

The nature of the basis phenomena is not explainable, according to Goethe, because such an explanation is unnatural and mere supposition. The mind loses its own identity in any attempt to achieve a deep knowledge of the basis phenomena. Cassirer points out that Goethe insists on the mystery of the basis phenomena because he "wants to retain the 'natural' attitude of spirit that he feels so close to as an artist. Art requires no 'metaphysical' depth—it must protect itself from this supposed deepness. It must be on its guard against it insofar as it does not want to lose itself. For it is concerned with the 'surface' of the phenomena, the 'many-hued reflection' of life. Goethe wants to preserve this standpoint even as a thinker" (131–32; 126).

Because they are the ultimate ground of knowledge, the basis phenomena cannot be known by means of some further point.

Not conceivable as objects, they cannot be viewed from an external perspective. Goethe thus denies the accessibility of the basis phenomena to human knowledge: "He protests against every attempt to go behind the primary phenomena—against every attempt to 'explain' them" (132; 126).

In contrast to the Goethean view is what Cassirer calls the Cartesian-Kantian view. This view is not poetic. It focuses on the demand for knowledge that arises from philosophy as an activity of reflective understanding. Once philosophical thought begins in human experience, all aspects of reality are open to question. Cassirer says, "From now on nothing escapes from the sphere of questioning" (135; 129). Philosophy becomes enamored with and defined by reflection and criticism: "The onset of 'reflection' has thereby begun—and it stops now at nothing, at no 'last things.' It subjects everything to its corrosive 'criticism.' Philosophy, at least, was henceforth addicted to this criticism and it cannot protect itself from it without forfeiting its own nature" (135; 129–30). Scholasticism was the extreme manifestation of this addiction; it was "a kind of bastard birth (the scholastic 'systems' of Nominalism and Realism)" (135; 130).

The Scholasticism of the Middle Ages represented the attempt to unify reason and belief; critical philosophy, embodied in the thought of Descartes and Kant, dissolved this union. Cassirer says, "The spirit of criticism in Descartes and in Kant dissolves this 'marriage,' and it leads to sharper forms of questioning and of doubting. Criticism extends to the limits of skepticism: *de omnibus dubitandum*. . . . Doubt is the positive instrument of knowledge and expresses the function of philosophical knowledge" (135; 130). The philosophy of criticism and doubt is a positive result.

Cassirer's concern is to resolve this conflict between the Goethean natural attitude and the Cartesian-Kantian reflective standpoint. For any position to be true to the natures of the

basis phenomena, both their proper limitations and their possible depth must be recognized. An account of the basis phenomena must neither overstep its limits nor stop short of its possibilities. The conflict thus bears directly on the success of Cassirer's project. He asks, "How can we do justice to the Goethean demand for the recognition of 'primary phenomena' and to the Cartesian-Kantian demand for 'reflection' in knowledge and philosophy?" (136; 130). Cassirer states that all well-known oppositions in philosophy can be traced to this conflict. The antinomy between the notions of immediacy and mediacy is at the base of this dispute.

Cassirer asks, "Is there a way to reconcile them, which is more than—and principally different from—an eclectic mixture? Can we preserve respect for the primary phenomena, without acting in opposition to the critical spirit, without becoming guilty of sinning against spirit, which occurs when we deny its original right?" (136; 131). Spirit or intellect has a right to its autonomy; however, if this autonomy is exercised beyond its actual powers, the results are deceptive and false.

Cassirer finds some truth on both sides of the conflict. He agrees with Goethe regarding the irreducible primary nature of the basis phenomena. After giving an overview of his own notion of the basis phenomena, Cassirer says, "Here we have the three primary phenomena (basis phenomena) before us, for which we ourselves cannot give any further 'explanation' and cannot want to" (142; 137). Since the basis phenomena make possible all explanation, thought, and inference, nothing further can be given that would explain the basis phenomena or why they exist.

In his lecture "Language and Art II" Cassirer mentions the Goethean sense of life as a primary phenomenon that has no rational explanation. Cassirer says, "We cannot explain it, if ex-

planation means the reduction of an unknown fact to a better-known fact, for there is no better-known fact. We can neither give a logical definition of life—*per genus proximum et differtiam specificam*—nor can we find out the origin, the first cause of life."[2] Cassirer holds that no abstract, logical, or causal definition of the origin can be given.

In the text on basis phenomena Cassirer claims that none of the three equally primordial basis phenomena can be fully known. Knowledge of these most fundamental features of human reality can only be referred to, not known as such. In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* Cassirer states, "It is clear that the process of grounding cannot go on into infinity, that we must in the end come across something that is 'showable' [*aufweisbar*] but not provable [*beweisbar*]."[3] In this sense Cassirer agrees with the Goethean view concerning the irreducible nature of the basis phenomena.

He also agrees with the Cartesian-Kantian view of the activity of knowledge. It is essential that knowledge should attempt to penetrate, unravel, and define its object. The mind becomes itself in such attempts. Cassirer asks, "But is such an attitude, as Goethe demands it of the artist and practices it himself, possible for the whole of our spiritual life?" (133; 127). Cassirer's answer is No. The function of questioning is a primary and characteristic function of the intellect. This function cannot be rejected by philosophy.

Cassirer's acceptance of the Cartesian-Kantian philosophical view is not, however, a complete acceptance. The intellect can go astray in its questioning and its findings. Cassirer asks, "Where do we find limits here—where is our protection against the 'busy

2. "Language and Art II," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 194.

3. *LCS,* 44.

Procuress Understanding' [*'den tätigen Kuppler Verstand'*]?" (133; 127). Thus in the end Cassirer does not fully accept either the Goethean or the Cartesian-Kantian view of human knowledge.

The dispute between the Goethean and the Cartesian-Kantian attitudes is Cassirer's version of the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. For Goethe, poetry or artistry is interested in surfaces and representations; "it is concerned with the 'surface' of the phenomena" (131; 126). Goethe is a poet: "Goethe is no systematic philosopher; he does not want to unveil and reveal the nature of the absolute" (132; 126). Philosophy, in contrast, is interested in the construction of absolute concepts. The quarrel exists between poetry as artistic representation and philosophy as absolutizing, reflective reason.

Cassirer endeavors to overcome the quarrel by educing the positive, genuine features of both art and reason. On the one hand, if art is defined as feeling, it is valuable for philosophical activity. Cassirer says that Goethe "has an incomparable feeling for the primary phenomena. . . . So we can use him as the true divining rod that can lead us to the hidden treasure of the primary phenomena" (132; 126). The poet brings the necessary human dimension of feeling to philosophy. Poetry provides access to human reality.

On the other hand, if reason is defined as essential questioning, it too is necessary for philosophical activity. Questions about human origins and ends are proper to philosophy, whereas the absolutizing constructions of reason are detrimental to philosophy. For Cassirer the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy is actually a quarrel between artistic representation and absolutizing reason; his philosophy unites both poetic feeling and questioning reason in its search for an understanding of all human reality.

The successful philosophical unification of art and reason is found, according to Cassirer, in Socrates. Socratic thought is

the origin and essence of philosophical questioning. Philosophy originates in the question of reality. Cassirer says, "It begins with the question of [what is]. That is the onset of the Socratic concept, the onset of reflection" (133; 127). Wonder is the impetus for philosophy.

Philosophical thought is a particularly human achievement. The quality of human life depends on its questioning activity. Cassirer says, "The transfiguration of 'life' through the form of the 'question': that is the specifically Socratic achievement. This is what gives life its value: ['Life without . . . examination is not worth living']" (133; 127). Human beings are the only living beings capable of such reasoned examination.

Socratic ignorance incorporates the Goethean attitude toward knowledge. One must recognize and accept the limitations of individual knowledge, and doubt and explore the claims others make to knowledge. Not knowing is essential to the concept of philosophy. In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* Cassirer mentions the value of Socratic ignorance and says, "One needs only to think of its [philosophy's] most significant and fruitful periods in order to realize what an important and indispensable role *not-knowing* has played in them and how, time and again, knowledge was able to find and renew itself only by means of it."[4] Ignorance presents the opportunity to recognize limitations and to discover the possibilities of knowledge.

Cassirer compares Sophistic and Socratic questioning about origins and ends. Both the Sophists and Socrates ask about human reality; they "regard human reality as something which we need to raise questions about and which it is worth raising questions about" (135; 129). Both place value on the examination of existence. The Sophists differ from Socrates in their sense of origin. The Sophistic question of the origins of morality stems

4. *LCS*, 100.

from a historical, causal sense of origin. Morality is based only on its historical development rather than on an unchanging human realm. The Socratic question, however, seeks not a historical cause but a final cause. Cassirer says, "Socratic 'reflection' is not satisfied with this kind of foundation and explanation. It looks for 'another kind of cause' . . . in its 'end,' in its telos" (135; 129). The essential, proper, and characteristically philosophical issue is final cause, or the relation of origins and ends.

In sum, in Cassirer's philosophy the three basis phenomena are the original sources of human reality. Philosophy, Cassirer claims, can overcome the dispute between art and reason concerning our access to these basis phenomena by incorporating features from both sides of the dispute. Socratic ignorance and Socratic questioning are the model for such incorporation and access to the basis phenomena.

Reconstructive Method

Cassirer claims that the method that respects our limited access to the basis phenomena yet discloses features of the basis phenomena is the "reconstructive method" (*rekonstruktive Methode*). This method is adopted from psychology, that is, "from the psychological perspective in the broadest sense" (142; 138), rather than from the natural sciences. The correct methods and discoveries in psychology are useful for philosophy because the basis phenomena are primary, " 'psychic' phenomena" (144; 140).

Psychology in this broad sense differs from the natural sciences because of its distinctively autonomous viewpoint. Such autonomy from the other sciences is necessary if philosophy is to use psychological methods and results. Cassirer says, "If psychology is supposed to contribute anything to the resolution of the 'basis phenomena,' then it can obviously meet this task only

if it subjects itself to a certain basic methodical requirement. It must adhere to its autonomy, that is, it must grasp each of these phenomena through its own specific 'viewpoint' and not let this viewpoint be prescribed from outside" (143; 138).

Psychology cannot explain the basis phenomena, although in the history of psychology such attempts have been made. Cassirer rejects naturalistic psychological methods because they do not preserve the mysterious and immaterial human features of the basis phenomena. In contrast, Cassirer says the reconstructive psychological method is "not explanation, but elucidation"; it proceeds not "in the sense of 'explaining' the primary phenomena, the basis phenomena—for that would be an impossible undertaking"; rather it attempts "to make them 'visible' " (142; 138).

Cassirer connects this reconstructive method to descriptive psychology. Dilthey, Husserl, and Natorp each contributed to the notion of descriptive psychology: "The ideal of a descriptive psychology as Dilthey conceived of it, as Husserl presented it, and as Natorp attempted systematically to found it—together brought a new 'breakthrough' to the basis phenomena" (143; 138). These thinkers contributed to an essentially philosophical psychology that could reveal the primary phenomena of human reality.

Physical sciences deliberately disregard psychic phenomena. Such phenomena disappear in these sciences. They must be brought back into view by other means; "the turn in viewpoint that would be necessary in order to make them visible again lies completely outside the methodological possibilities and the methodological competence of objective science" (144; 140). Descriptive psychology makes this required turn.

Lipps's study of human experience illustrates this turn. Lipps takes up the older division of feeling, willing, and thinking and says the division cannot be found through sensualistic or ma-

terialistic psychological methods. Cassirer says, "Feeling, willing, thinking is a division taken without special concern, and without any previous scientific preparation, from everyday, prescientific language and yet—perhaps because of this—it opens up again a new, deeper dimension for psychology that it had overlooked and underestimated all too greatly in its 'sensualistic' form" (148; 143). Psychology should not dismiss ordinary or everyday experience; culture is grounded in such experience. A deeper understanding of the human being is achieved by turning toward, instead of away from, psychic phenomena.

Cassirer specifically adopts Natorp's notion of the reconstructive method of psychological analysis. Natorp's reconstructive method is defined by its indirect, subjective, and factual approach. Through an indirect, subjective approach, both the objective structure and original nature of the first basis phenomenon becomes visible. Cassirer states, "It [life] can be made visible only indirectly—by asking about the 'objective' structure's 'subjective' sources and 'origins.' That is the unique 'reconstructive' method of Natorp's psychology" (150; 145). The philosophical interest in origins arises in this psychology.

The reconstructive method also maintains a factual approach. Natorp conceives of an analysis of subjective knowledge that begins with factuality or objective knowledge. Knowledge of the subjective, knowledge of life, is not given but must be acquired: "Only by means of a reconstructive analysis from 'factual knowledge,' objective knowledge, can we attain knowledge of the forces that generate this knowledge and have brought it forth" (150; 146).

Cassirer regards Bühler's analysis of language as corresponding to Natorp's methodological approach to subjectivity. Bühler's analysis of language shows how the basis phenomena become visible through the use of reconstructive psychology. Bühler begins with factuality. Cassirer says, "His contribution

is truly 'reconstructive' in Natorp's sense. He begins with what language in fact is, that is, the unity and totality of its meaning, how it brings about meaning, and he distinguishes among the different 'aspects' of this meaning" (152; 147). Cassirer considers the three basis phenomena as factual features of experience: "We hereby begin by simply taking this three-dimensionality as a fact" (138; 133).

The methods of Bühler and Cassirer are alike in classifying phenomena according to modes. According to Bühler, each aspect of language can be categorized through its specific mode of psychic representation. Cassirer says, "For each of the aspects he identifies—announcing, evocation, representation—he seeks a particular mode of mental representation" (152; 147–48). Cassirer's analysis of the basis phenomena identifies the modal characteristics of his subject matter: "Each of the three basis phenomena that we have distinguished from one another can itself be seen and interpreted in terms of a different mode of knowledge" (167; 166–67).

The reconstructive method proceeds indirectly, and this feature of it appears in both Bühler's and Cassirer's studies. An originary activity or principle can be known through its manifestations but cannot be known directly. For Bühler, the structure of language indirectly reveals the categorization of what must be inherent in mental (psychical) phenomena. Cassirer says, "This classification is indirectly inferred from particular features of the structure of 'language.' This structure must be somehow 'inherent' in the basic mental phenomena, for without this inherent 'predisposition,' it could not 'develop' " (152; 148).

For Cassirer, the history of metaphysics indirectly reveals the relation between the basis phenomena: "The types of metaphysics as they have actually come forth in history result in an indirect representation of this structural relationship—a kind of map of the entire territory of knowledge of reality" (155; 152).

In Cassirer's hands, the reconstructive method moves from a method of psychology to a method of metaphysics and his study of the basis phenomena.

Holistic Projects of Philosophy

Cassirer's metaphysics and the theory of knowledge that accompanies it are holistic. His goal is to encompass and grasp their subject matter as completely as possible. Cassirer criticizes those metaphysics and theories of knowledge which are abstract and merely partial, although he finds that studying such philosophies is a key to understanding the basis phenomena from which they stem.

Cassirer claims that metaphysics, when properly conceived, is concerned with the totality of reality, or "in the question of the functions that disclose and make 'reality' accessible to us at all, in the question of their systematic totality and their systematic organization" (153; 150). Interpreting, not turning away from, phenomena is its purpose. He says, "It seeks . . . to give a reading, interpretation, understanding of phenomena" and "to provide a total vision and a total interpretation of reality" (155; 151). Metaphysics is defined essentially by this concern with the whole of reality.

Metaphysics is not independent of experience. Some thinkers view metaphysics as an attempt by thought to break away from human experience. Cassirer says, "Metaphysics is virtually defined for Kant by its going beyond everything that can be determined through 'possible experience,' that it in principle 'transcends' experience" (153–54; 150). For Cassirer, metaphysics is possible precisely because it does not attempt to transcend experience: "In and for itself metaphysics is in no way a turning away from experience, from the phenomenon per se" (154–55; 151).

A break from experience is not in fact ever realized. Cassirer states, "If we consider the historical forms of metaphysics, we see that in them this claim to absolute freedom from experience is nowhere realized" (154; 150). Such a break is simply not possible. Cassirer asks, "How could a generally valid, completely universal statement about reality be attained if we break off every bridge to experience?" (154; 150). A completely universal statement must incorporate experience as part of its claim to universality.

In his essay "Naturalistic and Humanistic Philosophies of Culture," Cassirer remarks that his critical philosophy cannot escape the experiential or empirical limitations of knowledge. He says, "Nor can philosophy transcend these limits to our empirical knowledge. As critical philosophy, it endeavors to understand the universal and basic cultural orientations; it seeks, above all, to penetrate to an understanding of the universal principles according to which man 'gives structure' to his experience."[5]

Cassirer calls philosophies "real" metaphysics that do not claim to disconnect themselves from experience. He says, "We do not find such a separation therefore in any real metaphysics—in Parmenides, in Heraclitus, in Aristotle, in Leibniz, in Spinoza, in Hegel" (154; 150). In the history of metaphysics, these thinkers are noteworthy for their attitudes toward the fact that the real is inherent in human experience.

These real metaphysicians are nevertheless in error. Each isolates a part of reality and attempts to make it the whole of reality. Cassirer says, " 'Metaphysics' errs here not by turning away from experience per se but by screening out certain basic aspects of it" (155; 151); and also, "in each case a certain aspect of experience has been posited as absolute and then taken in isolation, where-

5. "Naturalistic and Humanistic Philosophies of Culture," in *The Logic of the Humanities,* 36–37.

upon this absolute positing is declared to be primordial, being in itself" (154; 151). Not absolute, but relative, truth characterizes human reality; any absolute metaphysics is a flawed description of human reality.

Above all, in his own metaphysics, Cassirer wants to make the basis phenomena visible. He criticizes traditional metaphysics for attempting to dissect the primary phenomena. Cassirer states, "Characteristic of the method of metaphysics is the circumstance that it is not satisfied with making 'visible' the relevant primary phenomenon, basis phenomenon, that it rests upon; rather, it strives to unravel it, it wants to unveil the veiled image of Sais, it wants to find 'the clue' to the riddle of life, of nature, and so on. It believes that it can attain this goal only by establishing that this phenomenon is all-encompassing, is 'reality' itself" (155; 152). Metaphysical thinking should not desire to overreach its inherent limits. Such overreaching invites absolute and false explanations of reality. The Goethean idea that what cannot be unraveled must be accepted as such is incorporated by Cassirer into his conception of metaphysics.

A significant portion of the text on basis phenomena concerns the history of metaphysics. Each metaphysical system in the history of metaphysics is grounded in and emphasizes one of the basis phenomena; a study of this history is one of our primary forms of access to these phenomena. Cassirer says, "The analysis of metaphysics in its historical form can divulge something to us about the structure of knowledge of reality" and "an overview of the types of metaphysics leads us back again to those typical 'basis phenomena' that we have sought to distinguish" (155; 152).

The theory of knowledge is the other holistic project of philosophy with which Cassirer is concerned in the text on basis phenomena. Different theories of knowledge are founded on the different basis phenomena. Cassirer wants to develop, in con-

trast to these theories, a theory of knowledge that encompasses all three basis phenomena. The partiality of each theory is comprehended in his universal system of knowledge.

Cassirer says, "The different dimensions of the basis phenomena are also valid in the organization of the theory of knowledge, for within each dimension the problem of knowledge acquires a different shape and 'meaning,' that is, another teleological structure" (166; 165). These theories present knowledge as primarily structured by either the self, others, or culture; that is, "each of them is associated with a particular, characteristic form of knowledge: the form of 'intuition,' of 'action,' of 'contemplation' " (167; 167). Knowledge is acquired and shaped differently in each case.

Theories of knowledge make the same mistake as their metaphysical counterparts. Each theory of knowledge isolates one aspect of knowledge and reduces all others to it. Cassirer states, "These different forms of exegesis take in each case a specific basis phenomenon to be the central, indeed the only one. They seek analytically to constitute and so to reduce everything that we call 'knowledge' to it" (166; 165). The reduction of all knowledge to one element is the typical error of partial, narrow theories.

A holistic theory seeks to incorporate all ways of human knowing. Each of the partial theories is understood as a relative viewpoint within the whole, and no one way of knowing is considered absolute. Cassirer says, "The task of a truly universal theory of knowledge would be to grasp the relative character of all these different interpretations, that is, to comprehend how each of them is related to a particular fundamental kind of basis phenomenon and how they provide its 'interpretation' or 'reading.' It would then synthetically unite them in such a way that justice is done to every aspect of our knowledge of reality" (166; 165–66). Cassirer's holistic grasp of the relative nature of

particular theories allows it not to dismiss any aspect of human knowing.

Cassirer is not interested in the conventional schemes that use the concept of schools of thought to classify different theories of knowledge. Such classifications remain abstract, whereas the concept of basis phenomena leads to a deeper understanding of these theories. He states, "Here our concern is not with the traditional opposites of realism and idealism, of empiricism and rationalism, but with a distinction that lies much deeper, compared to which these oppositions are merely superficial categories" (167; 166). The categories of realism and idealism, and so forth, are oppositions within the same debate. Cassirer prefers to cut these Gordian knots by moving beyond such absolute positions.

In his theory of knowledge Cassirer distinguishes between bases and modes of knowledge. The bases are the three basis phenomena, whereas the modes are the various conceptual manifestations of the bases: "the basis of knowledge (that is, the primary phenomenon that is its basis) as the 'source' from which all certainty springs and flows, and the mode of knowledge in which this phenomenon must be 'comprehended' and 'interpreted'" (167; 167). All theories of knowledge can be categorized and understood in light of this distinction. Cassirer says, "The 'modal' change belongs to a different dimension from the change in type, and the two must be carefully kept apart in our analytic observations" (177; 180).

The history of the theory of knowledge reveals that each theory grounds knowledge in or refers knowledge to one of the basis phenomena: "The various 'theories of knowledge' that have emerged in the history of philosophy explicate these different 'meanings or opinions' concerning the concept of 'knowledge'" (166; 165). Cassirer's goal of a "systematic overview [*systematischer Überblick*] of the possible forms of the theory of

knowledge" (167; 167) or a "truly universal theory of knowledge" (166; 165) requires that all types of theories of knowledge occurring in the history of philosophy must be comprehended. A viable theory of knowledge must encompass all the basis phenomena; that is, "it does not therefore deny these aspects and cannot do without them, if it is to fulfill its task to make visible and accessible the whole of knowledge" (171; 172).

Metaphysics and theory of knowledge are integrally related for Cassirer. Metaphysics (what reality is) and theory of knowledge (how this reality is known) are parts of a total way of thinking. In his philosophy Cassirer attempts to grasp "the complete description of reality" (126; 122); whatever is partial or one-sided is brought together with all else that is partial and one-sided, and the totality in which they actually exist is reconstructed in philosophical thought.

Philosophies of the First Basis Phenomenon

In metaphysics the first basis phenomenon is expressed by the metaphysics of life. In the theory of knowledge the first basis phenomenon is expressed by the theory of intuition; the views of Bergson, Descartes, and Husserl are the modes of this theory. The so-called philosophies of life are grounded in the first basis phenomenon, itself described as life. The metaphysics of life maintains that it has access to the nature of life and is able to unveil it. Cassirer says, "It is 'a mystery to us and others,' but metaphysics presumes to be able to 'take down the gates.' It wants to open the holy shrine of life, the *mysterium tremendum* of life. This is how the different varieties of the philosophy of life arise" (156; 153).

In the text on basis phenomena Cassirer's remarks concerning the metaphysics of life are quite brief. He mentions the Renaissance thinkers Tommaso Campanella and Giordano Bruno,

the mystics, and Schelling and Bergson as metaphysical thinkers of the first basis phenomenon. For each of these thinkers life is the sole primary principle of reality. Cassirer states that for Schelling, "There is an intellectual intuition of life that goes beyond all the divisions of the concept, which makes visible [the] unity and fundamentality of the process of life. The spirit emerges from it, not as life's opposite, but as its culmination and completion" (157; 154). Life is here the only fundamental metaphysical process. The metaphysics of life, formulated by Schelling, Bergson, and others, selects, implies, or assumes the first basis phenomenon as the sole ground of reality.

The first basis phenomenon also grounds a type of theory of knowledge. All theories of this type follow the same method of ascertaining the crux of knowledge, which for them is the I or the monad. All monadic theories of knowledge, Cassirer claims, share a method of intuition. Human knowledge is said to stem from intuitive ability. According to monadic theorists, the notion of intuition best explains the essence of selfhood: "They believed that with this they had named a source of knowledge which is specifically correlated to the I, that reveals the new, unique 'figure' ('visage') of the I in a unique, unparalleled way of seeing" (169; 169). All certain knowledge of the self, others, and the world is obtained through intuition, in their view.

In this method, ideas commonly considered true are set aside or bracketed as suspect. This bracketing allows the irreducible source and center of all knowledge to emerge. Cassirer says, "The 'technic' of the theory of knowledge consists in taking a specific body of knowledge, the content of cognitions, in order then to put it hypothetically in suspension and to see what follows from this suspension. This is the only way it can move ahead to its 'center' " (172; 173). Encompassed in the suspension are all previous theories of knowledge; an unbiased and original viewpoint should thus result.

This suspension is only hypothetical, however; all previous ideas are disregarded but not considered to be nonexistent. Cassirer claims that the contents of this hypothetical bracketing are the phenomena of the You and the It. He says, "It is essential here for the 'monadic' theories of knowledge that they 'disregard' the 'You' [*Du*] and the 'It' [*Es*], not in the sense that they are declared to be ontologically unreal or invalid, but in the sense that they direct and orient them toward the pure I [*Ich*]" (173; 174). In this view the You and the It are deduced from the I; thus they are secondary structures of knowledge.

Monadic theories of knowledge claim that the monad is the unconditional and irreducible middle point of all knowledge. The intuition of the self is the most fundamental feature of the self: "This 'visage' is primordial, original" (169; 169); he describes it as "a compression of all 'world' and the whole breadth of existence into a single point: the extreme concentration of the whole 'periphery' into the single central datum of the self" (177; 179).

Within the monadic theory of knowledge appear different modes. The figure of the I has different characteristics in these modes: "This original can be taken in different ways, differently interpreted in different 'modes' of knowledge whereby each modus is indicative of a different level or 'elevation' of knowledge" (169; 169). The method by which these modes secure the I, despite their divergent characterizations of the I, is the same. In their bracketing of the other two basis phenomena, the modes correspond. Cassirer states, "They are, from the standpoint of their content and their inferences, completely different, even divergent and irreconcilable. . . . But in the manner in which they work out, attain, and secure their center ('pure intuition' of the I), they follow a very specific course in which they coincide" (172; 173).

Cassirer identifies three modes of this type, which are repre-

sented by the approaches of Bergson, Descartes, and Husserl. Cassirer says, "The '*mode* of knowledge' that interprets and renders this originally given original intuition is different. We distinguish here among three levels, which can be designated with the names Bergson, Descartes, Husserl" (169; 169). In these three modes, the I is experienced either as duration, as thought, or as intention.

Bergson's method of isolating the center of knowledge consists in putting aside the biological aspects of life so that the purely creative aspects become visible. Biological facts do not reveal life; thus, those facts are bracketed: "The particular character, the 'flow' of life, disappears while on the other hand the pure intuition of this stream of life lets us understand how it divides into different directions" (174; 176). Bergson conceives of the I as life and duration. Cassirer says, "For Bergson, the intuition of the I melts into the universal intuition of 'life' or of 'lived duration' of *durée vécu*" (169; 169).

Descartes's and Bergson's methods are analogous, though the contents of their presuppositions are radically divergent. Descartes's method places certainties of thought in suspension so that the source of their certainty emerges: "It is Descartes' violent tearing himself away from the type of mathematical certainty, from the 'objective,' unquestionable truth of mathematics, by 'calling into question the unquestionable,' in order to attain the actual original source of certainty, the *cogito*" (175; 177). In Descartes's case, the bracketing is performed in isolation and results in an isolated source of certainty. Cassirer says, "He attains the phenomenon of the I in pure isolation. . . . The phenomenon of life shrinks to the phenomenon of the I and thereby to the phenomenon of thought, of '*cogitatio*'" (169–70; 170). The source is the I, which is essentially thought; life is reduced to thought.

Husserl's mode of intuition is eidetic, seeking the pure es-

sences of the objects of knowledge. In this method of eidetic intuition, the user sets the world aside in order to focus on the ego's intentions. Cassirer says, "The entire reality of things is swept aside, 'put in brackets,' put out of view through the *epoché.* All that remains is the reality of the stream of consciousness, of the 'pure I,' to which all so-called being, all truth is related and in which it is 'founded' " (171; 172). The second and third basis phenomena are bracketed out and then understood only through the first basis phenomenon. The I is intentionality toward all of reality: "*All* intentions, intention toward the 'You' as well as toward 'It,' . . . lies enclosed in *noesis,* in the pure ego's meaning-giving acts" (176; 179). Knowledge is traced back to its source in the self.

Cassirer's description of the philosophy of life in the text on basis phenomena parallels his earlier description of it in his texts concerning spirit and life. Cassirer identifies the philosophy of life and its proponents in a way that coincides with the earlier texts, even though his description, interpretation, and classification of life are framed in terms of the monad, the I, and the Self. He continues to maintain the fundamental idea that some philosophies are based on a notion of life.

Philosophies of the Second Basis Phenomenon

Some metaphysics and theories of knowledge take the second basis phenomenon, the will, as their center. The will is viewed either as an irrational or as a rational force. In such metaphysics the will is posited as the ground of reality. In the theory of knowledge accompanying metaphysics of this type, action is considered the source of knowledge; Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Fichte exemplify the modes of this pragmatic theory.

The passages in the text on basis phenomena concerning the metaphysics of the will are brief. Cassirer makes the main point

that in this metaphysics the first and third basis phenomena are reduced to the second basis phenomenon as their center and ground. Cassirer says, "The totality of being is concentrated in a highly unusual way into a single point, 'devoured' by the phenomenon of the will, so that even the I-You problem is visible only in terms of pure ethics" (158; 155): all interaction is fundamentally an action of the will. The will is defined in two different ways, which generate the two modes of this type of metaphysics. The will is conceived of in one as an irrational, irresistible urge, and in the other as a rational, intellectual basis of duty. Cassirer mentions Schopenhauer as a representative of the former conception; for Schopenhauer, "the will is grasped as a 'blind drive' " (157; 154).

Fichte represents the other mode of the metaphysics of the will. For Fichte, the will is independent of mere drives and is their conscious ruler; the will is "something on its own, independent, autonomous, opposed to the mere drives which it governs and shapes" (158; 154). The reality of the You is essentially ethical. The interaction between wills is real, whereas the notion of the monad is unreal or illusory. Cassirer states, "Consciousness of duty, 'conscience,' breaks through the merely 'monadic' form of self-consciousness. It leads to the 'reality of the You' [*das Du*] as the subject of ethics with equal rights and equal autonomy—individuality [is] only illusion" (158; 155). Both modes of the metaphysics of the will agree that all phenomena can be reduced to the phenomenon of the will.

The pragmatic theory of knowledge is associated with the second basis phenomenon. All human cognition has its source in willed action. Truth must be understood through action: "All truth, in order to be really 'understood' and epistemologically justified must be traced to this single source (coordinate middle point)" (178; 181). Truth does not exist in itself but rather arises in action, and it is the goal of this theory of knowledge to locate

the forces behind truths and knowledge. Cassirer says, "The [action] theory of knowledge is nothing but this technique of debunking, not the uncovering of a truth that exists 'in itself,' but the discovery of an original force that is *hidden* behind this supposed truth" (180; 184).

According to this view the will is primordial and the primordiality of other phenomena is rejected. Monadic self-consciousness is denied so that willed action can be posited as the explanation of knowledge. The I-aspect of knowledge is denied: "In order to bring the pragmatic aspect fully to bear, the other—the I-aspect . . . is now blacked out, put out of commission" (178; 181). The It-aspect, or the objective sphere of knowledge, is likewise denied. Cassirer says, "This same blacking out, as applied here to the I-sphere, also is brought to bear on the sphere of objective values, objective being, and objective truth" (179; 182). Only the You-aspect of knowledge is legitimated on this view.

Cassirer identifies two modes of this theory of knowledge. In the history of philosophy the will is regarded as a lower-level unconscious drive or as a higher-level intellectual force. The two modes of this theory are divided according to this distinction. Cassirer says, "If we remain within the general 'typic of the phenomena of will,' we meet with various kinds of theories of knowledge, depending upon whether the interpretations focus on the 'elementary' or 'higher' forms of the will. . . . Both forms are represented in the history of the theory of knowledge" (177; 180).

The one mode characterizes the will as a blind drive that the intellect serves. Cassirer includes modern pragmatism, fictionalism, and the views of William James, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger in this mode. Any view of knowledge that bases knowledge on a means-ends scheme or on a quest for power belongs to this mode. Some political theories can also be explained in this way: "This reduction of truth to effectiveness is charac-

teristic therefore of all theories that make the 'Will to Power' their highest principle, of fascist theories as well as of the Marxist theory of the superstructure" (180; 183). The aim of will and action, and subsequently of knowledge, is effectiveness or influence on the surroundings.

Nietzsche is a chief proponent of this will-based theory of knowledge. Nietzsche, Cassirer claims, is especially concerned with rejecting the third basis phenomenon of objective cultural values. Cassirer says, "All so-called values serve a foreign purpose (stemming from the will to power). That is the conclusion already drawn by Nietzsche, who is the most persistent and consistent representative of this pragmatic leveling of the value of truth" (179; 182). Values are constructed for a foreign and instrumental goal rather than an inherent purpose that stems from the will.

Heidegger maintains a similar theory of knowledge. For Heidegger, Cassirer claims, knowledge is based on unconscious will and action, on unconscious being-in-the-world and being-thrown. Vital action, "being driven to the outside, being driven forward" (181; 184), is the human being's first understanding of reality. Cassirer holds that Heidegger's notion of care (*Sorge*) is also based on will and action.

In contrast to the view that defines the will as blind force, the other mode of theory of knowledge defines the will as intellectual force. The theories in this mode also posit the originary nature of the will; they "retain the primacy of the will before knowledge but do not begin with the will as a dull, dark, unconscious 'drive,' but see in it rational, reasoned energy conscious of itself" (181; 184). The self and the world are known through action, "in an originary, spontaneous act" (182; 185).

Fichte is the best representative of this kind of theory of knowledge. In the turn from the first to the second basis phenomenon as the focal point in the theory of knowledge, Fichte's

concept of an intellectual will replaces concepts of monadic intuition in other philosophies. Cassirer says, "This turn is represented historically in the purest form by Fichte" (181; 185).

Fichte claims in his theory of knowledge that understanding arises only through an ethical categorical imperative. The self, the other, and the world of stable objects are known through intuition of the "I, because it is I only insofar as it is practical and it is practical only insofar as it submits to a general, completely universal commandment of reason; of the You, because the 'recognition' of the You comes about only through the 'ought'; of the World, because this is nothing other than 'duty's material made sensible' " (182; 186). Human reality is fundamentally ethical; knowledge of reality and all its phenomena must therefore spring from knowledge of their source in the ethical.

Cassirer argues that Fichte's views are centered not in the first basis phenomenon, as might appear, but in the second basis phenomenon. Fichte's notion of transcendental apperception is not logical, but ethical. The I is produced by an act; the monad is not given to knowledge as a fact but must be made. Cassirer states, "As soon as we even speak the word 'I,' we were already in the midst of the sphere of action" (181; 185). The notion of the self comes into being through an intellectual act of the will. For all philosophies focused only on will, ethics, practice, and action, the second basis phenomenon is the principle that underlies their conceptions of reality and knowledge.

Philosophies of the Third Basis Phenomenon

The third basis phenomenon of the work (*das Werk*) grounds a third type of philosophy. Cassirer claims that the philosophies of Hegel, Dilthey, and Kant are examples of this type of metaphysics. He claims that Socrates, Plato, and Kant are the main representatives of thinkers who derive their conceptions

of knowledge from the contemplation of works. Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, although it derives its position from all three of the basis phenomena, has a particular relation to the phenomenon of the work.

As a primary experience of the human being, the work cannot be reduced to either the first or the second basis phenomenon. Cassirer says, "The work-sphere places metaphysics before new tasks. These cannot be dealt with (1) by approaching them through purely monadic being. . . . (2) Nor can the metaphysics of will fully grasp them" (159; 156). Culture, the prime example of the work, is an irreducible phenomenon of human reality.

The Romantics and Hegel, in their metaphysical systems, see that the objective nature of works cannot be explained through either a monadic metaphysics or a metaphysics of will. Culture is not the sum of individual actions; according to the Romantics and Hegel, the works that constitute culture "must have a different and firmer footing" (160; 157) than either the individual or the will. This version of metaphysics is flawed in that the phenomenon to be explained is referred to some unknown concept. Cassirer says, "The notions of the spirit of a people or the world spirit, and so on, commit the same fundamental mistake of metaphysical substantialization and hypostatization" (161; 158).

This flaw prompts another mode or interpretation of the work in the history of philosophy. A new approach to works is needed "after the downfall of Hegel's metaphysics"; Dilthey uncovers this approach, this "decisive step" (161; 159). Cassirer regards the step as having been achieved in Dilthey's conception of history and historical analysis. Dilthey holds that the work is not reducible to or understandable through the other two basis phenomena. Works have unique characteristics and arise in a specific way. The features of human reality are revealed only through works: "Dilthey's basic problem is that of creative ac-

tivity, that is, the activity that gives birth to the 'work,' to what is deposited, manifested in works and is revealed in them—and *only* in them" (162; 160). The manifestation of creative works cannot be grasped by a metaphysics of the monad or a metaphysics of the will; it requires a view of the work as a primary phenomenon of reality.

According to Dilthey, works have "particular structures which are actually realized here and now at a particular historical point in being and which must be understood in this particular realization" (165; 163). For Dilthey, each kind of work has its own definition or structure, which occurs through the relation between creative personality behind the work and the production characteristic of it. Cassirer says, "The work of art, for example, has a structure of its own that can be objectively distinguished, for example, from the structure of a work of philosophy or of science" (162–63; 161). Only through a structural analysis, rather than a subjective analysis, of a work can that work be understood. In a poetic work, the inner process of creation, which is the interaction of the artist's personality and the goal of the work, determines the particular reality and structure of the work.

Dilthey represents one mode in the metaphysics of the work and Kant represents another. In Cassirer's view of metaphysics as the union of human reality, experience, and knowledge, coupled with the recognition of a world of empirically existing objects, both Dilthey and Kant are classified as metaphysicians, despite their objections to metaphysics.

Kant's critical philosophy is an examination of the works of culture. Cassirer says, "A concluding, fundamental way to try to understand the 'works' of culture—their peculiar kind of objectivity—is the method that Kant introduced into philosophy" (164; 162). Kant's focus on objectivity is a focus on works, or the products of culture or mind.

Although both Dilthey and Kant focus on the structure of works, Kant holds that works are structured by their universal, not particular, features. Cassirer says that for Kant, works "must be understood as universal forms—the form of natural science, the form of art" (165; 163). The difference between Dilthey and Kant lies in their different emphases on the particular and the universal. Works, according to Kant, are not substances but the relation between how and what we know. Kant's approach to works is always through this relation. Cassirer says, of Kant's approach, "It does not begin with the analysis of things but rather asks about the specific mode of knowledge in which things alone are 'given' to us" (164; 162).

Substances, things, and traditional ontological concepts are not the form in which works are given, and therefore not the way in which human reality is in fact disclosed. Cassirer states, "Kant does not investigate directly the being of things in the sense of the older ontology. He investigates the factum of specific 'works' (the 'work' of 'mathematical natural science,' and so on), and he asks how this work was 'possible,' that is, on what logical presuppositions and principles it is based" (165; 163). For Kant, the universal forms of knowledge are the universal forms of human or cultural reality, and these universals are revealed through works. Despite their modal differences, Hegel, Dilthey, and Kant all belong to the same type of metaphysics; all locate human reality in the phenomenon of the work.

Theory of knowledge as based on the contemplation of works avoids the problems of reductionism associated with intuition or action as the source of knowledge. This type of theory focuses not merely on monadic theory or on ethical practice but on the dialectic between theory and practice. Dialectical knowledge is irreducible to either of the other types of knowledge. This theory of knowledge is a "turn to 'contemplation,' to pure 'objectivity' as a turn toward the Idea in the broadest sense" (189; 195).

The Greek natural philosophers discovered the sphere of contemplation. They were able to view nature as objective, formal, and rule-following. Cassirer says, "This first occurs in Greek culture and originally only in it. This discovery of nature in objective 'perception' is then confirmed, furthered, and supplemented, in a sense 'transcended,' in the discovery of the realm of Ideas, as the realm of 'pure forms' " (190; 195). The objectivity required for contemplation was discovered by the pre-Socratics, but its fruition and realization began with Socrates.

Cassirer regards Socrates as the most characteristically contemplative philosopher in the history of philosophy. In describing the contemplative theory of knowledge, he refers to Socrates as its beginning and essence: "In the history of philosophy, it is Socrates who discovers this sphere, who puts it forth and establishes it as a central object for philosophical investigation and 'marvel' " (184; 188).

Socratic contemplation has the productions of culture as its object. The forms of culture are manifested in its works. Cassirer says, "The discovery of this imperative of the work—its autochthonic and autonomous sense, its 'binding character'—that is Socrates' real deed. With this he accomplishes the 'turn to the Idea'; this contains the synthesis of theory and praxis" (186; 191). Ideas or forms of thought are revealed: "In this contemplation the realm of form—of *eidos* and of *idea*—is discovered" (185; 190).

The classification of philosophies as either theoretical or practical cannot be used in a consideration of Socrates' philosophy. Theory is associated with conceptual, abstract, logical knowledge or rationality, and practice is associated with technical, willful action; these categories continually unite and separate for Socrates. Cassirer says, "Every attempt at such a classification immediately turns dialectically into its opposite" (184; 188). Socratic irony exists in part through this dialectical movement.

The attempt to classify Socrates as a theorist or a practitioner stems from the flawed presupposition that philosophy must be one or the other. Cassirer says, "This resulting dialectical cancellation is only a symptom of the fact that the real question of Socrates has not yet been raised" (184–85; 189). The real question of Socrates concerns his approach to theory and practice: "The opposition between theory and practice—the opposition between knowledge and action—has been denied and overcome by Socrates, raising it in a synthesis to a new level" (185; 189). The object of Socratic investigation is the clue to this new level of synthesis.

The object of Socratic investigation is the work. Through Socrates' dialectic, the third basis phenomenon becomes the access to truth. Socrates' essential contribution or " 'originality' " (185; 189) lies in the study of the work as the key to the human. Cassirer says, "The reflection of productive activity in the work is what creates the new sphere that is characteristically to be distinguished from that of mere 'theory' and that of mere 'praxis' " (185; 190). The new sphere is the contemplative sphere, which examines the idea as present in the work of human culture.

The idea, seen in the work, transcends abstract thought and technical activity. The idea is nevertheless connected with thought and activity because both are required for the production of a work. Cassirer says, "It is rooted in both, but it goes beyond them both; it has a peculiar 'transcendence' " (187; 191). Contemplation is a search for and consideration of the pure ideas manifested in culture. Cassirer describes this Socratic contemplation as a purity of vision.

The Socratic quest for self-knowledge is directly related to the third basis phenomenon. Self-knowledge is achieved by examining one's works, not by looking inward to oneself as an isolated individual. In the Socratic view, merely examining the first basis phenomenon does not yield self-knowledge: Socrates "does not

call for 'self-knowledge' in the sense of some pure (monadic) looking inward (intro-spection, intuition of the I in the pure act of the *cogito*); instead, it means something completely new and unique for him" (185–86; 190). Cassirer says that Goethe's maxims 657 and 663 support Socrates' view of self-knowledge; the maxims assert that such knowledge is gained not by introspection but by examination of one's place in the broader realm of community or culture.

Knowledge of the self arises through knowledge of the works of the self. Works begin with instinct or tradition but can become self-conscious productions if one recognizes oneself as the active agent of their production. The call of the Delphic oracle requires the examination of the work. Cassirer says, "This call now means: know your *work* and know 'yourself' *in* your work; know what you do, so you can do what you know" (186; 190). One must start from one's place in history and culture, then act, then look at one's work. Self-knowledge is not only an instance of the third basis phenomenon; it is possible only through it.

Plato's theory of knowledge stems from Socrates' view. Cassirer says, "Plato invokes, develops, and systematically describes this realm of 'forms', the *ideai* as *logoi,* as the completion of Socrates' claim. And with this the new sphere of contemplation stands before us" (187; 192). This new sphere is opposed to the subjective, monadic sphere and to the technical, practical sphere. The first and second basis phenomena are continually changing and becoming, whereas the third basis phenomenon is essentially enduring, that is, "only the pure form endures" (188; 192). A work is enduring, fixed, and objective.

Contemplation for Plato, as for Socrates, is dialectical. In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences,* Cassirer remarks that different perspectives of form are united through dialectical knowledge. He says, "This separation and reintegration, *διάκρισις* and *σύγκρισις*, is what Plato considered as the task of 'dialectic,' the au-

thentic and philosophically basic science."[6] The fundamental way in which philosophy proceeds is through dialectical activity in contemplation of the forms of the work.

For Plato, knowledge of the third basis phenomenon is the proper ground for politics. Politics cannot be grounded in the first and second basis phenomena, because they are the experience of change. The third basis phenomenon is the experience of endurance, and politics should be grounded in enduring truths about human reality. Plato rejects the view that politics is a praxis, a manifestation of the second basis phenomenon. Cassirer says, "To put productive activity under the guidance and protection of pure form and knowledge of pure form—that is the goal that Plato also sets for himself as a politician" (188; 192).

Contemplation of works supersedes intuition and action as the basis of political knowledge. Individuals and society itself must look to enduring form and idea to determine action. Form has permanence, owing to its objective quality: "As with truth, 'just law' can arise from this alone. For such 'just law' can be nothing other than the inner 'objective' definiteness of form that Plato compares with the definiteness found in geometry" (188; 193). Knowledge of truth, including justice and politics, is grounded in the ideas and forms that are expressed and experienced in works.

Kant's conception of knowledge is based on form, in contrast to the Cartesian conception of knowledge as subjective or monadic. This notion of knowledge as based on form links Kant with Plato. Cassirer states, "In modern philosophy this cognitive ideal of 'pure form' was most clearly realized by Kant. . . . It too begins with the 'work,' and it uses this work in order to find out, through retrospective 'reflection' on the structure of the work, what forms are invested in it" (188; 193). Natural science is taken

6. *LCS,* 19.

as a fact by Kant; its structure is examined, and then its forms or principles are revealed through his transcendental method. Natural science, morality, and art, the subjects of Kant's three *Critiques,* are works. Transcendental analysis of their structure reveals the forms of human experience and knowledge.

Kantian ethics, according to Cassirer, stems from the third basis phenomenon, just as Platonic knowledge of politics stems from that phenomenon. Ethics, for Kant, is not subjectively based: "Kant set forth a purely 'formal' ethics instead of a 'material' ethics" (189; 194). Ethical action is objective and performed for its own sake.

Cassirer says that one central objection to this type of ethical theory is that it posits an empty notion of duty; action without content is not action. A contradiction exists between the willed effects of an act and willing for its own sake. Kant's aim, Cassirer claims, is not to hinder action but to ground it in knowledge of the pure form of ethics. Cassirer says, "This contradiction is resolved if we pay attention to the basic tendency of Kantian ethics, which consists in nothing other than to liberate ethics the same as logic from the despotism of merely material aims, that is, from the despotism of mere action, to purify it in the process of simple contemplation, knowledge of the ought" (189; 194). This knowledge of the ought is derived from the contemplation of ethical action as a kind of work.

In *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* Cassirer describes Giambattista Vico in terms that place him in the group of thinkers whose theory of knowledge is founded on the third basis phenomenon. Where thought must choose between piecemeal knowledge of nature or piecemeal knowledge of subjective concepts, Cassirer claims that Vico turns to the notion of works in order to satisfy both conditions. Cassirer says, "The works of human *culture* are the only ones that unite in themselves both conditions in which perfect knowledge is based; they have not

only a conceptually apprehended existence but also a thoroughly determined, individual and historic one. However, the internal structure of this existence is accessible and open to the human spirit only because it is its creator."[7] Works are determinate, historical, and enduring as well as culturally made.

Knowledge of works is the goal of philosophy for Vico because knowledge of works is identical to self-knowledge. This view of self-knowledge links Vico to Socrates, the originator of the contemplative philosophy of human reality: "According to Vico, the real goal of our knowledge is not the knowledge of nature but human self-knowledge."[8] Self-knowledge is accessible through the works of culture. For Socrates, Plato, Kant, and Vico, knowledge of human reality is based on the phenomenon of the work.

The Work and the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

Through his discussion of the various forms of metaphysics and of theory of knowledge, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms emerges as a philosophy of the work. The third basis phenomenon is the source of Cassirer's conception of culture. The symbolic forms are the objective, enduring works of culture whose structure is disclosed through the philosophy of symbolic forms.

Cassirer regards the metaphysics of the work of Hegel, Dilthey, and Kant as primary sources for his philosophy of symbolic forms. He states, "This is where the final way of inquiring into the 'structure' of works begins—the approach of the philosophy of symbolic forms. It goes back to Kant's 'critical' question, but it gives it a broader content" (165; 163). Human reality is the way

7. *LCS,* 10.
8. *LCS,* 9.

in which human beings structure their world in thought. Metaphysics, as the study of reality, must be centered in the structure of the symbolic forms.

An understanding of the inner form of symbolic activity is the key to a philosophy of culture. Cassirer says: "What the philosophy of symbolic forms claims is that this [turn toward the general 'inner form'] is what truly gives us access to the sphere of 'works'" (165; 164). Access to inner form cannot be accomplished in the abstract; it depends on empirical and historical information. Cassirer says, "This 'form' can be found only through immersion in the empirical material, but this is accessible to us—and here our analysis agrees with Dilthey—only in a historical form" (165; 164).

Cassirer agrees with Dilthey's emphasis on the importance of history. The history of works is essential; however, works do not stem merely from what Dilthey calls creative personalities. Works also do not stem from a Hegelian overworld or from a Romantic underworld. A Diltheyan understanding of the personalities that created a work is useful, but it must be supported by an understanding of the universal and original form of meaning that is expressed in the work. Universal meaning, or the "specific yet truly universal and original (because originary) forms of giving meaning" (166; 165), is central to understanding the human sphere. Cassirer says, "As the philosophy of symbolic forms regards things, history is only the starting point, not the end—*terminus a quo* not *terminus ad quem*—a phase, not the goal of philosophical knowledge" (165; 164).

From a starting point in empirical, historical knowledge, the general forms of human reality and human thought, it is possible to discover the symbolic forms. Cassirer states, "Now a turn toward the general takes place that leads it . . . to an interpretation of 'language' in general—its 'inner form'—of myth in gen-

eral, of natural science and mathematics in general" (165; 164). "Inner form" refers to the genuine constitution of the symbolic forms, not an abstraction derived from their contents.

The goal of the metaphysics of symbolic forms, conceived as a metaphysics of the work, is the holistic grasp of the works of culture. Cassirer says, "All the 'works' of culture are to be investigated in regard to their conditions and presented in their general 'form' " (165; 163–64). In his lecture "Language and Art II" Cassirer repeats this concept of philosophy; philosophy is called "the highest and most comprehensive mode of reflection."[9] In the text on basis phenomena, the philosophy of symbolic forms is the highest and most comprehensive mode of the metaphysics of the work. Culture as the expression of the third basis phenomenon is the totality of human works, which provides the beginning and ending points of philosophical reflection on the nature of reality.

The philosophy of symbolic forms is a holistic theory of knowledge. All forms of knowledge are to be comprehended. In his criticism of physicalism as an explanation of human expression, Cassirer states that philosophy is concerned with all the ways in which human beings know their world: "Here we [can raise] the objection that philosophy is concerned not just with science alone, but with all forms of 'world understanding' " (123; 119). Myth and religion, language, art, history, and science must be grasped as individual forms and as the interrelated elements within the unity of human knowledge.

Cassirer makes one especially strong statement about the philosophy of symbolic forms as a theory of knowledge. After describing Kant's theory of knowledge, Cassirer says, "The 'philosophy of symbolic forms' grows out of this critical, transcendental question and builds upon it. It is pure 'contemplation,'

9. "Language and Art II," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture,* 194.

not of a single form, but of all—the cosmos of pure forms—and it seeks to trace this cosmos back to the 'conditions of its possibility'" (189; 194–95). The philosophy of symbolic forms embraces and transforms into its own position Socrates' conceptions of dialectic and self-knowledge, Plato's conception of pure form, and Kant's conceptions of functional form and method.

The philosophy of basis phenomena is a search for a view of human reality and knowledge that does not reduce the human to one of its aspects. The philosophy of symbolic forms apprehends culture as a totality that arises from the interaction of all three of these basis phenomena. The work becomes the key to comprehending how this totality endures. For Cassirer, philosophy is part of culture; it is that activity of culture wherein culture apprehends itself as a whole, as a work and as a system of works. The most original and notable claim about philosophy that Cassirer makes in the text on basis phenomena is that the philosophy of symbolic forms is a Socratically grounded philosophy of the work.

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